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BEYOND THE SCREEN: EXPLORING THE PLAYER'S ROLE AND ITS IMPACT ON EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES IN VIDEO GAMES

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Abstract

This article explores the idea of the player as a co-creator of their own experience in video games, focusing on how we can define their role within the game's architecture and how they shape their emotional experiences. By agreeing to an implicit 'contract' as they play a video game, players not only accept to adhere to the rules of the game world but allow themselves to become engaged in the game's narratives, landscapes, characters, and other elements, opening themselves to deep emotional involvement and becoming integral parts of the narrative structure. Drawing on examples from games like Mass Effect, God of War, Doki Doki Literature Club!, and The Last of Us, among others, the article examines how players form emotional connections through romantic relationships, familial bonds, and friendships. Using concepts inherent to video games, such as agency and immersion, alongside others like involvement and incorporation, as well as those applicable to all fictional works, like suspension of disbelief and rational distance, the article ties these concepts together to better understand the player's role and its impact on their experience. It highlights how that role influences these emotional experiences, allowing them to extend beyond the game world and leave lasting personal impacts on players.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, video games have evolved from simple entertainment into a complex and emotionally engaging medium that rivals traditional forms of storytelling such as literature and film. What sets video games apart is their interactive nature, where the player is not merely a passive observer but an active participant, directly influencing the unfolding narrative and outcomes. This agency, according to Murray (2017, p. 144), gives players the ability to see the results of their actions and choices reflected in the game. This interactivity makes video games unique, allowing for more emotional experiences as players engage with characters, plots, and environments in ways that foster deeper personal connections.

An essential aspect of this evolution is the concept of the player as a co-creator of their own experience. Pearce (2004, p. 153) argues that players, through their decisions and interactions, become active co-creators, stating that "in these new forms of interactive narrative, particularly those that employ story systems, this line has become blurred. The consumer is now becoming a producer/consumer." She emphasizes that game designers are now engaged in creating "an entirely and radically new ideology about narrative" (Pearce, 2004, p. 153). In this shift, the traditional role of the author as sole creator and storyteller is replaced by the design of contexts that allow players to shape their experience and journey within the game's architecture. According to Aarseth (1997), ergodic literature requires active engagement from readers or players, demanding effort, and interaction. In videogames, this framework highlights the unique role of players, whose choices and actions shape their experience, fostering a deeper sense of

agency and emotional connection. In this context, players become integral to the narrative and overall structure of the game through the choices they make.

At the heart of this engagement lies what can be described as an implicit player contract, where players not only agree to the game's rules but also commit to emotionally investing in the game's world. As Salen and Zimmerman (2003) explain, "To play a game means entering into a magic circle, or perhaps creating one as a game begins" (p. 95). Salen and Zimmerman used the magic circle to describe a metaphorical space in which the rules of the game take precedence over the rules of reality, highlighting the shift in mindset that occurs when a player enters a game. In this space, players consciously or unconsciously agree to the rules, constraints, and possibilities established by the game's design. However, this concept has been the subject of debate in contemporary game studies, considering the implication of a strict separation between the game world and reality, which does not fully account for the fluid, hybrid nature of modern gameplay experiences.

In line with this, recent work by Antunes (2024) challenges the perceived rigid separation between game worlds and reality that the magic circle implies. Suits' concept of lusory attitude — the voluntary acceptance of a game's rules — introduces a subjectivist element to the understanding of games, where the player's internal attitudes and emotions significantly shape the gameplay experience. Rather than creating an entirely distinct space, the magic circle becomes a more fluid, subjective boundary, blurring the line between objectivity and subjectivity. Antunes (2024) questions the metaphysical

separation implied in earlier interpretations, suggesting that gameplay intertwines the player's personal engagement with the game world, making it less about objective rules and more about the player's subjective experience.

This ongoing debate around the magic circle further highlights the complexity of the implicit player contract. Beyond this mechanical agreement lies a deeper commitment, the willingness to emotionally engage with the game's narrative, characters, and world. This contract implies that players suspend their disbelief and immerse themselves in the game, effectively navigating between the real rules of gameplay and the fictional worlds presented, a duality that Juul (2011) refers to as the half-real nature of video games, where players engage with games both as real activities governed by rules and as fictional experiences crafted by narratives. Murray (2017) further suggests that, in interactive media, players do not just suspend their disbelief but engage in an active creation of belief (p. 126), reinforcing their emotional and cognitive investment in the game.

Through this implied contract, video games create the conditions for players to form strong emotional bonds with the game's elements. As Ntelia (2020) explores, players often develop deep emotional connections with virtual characters, particularly through romantic narratives, experiencing emotions akin to real-life relationships. Ntelia discusses how these virtual romances can elicit genuine feelings of affection, demonstrating the profound emotional impact games can have on players. Although focused on entertainment more broadly, empirical data from Oliver and Raney (2011)

supports the idea that audiences form emotional connections with media that go beyond mere enjoyment, leading to meaningful and lasting emotional resonance. Characters become more than just avatars or digital representations – they evolve into companions, romantic interests and even reflections of the player themselves. This transformation aligns with Salen and Zimmerman's (2003) concept of 'meaningful play', where the significance of player actions emerges from the interaction between player input and system response.

Narratives take on personal significance, with the player's choices carrying emotional weight and consequences. Isbister (2016) explains that game designers intentionally craft characters and narratives to evoke emotions, allowing players to connect deeply with the game world. Landscapes and environments, meticulously designed by developers, become spaces where players project their emotions, transforming these virtual worlds into meaningful, lived-in experiences, a process that Calleja (2011) refers to as 'incorporation', where the game experience is assimilated into the player's consciousness and is reflected in their daily lives.

This article aims to explore the underlying structures that enable players to engage emotionally with video games and how this engagement goes beyond gameplay into lasting personal connections. We will begin by examining key foundational concepts such as agency, immersion, involvement, incorporation, suspension of disbelief and rational distance, which set the stage for emotional engagement. These concepts will clarify how players open themselves to becoming emotionally vulnerable in the game world.

Following this, we will analyze the role of the player as a co-creator, focusing on how their decisions, actions, and emotional responses shape the playing experience. This section will draw from established theories of player agency, including Pearce (2004), to explore how co-creation positions the player as an integral part of the narrative and emotional architecture of the game. Additionally, based on existing literature, we introduce the idea of the player's dual existence, where they physically exist outside the game but are cognitively present inside the game world. This dual presence allows players to immerse themselves deeply in the game's narrative, influencing the emotional experience in ways that resonate both within and beyond the game world.

Finally, we will explore the narrative strategies used by games to foster emotional connections, examining how elements such as romantic relationships, familial bonds, and friendships in games like *Mass Effect*, *The Witcher 3*, *God of War*, *Tales from the Borderlands*, *Doki Doki Literature Club!*, *The Last of Us*, and *Life is Strange* draw players into deeply personal experiences. In the end, we will tie these ideas together, showing how emotional experiences within games can resonate beyond gameplay, influencing real-life emotions and reflections.

2. Foundational Concepts

To comprehensively understand the emotional engagement experienced by players in video games, it is essential to examine several key theoretical frameworks. This section presents and defines foundational concepts such as agency, immersion, suspension of disbelief, rational distance,

involvement, and incorporation. By establishing clear definitions and exploring relevant scholarly perspectives, we intend to lay the groundwork for analyzing how these concepts interact to facilitate deep emotional connections within video game environments.

2.1 Agency

Player agency in video games refers to the degree of control and freedom that players possess within a game environment, enabling them to influence both the narrative and gameplay experience. This concept is fundamental in game design, as it directly affects player engagement, immersion, and satisfaction. Murray (2017) defines agency as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (Murray, 2017, p. 144), emphasizing the importance of allowing players to make choices with significant consequences within the game world.

Aarseth's (1997) concept of ergodic literature emphasizes the player's active involvement, requiring them to navigate and engage deeply with the game's structure. This interaction transforms them from passive consumers into co-creators of the narrative, enhancing their agency and emotional engagement with the game's unfolding events. This active participation enhances their sense of agency, as players see their interactions directly impacting the game's progression and outcomes. Ryan (2001) further explores the relationship between player choices and narrative structures, highlighting how this interactivity not only increases immersion but also fosters a deeper emotional connection to the game world (Ryan, 2001).

Juul (2011) discusses the balance between the structured rules of a game and the narrative freedom afforded to players, describing this as the 'half-real' nature of video games (Juul, 2011). He argues that this duality requires a careful equilibrium where player agency can flourish without compromising the coherence of the narrative. Practical implementations of player agency can be observed in games like *Mass Effect* (Microsoft Game Studios, 2007) and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt, 2015), where player decisions significantly influence the story's outcome and character development, thereby strengthening the player's connection to the game world. Games such as *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (Team Salvato, 2017) demonstrate how player agency can be used to create metanarratives, where the illusion of choice itself becomes a central theme, prompting players to reflect on the nature of agency and control in interactive media.

In the context of agency, the concept of 'active creation of belief' (Murray, 2017) highlights that players, through their interactions, are actively shaping their experiences, not just passively following a narrative. This points to the importance of agency as a work-around the limitations of branching narratives in video games. As Murray notes, even in games that offer multiple choice-points, these often lead to only minor variations in the overarching plot, as "even a story of less than a dozen branch points, with only two choices at each branching, would require hundreds of endings' (Murray, 2017, p.212). Alternatively, games offer variety in gameplay and systems that allow players to experience the same narrative differently, despite fixed plot structures. A decision of engaging in

stealth or in combat can shape the experience and the players' perception of the same narrative.

Agency not only affects the player's actions but also shapes how they perceive the game's narrative, influencing their emotional engagement and connection to the game world. Titles like Life is Strange (Square Enix, 2015) demonstrate this through narrative choices that directly affect the story's progression and character relationships. In contrast, The Last of Us (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2013) offers gameplay-driven choices—such as combat tactics, exploration, and resource management—that do not change the fixed narrative but deeply influence how players experience it. These gameplay decisions allow players to project their values and judgments onto the game, reinforcing their emotional connection to the story and characters.

Designers face the challenge of balancing player freedom with narrative structure to maintain player agency while preserving the coherence of the game's overall story. Games must allow players enough agency to feel in control of their actions while maintaining the coherence and integrity of the overall story. Whether through narrative or gameplay choices, player agency enhances emotional involvement by making players feel integral to the unfolding experience.

Player agency is crucial in shaping video game experiences that are both engaging and emotionally resonant. By enabling players to make impactful choices and witness the consequences, agency helps players create personal, emotionally charged narratives that deepen immersion and enhance the overall player experience.

2.2 Immersion

Immersion in video games refers to the extent to which a player becomes absorbed in the game world, influencing their emotional responses, engagement levels, and overall enjoyment. Understanding immersion requires examining various theoretical frameworks that elucidate its various aspects and types.

McMahan (2003) significantly advanced our understanding of immersion by focusing on its psychological dimensions, describing immersion as a layered experience where the depth increases as players become more involved with the game, transitioning from superficial engagement with game mechanics to a profound emotional connection with the narrative and characters (McMahan, 2003, p. 69).

On the other hand, Cairns et al. (2014) presents immersion as a continuum that includes tactical immersion, centered on gameplay mechanics; strategic immersion, focused on problem-solving and decision-making; and narrative immersion, where the story becomes the primary engagement driver (Cairns et al., 2014). This framework highlights how different game design elements facilitate varying levels of player immersion, suggesting that the most effective games seamlessly integrate gameplay mechanics, strategic elements, and narrative to create a compelling experience.

Ermi and Mäyrä (2005) introduce the SCI (Sensory, Challenge-based, and Imaginative) Model to dissect the player's immersive experience into distinct but interconnected dimensions. Sensory immersion captures players through audiovisual elements, challenge-based immersion engages them through gameplay mechanics and problem-solving, and imaginative immersion involves them deeply in the game's narrative and world. This tripartite model offers a nuanced approach to understanding how different aspects of game design contribute to overall player engagement and satisfaction.

Each game design approach activates different dimensions of immersion. For example, *God of War* (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018) exemplifies both challenge-based and narrative immersion, with an intense combat system that fosters challenge-based immersion, while the emotional depth of the story, particularly the father-son dynamic, engages players in narrative immersion, strengthening their emotional connection to the game world.

On the other hand, *Tales from the Borderlands* (Telltale Games, 2014) primarily demonstrates narrative immersion through its emphasis on character-focused storytelling and player-driven dialogue choices. The game's strategic decision-making elements enhance imaginative immersion with the unfolding narrative in a fantasy world.

Doki Doki Literature Club! also provides a unique case of narrative immersion through its metanarrative structure; by breaking the fourth wall and manipulating player expectations, it challenges the player's perception of agency while introducing a relevant social issue of mental health in teenagers, leading to deep engagement with its unsettling narrative. The game's overall design further manipulates expectations by adopting familiar dating sim tropes, bright colors, and an anime-inspired art style, which initially lures players into

a seemingly typical visual novel experience. This deceptive surface contrasts sharply with the game's dark themes and psychological horror elements, enhancing the sense of narrative immersion and making the eventual twists even more impactful (Team Salvato, 2017).

Understanding immersion through these models allows developers and researchers to craft experiences that engage players on multiple levels – from sensory engagement and challenge-based mechanics to deep narrative involvement. The combinations of Ermi and Mäyrä's (2005) SCI Model, along with the McMahan's (2003) layered approach and Cairns et al.'s (2014) immersion continuum, game designers have the tools to create more engaging and immersive gameplay experiences that resonate deeply with players.

Immersion is a multifaceted concept that plays a crucial role in shaping the emotional and engaging experiences of video games. Integrating sensory, challenge-based, and imaginative elements enables games to captivate players, fostering lasting emotional connections and enhancing overall satisfaction.

2.3 Suspension of Disbelief and Rational Distance

The concept of suspension of disbelief is pivotal in understanding how narratives capture and maintain audience engagement within the diverse fictional works. Initially defined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1817, suspension of disbelief referred to the reader's willingness to accept supernatural elements in poetry, provided they were presented with a 'semblance of truth' (Coleridge, 1817). Over time, this concept has evolved to encompass a broader application across all forms of fiction, including literature, theater, and digital media, where critical thinking and rational logic are voluntarily and temporarily set aside for entertainment purposes.

In contrast, Walton (1990) introduced the concept of 'distance', emphasizing the maintained awareness between the audience and the fictional work. Walton argued that a complete suspension of disbelief is impossible because audiences inherently recognize that the narrative is a representation and not reality, stating that they engage with fiction as if were 'props' in a game of make-believe, allowing them to experience emotional responses while acknowledging the fictional nature of the narrative. This dual awareness is what Walton termed the 'paradox of fiction,' highlighting the coexistence of emotional engagement and rational recognition of the artificial nature of the fictional work.

Building upon this, Wolf et al. (2013) challenged the notion that suspension of disbelief involves believing in the fiction's reality. Instead, Wolf introduced the term 'rational distance,' which "operates owing to the culturally acquired awareness of the difference between representations and reality" (Wolf et al., 2013, p.52). He argued that, in the context of 'aesthetic illusions,' engagement with fiction is about experiencing it as if it were real without necessarily believing it to be real. This perspective emphasizes emotional and imaginative immersion over literal belief, distinguishing between delusions and the intentional engagement fostered by narrative design. According to Wolf et al. (2013), this illusion does not deceive the audience into thinking the narrative is real but instead leads them to feel as if it is real, consisting "predominantly of a feeling, of variable

intensity, of being imaginatively and emotionally immersed in a represented world and of experiencing this world in a way similar (but not identical) to real life. As opposed to delusions and hallucinations" (Wolf et al., 2013, p.52).

In the context of video games, comprehending how suspension of disbelief and rational distance function is essential. Players serve as active participants who navigate and influence narratives, requiring insights into how these concepts can be used to enhance engagement. Game designers can choose to either increase rational distance to encourage critical engagement or reduce rational distance to blur the lines between reality and fiction, thereby fostering deeper emotional connections. As video games continue to evolve as a narrative medium, these theories offer valuable foundations for exploring how complex storytelling techniques can integrate both critical and emotional engagement. This understanding empowers game designers to craft experiences that resonate with players on multiple levels, fostering both intellectual stimulation and emotional investment.

Pinto and Luz (2024) argue that, in video games, the dual-presence of the player – both in and outside the game – allows for the manipulation of rational distance to effectively create emotional engagement. Instead of increasing the rational distance between the player's reality and the fictional game world, they propose that, by reducing this distance, both realities can momentarily converge into a meta-plane of reality can enhance emotional connections. Their research highlights how the sudden reduction of rational distance through fourth wall breaks, such as integrating emotional narratives and providing meaningful player

choices and consequences, can deepen players' emotional connection to the game world.

It is important to note that not all scholars agree on the use of the concept of suspension of disbelief in the context of digital media. As previously mentioned, Murray (2017) questions the applicability of 'suspension of disbelief' for digital environments, suggesting the term 'active creation of belief' as a more suitable alternative. Murray argues that interactive media require a more dynamic and participatory form of engagement from the players, which is better captured by this new framing and phrasing of the concept.

> "The pleasurable surrender of the mind to an imaginative world is often described, in Coleridge's phrase, as 'the willing suspension of disbelief.' But this is too passive a formulation even for traditional media. When we enter a fictional world, we do not merely 'suspend' a critical faculty; we also exercise a creative faculty. We do not suspend disbelief so much as we actively create belief. Because of our desire to experience immersion, we focus our attention on the enveloping world and we use our intelligence to reinforce rather than to question the reality of the experience'.' (Murray, 2017, p.126)

Despite Murray's reservations, many scholars relevant to our research – such as Calleja (2011), Juul (2011), and Ryan (2001), among others – continue to employ the concept of suspension of disbelief in the context of video games. This ongoing debate highlights the evolving nature of narrative theories as they adapt to new media forms. It emphasizes

the necessity for continued research into how traditional literary concepts are transformed in the digital age, especially as video games and other interactive media develop increasingly complex narrative structures that challenge conventional understandings of audience engagement and narrative immersion.

Achieving a nuanced understanding of both suspension of disbelief and rational distance enables game designers to effectively apply these concepts, engaging players emotionally and creating more resonant and profound experiences. The strategical reduction of rational distance, as illustrated by Pinto and Luz (2024), allows designers to create emotional engagement by blurring the lines between fiction and reality. This manipulation allows players to form deeper emotional connections with the game world, as the distinction between their real-world selves and in-game personas becomes less rigid. Such techniques not only enhance immersion but also intensify the emotional resonance of the narrative, offering players a more impactful and engaging experience. By carefully managing these interactions, designers can create what Calleja (2011) refers to as 'incorporation', where the game world becomes part of the player's lived experience, contributing to both cognitive and emotional immersion. As video games continue to evolve, the ability to understand the manipulation of rational distance through innovative narrative strategies can be crucial for developing emotionally compelling and deeply immersive gameplaying experiences.

2.4 Involvement and Incorporation

In the rapidly evolving landscape of video games, traditional concepts such as immersion can be increasingly seen as lacking or inadequate to fully capture the depth of player experience. As video games intertwine more intricately with players' lives through advanced narratives and interactive gameplay, the need to adapt and expand these definitions can become apparent. In this context, the ideas of involvement and incorporation emerge as an evolution of immersion, reflecting a shift towards acknowledging the unique, interactive nature of video games where players are active participants in narrative experiences. This evolution aims to better articulate how video games engage players not only during gameplay but also in how they resonate and integrate within their everyday lives, challenging and expanding the traditional boundaries of narrative engagement.

Calleja (2011) provides a nuanced framework for understanding player engagement through the Player Involvement Model (PIM), which distinguishes between micro-involvement (or on-line), as immediate, moment-to-moment interactions within the game, and macro-involvement (or offline), as broader, reflective engagement occurring outside active gameplay. This distinction sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how video games influence players' lives beyond the screen and the act of play.

Within Calleja's framework, player on-line involvement encompasses several dimensions that collectively define the depth and breadth of engagement in the act of playing a

video game: Kinesthetic Involvement refers to the player's engagement with the game's physical or control aspects, requiring coordination and mastery of mechanics. This form of involvement is crucial for games that demand precise movements and strategic input. Spatial Involvement involves interaction with and navigation through the game's geography, fostering a mental map of the virtual space and enhancing the player's sense of presence within the game world. Shared Involvement highlights the social engagement with other players or AI characters, adding cooperative or competitive dynamics that enrich the gameplaying experience. Narrative Involvement centers on the player's emotional connection to the storyline, shaped by both scripted and emergent events, thereby deepening the player's attachment to the game's narrative. Affective Involvement encompasses the emotional responses generated by the game, ranging from awe and fear to joy, which contribute to a memorable and impactful experience. Lastly, Ludic Involvement pertains to the interaction with the game's rules and mechanics, including strategy and decision-making, which stimulates cognitive engagement and problem-solving skills.

At the core of Calleja's (2011) theory lies the concept of incorporation, an evolution of conventional immersion. Incorporation extends the gameplay experience into the player's cognitive and emotional realms, affecting real-world perceptions and behaviors. Games become intertwined with the player's identity and everyday reality, making them a significant part of personal and social experiences. This concept is supported by Ntelia (2020), who explores how emotional connections, particularly romantic connections in the gameplaying experience, between players and game characters enhance

engagement and immersion, leading to profound involvement where players' feelings towards characters affect their real-world emotions and behaviors.

Isbister (2016) further aligns with Calleja's concept by emphasizing the role of emotional design in games. Isbister argues that well-crafted characters, particularly their behaviors such as animations, voice acting, and interactive responses, can evoke strong emotional responses, creating lasting impressions on players. This emotional engagement is a key aspect of incorporation through affective involvement, where the player's emotional and cognitive investment in the game transcends the screen, fostering a deeper connection to the narrative and characters.

Moreover, the dual motivations for entertainment consumption, as discussed by Oliver and Raney (2011), highlight why players seek both pleasure and meaningful experiences in games. Oliver and Raney's (2011) research suggests that games capable of delivering eudaimonic experiences – those providing a sense of meaning and personal growth – are more likely to achieve deep incorporation. Players reflect on the game's themes and narratives in their everyday lives, integrating game experiences into their personal identities and social interactions.

In terms of game design and narrative structure, both incorporation and on-line, or micro, involvement require developers to craft environments and stories that resonate deeply with players, with thoughtful and emotional experiences even when not actively engaged with the game. This approach demands a game architecture that views players as active

components of the game world. Their decisions and interactions shape not only the narrative but also their psychological and emotional landscape. For instance, moral dilemmas within a game can prompt players to consider their own values and ethical beliefs, facilitating a deeper connection to the game's narrative.

Narratively, incorporation pushes for stories that captivate players to the extent that they reflect on the game's events and characters even when they are not playing it. This level of engagement suggests that narratives within games should be compelling and relatable enough to extend their influence beyond gameplay, fostering a profound connection between the player and the game. This connection blurs the lines between the player's self and their in-game representation, and between the virtual world and reality, enhancing the narrative depth and emotional influence of the game.

Calleja (2011) emphasizes that while incorporation serves as the culmination of various dimensions of involvement, the application of the PIM does not necessitate the presence or equal relevance of all dimensions in every game. Players might focus intensely on one aspect of their experience at a time or blend several dimensions as their engagement evolves, reflecting the fluidity and variability of player engagement.

Calleja's model, along with the concepts of involvement and incorporation, provide invaluable insights into the dynamics of player engagement in video games. With the effective integration of these concepts into game design, developers can create more engaging and personally resonant experiences that transcend traditional entertainment, fostering lasting emotional and cognitive connections with players. This approach not only enhances the player's experience but also highlights the broader cultural and psychological impact of video games, affirming the medium's role in shaping and reflecting contemporary human experiences.

2.5 Summary

In summary, the foundational concepts of agency, immersion, suspension of disbelief, rational distance, involvement, and incorporation collectively provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding emotional engagement in video games. Agency empowers players by granting them control and meaningful choices, fostering a personal investment in the game's narrative and outcomes. This sense of agency transforms players from passive observers into active participants, enhancing their connection to the game world.

Immersion captures the depth of player absorption through various dimensions – sensory, challenge-based, and imaginative – creating a compelling and engaging experience. The layered and multifaceted approaches to immersion ensure that players are not only visually and audibly engaged but also intellectually and emotionally involved in the gameplay and narrative.

The interplay between suspension of disbelief and rational distance explains how players balance emotional engagement with cognitive awareness of the game's fictional nature. While suspension of disbelief allows players to emotionally invest in the game world, rational distance ensures they

maintain an understanding of the game's boundaries, preventing delusion and fostering a healthy engagement with the narrative.

Involvement and incorporation, as outlined by Calleja's Player Involvement Model (PIM), expand upon traditional notions of immersion by emphasizing both immediate, moment-to-moment interactions and broader, reflective engagements that extend beyond active gameplay. These concepts illustrate how video games not only engage players during play but also resonate and integrate into their everyday lives, deepening emotional connections and influencing real-world perceptions and behaviors.

With the exploration on integration of these foundational theories, this section presents the complexity of player experience and establishes a solid basis for exploring how game design can foster profound emotional and cognitive connections within digital environments. Understanding these interconnected concepts is essential for game designers and researchers aiming to create and study emotionally resonant experiences. The subsequent sections will examine how these foundational theories inform practical game design strategies and contribute to the ongoing evolution of narrative and emotional engagement in video games.

3. The Implicit Player Contract and Emotional Engagement

When players engage with a video game, they enter into what can be considered an implicit "player contract." This contract is not merely about adhering to the game's mechanical rules but also involves a deeper, emotional agreement to invest in the game's narrative, characters, and virtual world. Salen and Zimmerman (2003) describe this as stepping into a metaphorical space where the normal rules of reality are suspended, where the game's rules dominate. By entering this space, players allow themselves to be immersed in the fictional world, blurring the lines between their real-world identity and the game's constructs.

However, this contract extends beyond following rules, it also opens the player to be emotionally engaged by the game. As Juul (2011) argues, video games are inherently 'half-real' experiences: players interact with tangible, rule-based systems while engaging with fictional narratives that elicit real emotions. This dual nature of games creates a fertile ground for players to become emotionally involved in ways that go beyond passive media consumption. Murray (2017) expands this idea, arguing that in interactive media, players do not simply suspend their disbelief; they engage in an 'active creation of belief'. As they interact with the game world, players use their cognitive faculties to reinforce the reality of the experience, deepening their emotional investment. This active engagement is crucial for emotional involvement because it requires the player to participate not just with their hands, but with their hearts and minds.

A deeper dimension of this player contract is reflected in the concept of the ludic contract, as discussed by Duflo (1997), where players willingly submit to the rules and legal framework of the game in exchange for the freedom to engage with its world. Duflo describes this as the act of inserting "ludic time and space into real time and space", where players

temporarily abandon a portion of their real-world freedom to fully immerse themselves in the game's rules and structure, gaining a new form of freedom within the game world (*"Le contrat ludique, ainsi, est cet accord sur la légalité ludique fondatrice, qui instaure son règne. Il est la décision d'insérer ce temps et cet espace ludique dans le temps et l'espace réel,"* p. 222). This act of voluntary submission reflects the emotional contract players make when engaging with a game's narrative and world, allowing the game to shape their cognitive and emotional experience.

By voluntarily adhering to the rules of the game world, players not only accept the game's structure but also open themselves up to its emotional impact. This dual engagement with both the legal and emotional aspects of the game reinforces the idea of the player as a co-creator of the game's experience. The ludic contract thus plays a critical role in shaping how players interact with the game's systems, influencing their emotional investment in the characters, narrative, and overall experience.

> Once the implicit player contract is accepted, players can become emotionally vulnerable within the game's structured environment. This vulnerability is rooted in the balance between the rigid rules of gameplay and the fluid, emotionally charged narrative elements. As Juul (2011) points out, the "half-real" nature of games forces players to constantly navigate between a logical understanding of the game as a system of rules and an emotional connection to its story and characters, as the players become attached to the outcome of their actions. According to Juul, a "game is

> a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable."
> (Juul, 2011, p. 58)

This implicit agreement to engage with the different elements of a game, and that attachment to the outcome, opens up players to be more susceptible to an emotional involvement. Ntelia's (2020) research in the context of romantic love in game narratives, argues that players have to be willing to allow themselves to be engaged emotionally in order to develop those connections with virtual characters akin to real-life relationships, "similar to the idolization of male celebrities by female teenagers" (Ntelia, 2020, p. 77). Those real feelings and affections that derive from that susceptibility are built into the game, with game designers either deliberately blurring "the distinction between player and character" or by manipulating "players so as not to be able to fully distance themselves from their characters" (Ntelia, 2020, p. 77). These virtual relationships, while fictional, evoke genuine feelings of affection and players often find themselves emotionally involved in the outcomes of these relationships. The willingness to suspend disbelief and emotionally invest in virtual characters is part of the implicit player contract, allowing the game to manipulate emotional responses in meaningful ways.

Isbister (2016) emphasizes the role of emotional design in video games. While Ntelia (2020) focuses more on the physicality of NPCs and embodiment, Isbister (2016) focuses

more on the behavioral aspects, arguing that, by creating characters with believable behaviors – through animations, voice acting, and interactions, for example – game designers foster emotional connections that transcend the screen. This emotional engagement becomes a key aspect of the implicit player contract, as players are not just controlling avatars but forming attachments to characters who feel real. This attachment is reinforced by the player's ability to influence the game's outcomes, making the emotional stakes higher and more personal.

A crucial aspect of the implicit player contract is player agency as the ability of players to make meaningful decisions that impact the game world. Murray (2017) describes agency as the power to take meaningful action and see the consequences of those actions in-game. In this context, the player contract is not a passive agreement; it is an active collaboration between the player and the game, granting players the power to shape the narrative, while games enhance emotional engagement because players feel a personal stake in the outcomes of their actions.

> "Dramatic agency can often be produced by thwarting the desires triggered by the fictional situation. The difficulty of finding out what has happened to the missing sister in Gone Home increases the player's emotional investment in the story. As with the unavoidable sacrifice of the appealing robot companion in Planetfall, sometimes the loss of a familiar character can make for powerful story involvement. In the game Brothers: The Story of Two Sons (2013) the experience of loss is mirrored by a change in game

controller patterns that reinforces the action in a hauntingly poignant way, as this player's description makes clear" (Murray, 2017, p. 169)

The concept of co-creation in interactive media (Pearce, 2004) highlights how players actively shape their own experiences rather than passively consuming a pre-determined narrative. Through their decisions, players influence both the emotional and narrative trajectory of the game, making choices that carry significant emotional consequences. This co-creation reinforces the emotional weight of the game and the attachment to the outcome mentioned by Juul (2011), as players are not only participants in the narrative but also responsible for shaping it.

In games like *Mass Effect* and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, for example, players can influence romantic relationships, friendships, and moral dilemmas that have lasting emotional repercussions. This decision-making process affects not only the narrative but also their relationships with their in-game characters, players engage in a form of emotional co-creation. This reinforces their emotional involvement, as they are not only participants in the narrative but also actively influencing the experience.

We can also relate the implicit player contract Calleja's (2011) concept of incorporation, where the game world becomes part of the player's cognitive and emotional landscape. As players engage deeply with a game's narrative and characters, the boundary between the game world and the player's reality begins to blur. This is particularly evident in games that foster emotional connections through relationships, such as

God of War, where the father-son bond forms a central thread. Players who agree to the implicit contract of emotional engagement find that their connection to these characters and narratives resonates beyond the confines of the game world and their on-line involvement, influencing their real-life emotions and reflections.

The contract that players implicitly agree upon when they engage with a video game plays a crucial role in shaping emotional engagement in video games. Players agree to the rules and boundaries of the game world, opening themselves to be engaged and immersed by the different of components of the game, which can lead to a deep emotional involvement with the game's characters, narratives, and environments. This engagement is not passive; it is an active, dynamic, collaborative process where players exercise agency, shape the narrative and emotionally invest in the outcomes. The emotional vulnerability that can be created by this implicit contract enables games to foster meaningful connections that resonate with players, both within and beyond the game world.

4. The Role of the Player as Co-Creator

The player's role in video games extends far beyond passive participation, positioning them as co-creators within the game's architecture. Unlike traditional media, where the audience is confined to a passive role, video games offer players the ability to directly interact with, influence and even reshape the narrative as they progress. This capacity transforms the player into an essential component of the game's structural and emotional construct, blurring the boundaries between creator and participant. In this sense, the player becomes an

integral part of the game's architecture, which reveals a dual existence, in which "players are simultaneously within and outside the game's narrative structure" (Pinto & Luz, 2024, p. 3). This duality is critical in understanding how emotional engagement forms, as the player is both a character in the story and a real-world individual projecting their emotions onto the game world.

Central to this co-creation process is player agency, the players' ability to take meaningful actions is paramount to influence both the game world and their emotional journey. As Murray (2011) states, agency in video games involves the power to take actions that have tangible, impactful outcomes, shaping not just the course of the narrative but also the player's emotional involvement with it. This sense of agency enhances the player's emotional engagement because their decisions carry weight, making them deeply invested in the narrative's direction and outcome.

According to Murray (2017):

> "The computer is providing us with a new stage for the creation of participatory theater. We are gradually learning to do what actors do, to enact emotionally authentic experiences that we know are not 'real.' The more persuasive the sensory representation of the digital space, the more we feel that we are present in the virtual world and the wider range of actions we will seek to perform there." (Murray, 2017, p.140)

Building on the concept of co-creation in interactive media (Pearce, 2004), players are not merely consumers of a

scripted story but active participants in shaping the narrative. Through their choices and interactions, players influence both the outcomes and their own emotional experience, reinforcing the emotional intensity of the narrative. This collaborative dynamic between the game and the player ensures that players are not passive observers but co-creators of their journey. The concept of ergodic literature (Aarseth, 1997) further supports this by emphasizing the non-trivial effort players invest in navigating and shaping the game's structure, making them central to the creation of meaning within the game.

The player's active role in shaping their emotional journey goes beyond simply making choices within the game. Players also bring their personal expectations, desires, and previous experiences to their gameplay, which further shapes how they interpret and engage with the game's narrative. This dynamic process is highlighted by Ermi and Mäyrä (2005), who describe how players actively contribute to the construction of their gameplay experience.

> 'Players do not just engage in ready-made gameplay but also actively take part in the construction of these experiences: they bring their desires, anticipations and previous experiences with them, and interpret and reflect the experience in that light. For example, a certain gameplay session might be interpreted as fun, challenging and victorious until one hears that a friend of hers made a better record effortlessly, after which it might be reinterpreted more like a waste of time. Experiences are also largely context dependent: the same activity can be interpreted as highly

pleasant in some contexts but possibly unattractive in other kinds of settings'.' (Ermi & Mäyrä, 2005, p.2)

Aarseth (1997) goes further in affirming the importance of the role of the player drawing comparisons between the meaning of interacting and having the ability to change the narrative and being a spectator, stating that:

> "A reader, however strongly engaged in the unfolding of a narrative, is powerless. Like a spectator at a soccer game, he may speculate, conjecture, extrapolate, even shout abuse, but he is not a player. Like a passenger on a train, he can study and interpret the shifting landscape, he may rest his eyes wherever he pleases, even release the emergency brake and step off, but he is not free to move the tracks in a different direction. He cannot have the player's pleasure of influence: 'Let's see what happens when I do this.' The reader's pleasure is the pleasure of the voyeur. Safe, but impotent." (Aarseth, 1997, p.4)

The dual presence of the player – simultaneously within and outside the game – intensifies this emotional connection. Players are not just controlling a character or making decisions within the game's fictional world; they are also bringing their real-world emotions, experiences, and identities into the game. This duality, where the player's real-life self and in-game persona converge, blurs the lines between fiction and reality, deepening emotional involvement. It also ties directly to the concept of incorporation, as described by Calleja (2011), where the game experience becomes assimilated into the player's daily life. Calleja identifies that duality

in the involvement of the player as micro with his presence in game and determined by how the game engages with the player during gameplay, and macro which relates to the players' presence outside the game. Incorporation involves both types of involvement, where players are engaged in moment-to-moment gameplay decisions, and macro-involvement, which refers to the broader, reflective engagement that extends beyond active gameplay.

In this way, the player's role as a co-creator is not limited to their immediate actions within the game but also extends to how the game resonates with them outside of play. This ties into the concept of narrative involvement, where players emotionally connect with the game's storyline, and affective involvement, where emotional responses are triggered by in-game events. The emotional investment deepens as the player becomes an active participant in shaping the game's world, further heightening their connection to the narrative and the characters.

Additionally, the player's dual existence involves both cognitive and emotional engagement, where the distinction between the player and the game world becomes increasingly blurred. Building on the earlier discussion of player agency, several games demonstrate how both narrative and gameplay choices impact the player's emotional engagement and perception of the game. As players make decisions, they not only affect the game's world but also reflect on their own values, ethics, and emotions. This dynamic interplay between narrative choices and emotional engagement is exemplified in games like *Mass Effect* and *Life is Strange*, where the player's decisions directly influence the unfolding narrative and

character relationships. These choices often carry significant narrative weight, shaping the story and the emotional journey of both the characters and the player.

In contrast, gameplay-driven choices play a central role in emotionally engaging the player in *The Last of Us* and *God of War*, where decisions related to gameplay and the player's approach to the game can create a tense, emotionally charged experience. While the game's fixed narrative may not change based on these gameplay choices, they significantly alter the player's personal experience of the story. Deciding whether to engage in stealth, aggressive combat, or how to develop a character's abilities not only affects the gameplay but also shapes how players view their character and the unfolding events. This perceived narrative allows players to project their values and judgments onto the game, reinforcing their emotional connection to the characters and the world around them.

Thus, narrative choices that alter the story itself and gameplay choices that shift the player's perception of the game both reinforce the co-creative role of the player. In either case, the player's decisions—big or small—carry emotional significance, deepening their engagement with the game and influencing not just the narrative but also how it is emotionally experienced.

The player's role as a co-creator within the game's architecture fundamentally shapes their emotional journey, integrating their decisions, actions and personal experiences into the game's narrative, players become not just by participating but shaping the emotional landscape. This co-creation

process, facilitated by agency, involvement, and incorporation, allows for a more profound emotional engagement, where the player's dual existence enhances their connection to the game world, turning it into a deeply personal and resonant experience.

5. Narrative Strategies and Emotional Connections

Game designers can employ a range of narrative strategies to foster emotional connections between players and the game's world, characters, and storylines. This can be done by designing these experiences with an awareness of player engagement, they create opportunities for players to emotionally invest in the game. According to Ntelia (2020), game designers can manipulate scenarios where the boundaries between player and character are intentionally blurred, creating emotional immersion that prevents players from fully distancing themselves from their in-game personas. This deliberate emotional manipulation helps players form strong emotional bonds with the characters, amplifying the overall emotional experience. Ntelia (2020) also emphasizes that players' willingness to emotionally engage is a critical factor in how deeply these emotional connections are formed. Players who enter games with an openness to emotional involvement are more susceptible to forming significant attachments to the characters and narratives presented by the game (p. 77)

Isbister (2016) emphasizes that emotionally compelling games, like other forms of media, are the result of intentional design strategies. Just as musicians and filmmakers use a multitude of techniques to evoke feelings on their audiences, game developers craft emotional experiences through carefully honed methods.

"Compelling games don't happen by accident, any more than do gripping novels, movies, or music. In all these media, creators draw from a well-defined set of strategies and techniques to create a specific emotional experience. Musicians, for instance, might use a minor key and slower tempo to create a sad or anxious mood (at least in the West). Film directors use close-ups to create intimacy. Game developers, too, have been honing techniques that lead players through intentionally designed emotional experience, whether that experience is the offbeat and comic mood of The Sims or Angry Birds, or the dramatic intensity of Call of Duty. Unlike film, fiction, or music, there isn't yet a common language among designers, players, and society at large for what is going on and why in the hearts and minds of players." (Isbister, 2016, p. 1)

In addition to these strategies, two participant-based studies reveal the importance of well-developed NPCs in fostering emotional connections. Coulson et al. (2012) have found that "virtual characters may be genuinely liked, and even loved, by the real people with whom they interact" (p. 180). Also, Bopp et al. (2019) claim their "findings show that the experience of different forms of character attachment is characterized by distinct emotional qualities: Players feel excited about cool and capable characters; express respect for a charismatic and fair nemesis; or admire characters as role models and embodiments of virtue" (p. 320). These studies highlight the critical role of character depth and personality traits in

creating empathy and emotional connections. The creation of NPCs with relatable traits, complex backstories, motivations and personalities, games can evoke strong emotional responses from players, deepening their investment in the game's world and narrative.

The exploration and implementation of diverse design strategies allows games to foster emotional involvement, encouraging this involvement through different types of relationships – romantic, familial and friendships – allowing players to experience a range of emotional dynamics that mirror real-life connections.

Romantic relationships are one of the most direct ways games forge emotional connections with players. In titles like *Mass Effect* and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, players can form romantic relationships with other characters, developing emotional bonds through choice-based mechanics that allow them to influence the course of the romance. These relationships, shaped by player decisions, give a sense of agency over the emotional journey, deepening player investment in the game's outcome. For instance, in *The Witcher 3*, players choose between romantic relationships with *Triss* or *Yennefer*, each path leading to unique emotional consequences. Similarly, *Mass*

Effect offers players the opportunity to pursue romantic relationships with different crew members, intertwining these romances with the broader narrative. In both cases, these choices create a more personalized emotional journey, where the player's decisions influence not only the narrative but also their emotional connection to the characters. *Doki Doki Literature Club!* also engages with romantic themes but subverts

the player's expectations by transforming the seemingly lighthearted dating simulator stereotype into a psychological horror experience. The initial emotional investment in the romantic dynamics is later turned into a source of tension and unease, demonstrating how narrative strategies can manipulate emotional connections to create a deeper, more impactful experience.

Familial bonds offer another emotional connection point for players. In *God of War*, the relationship between *Kratos* and his son *Atreus* forms the heart of the emotional narrative. Throughout the game, *Kratos* struggles to connect with and guide his son, while *Atreus* seeks approval and understanding from his father. This evolving dynamic resonates with players, as the father-son relationship reflects real-world experiences of parenthood, responsibility, and growth. The emotional weight of their bond enhances the player's connection to the game, making the narrative stakes feel deeply personal. Similarly, *The Last of Us* builds its emotional resonance on the relationship between *Joel* and *Ellie*, which evolves into a protective, almost father-daughter bond. *Joel*'s trauma from losing his biological daughter early in the game is central to his relationship with Ellie, as she becomes a surrogate daughter over the course of their journey. The depth of this bond, coupled with the game's emotionally charged narrative, draws players into an intense emotional connection, where the survival mechanics and story become intertwined with the player's emotional investment in the characters.

Friendship is another key emotional dynamic that games explore to deepen engagement. Life is Strange exemplifies this

through the bond between *Max* and *Chloe*, where the player's choices shape the development of their friendship. As Max navigates her powers to rewind time, the player is forced to make difficult decisions that test their friendship and challenge their emotional investment in the characters. These choices heighten the emotional stakes, making the outcome of the story feel personal and impactful. In *Tales from the Borderlands*, emotional engagement is not only built through camaraderie and friendship between characters like *Rhys*, *Fiona*, and *Loader Bot* but also through moments of emotional shock that subvert player expectations. A particularly striking example is when the narrative leads players to believe that *Fiona* has sacrificed herself to save *Rhys* and the others. This moment of perceived loss adds significant emotional weight to the story, deepening the players' attachment to the characters and amplifying their investment in the outcome. The blend of humor, shared struggles, and unexpected emotional twists keeps players engaged, creating a rollercoaster of feelings that makes the narrative journey both impactful and memorable. Even *Doki Doki Literature Club!* manipulates themes of friendship and romance to engage players emotionally. The game's seemingly innocent friendships within the literature club only to quickly take a darker turn, using these connections to enhance the psychological horror of the game. Players become emotionally invested in the fates of the characters, further increasing the impact when the game subverts expectations.

Through the strategic use of the distinct types of love relationships, either romantic, familial or friendships, video games create emotional connections that resonate deeply with players. These narrative strategies, combined with the player's willingness to emotionally engage, allow for a wide range of emotional experiences, allowing players to shape these relationships through choice-based mechanics and immersive storytelling, games offer emotionally resonant experiences that extend far beyond the screen.

6. Empirical Evidence on Emotional Engagement

Understanding how players emotionally engage with video games requires not only theoretical perspectives but also empirical evidence to validate these experiences. Several studies have explored the nature of emotional attachments formed between players and virtual characters, as well as the broader motivations behind media consumption. These studies provide critical insights into the depth and impact of emotional engagement in games and other forms of entertainment.

In Bopp et al. (2019), they explore the emotional attachment players develop toward game characters, identifying seven distinct forms of attachment: cool and capable, respected nemesis, admired paragon, crush, concern for one's protégé, sympathetic alter ego, and trusted close friend. These forms cover a wide emotional range, from admiration and respect to deep concern and care. The study emphasizes how these various emotional experiences contribute to an engaging player experience by offering more nuanced character-player dynamics beyond mere functionality. The research highlights that the depth of these relationships significantly enhances the player's attachment and investment in the game.

This study underlines that attachment to game characters – whether as mentors, friends, or antagonists – can evoke

deep emotional responses that shape the player's overall experience and engagement with the game. It also contributes to understanding how games can foster meaningful, emotionally resonant experiences.

Similarly, Coulson et al. (2012) present empirical evidence demonstrating that players form real and meaningful emotional attachments to virtual characters. Surveying players of Dragon Age: Origins (Electronic Arts, 2009), the study reveals that emotional connections arise from a combination of the players' personality traits and the characters' attributes, such as physical attractiveness, friendliness, and usefulness. These emotional attachments resemble real-life relationships, highlighting the potential for video games to evoke strong interpersonal emotions. This attachment process is driven not just by the game mechanics but by the characters' perceived authenticity, which influences how players emotionally interact with the game world.

The research by Coulson et al. (2012) complements Bopp et al. (2019) by demonstrating that virtual relationships often mirror real-world emotional dynamics, with player-character interactions significantly shaping the overall gameplay experience. Both studies provide compelling evidence that video game characters can foster lasting emotional connections, which can profoundly affect a player's immersion and emotional investment.

However, emotional engagement extends beyond video games and into broader entertainment experiences. In their study, Oliver and Raney (2011) explore the motivations behind entertainment consumption, distinguishing between hedonic (pleasure-seeking) and eudaimonic (meaning-seeking) motivations. While pleasure is a central driver of entertainment, audiences also seek media experiences that allow them to reflect on deeper life questions and truths. These eudaimonic experiences often evoke mixed affective reactions, such as sadness combined with insight, which contribute to more meaningful, emotionally resonant engagement.

Although Oliver and Raney's (2011) study was not conducted with video games, their findings highlight the broader emotional impact that entertainment media can have. This evidence supports the idea that games, like other forms of media, can be consumed not only for pleasure but also for deeper emotional and reflective experiences. The pursuit of meaning can coexist with or even overshadow simple enjoyment, demonstrating that emotional engagement in media can be multifaceted.

In summary, these empirical studies provide a solid foundation for understanding emotional engagement in video games and media. Whether through attachments to virtual characters or through broader eudaimonic experiences, emotional connections play a vital role in how players and audiences interact with and derive meaning from media. Together, these findings reinforce the idea that games are powerful vehicles for emotional experiences, fostering connections that can resonate beyond the screen.

7. Game Experience Resonating in Real-Life

As video games continue to evolve as a narrative medium, the emotional experiences they evoke increasingly

extend beyond the confines of the screen, influencing players' thoughts, emotions, and reflections in their daily lives. Calleja's (2011) concept of incorporation helps explain this phenomenon, highlighting how players not only engage deeply with the game world during play but also carry elements of that engagement into their real-world experiences. Incorporation reflects the way in-game decisions and emotional moments become intertwined with the player's identity, affecting how they view relationships, ethics, and personal values long after gameplay has ended.

Ledesma (2022) explores how video games can bridge the gap between fiction and reality, positioning them as more than just entertainment but as tools for critical reflection. Arguing that through the immersive experiences games offer, players are encouraged to engage with ethical and political dilemmas within the game world, prompting them to reflect on real-world societal issues. This reflective process is a natural outcome of the decisions players make in games, as these decisions often carry implications that mirror larger social structures and power dynamics, blurring the line between fictional game scenarios and real-life systems.

In this context, Ledesma (2022) suggests that video games not only entertain but also provoke players to question and analyze their personal beliefs, values, and the society they live in. By immersing players in complex narratives and moral choices, games encourage them to think critically about the implications of their in-game actions, fostering emotional and intellectual engagement that extends beyond the screen. This aligns with the broader notion that video games can foster lasting emotional connections while also serving

as a medium for social and political commentary, helping players to reflect on their role in both virtual and real-world contexts.

Just as Ledesma (2022) highlights how games influence social and political reflection, they also have the power to foster emotional connections that transcend the game world. In games like *The Last of Us*, *Mass Effect*, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* and *Life is Strange*, the emotional connections players form with characters and narratives often do not dissipate when the game ends. Instead, these experiences can linger, prompting players to reflect on the emotions, choices, and relationships they encountered in the game and how they relate to their own lives.

For example, *The Last of Us* presents the relationship between *Joel* and *Ellie*, built on themes of love, loss, and survival. The complexity of *Joel*'s decisions – especially toward the game's conclusion—invites players to think deeply about the moral and emotional weight of his actions. His trauma from losing his daughter and his protective instincts toward *Ellie* resonate with players on a personal level, especially for those who identify with the themes of parenthood or guardianship. After playing the game, players often find themselves contemplating the broader implications of *Joel*'s choices, connecting these reflections with their own values and experiences.

In a similar way, *Mass Effect* offers players the ability to form emotional relationships with characters like *Garrus*, *Tali*, or *Liara*, either through romance or friendship. The decision-making mechanics force players to navigate complex

interpersonal dynamics, making these relationships feel personal and emotionally meaningful. These romantic or friendship-based bonds can lead to offline reflections on the nature of loyalty, sacrifice, and affection. Players may reconsider how their in-game relationships align with their own emotional needs and real-life relationships, illustrating how deeply the game's experience can resonate beyond play.

Building on this, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* deepens player emotional involvement through choices about *Geralt*'s romantic interests, whether to pursue a relationship with *Triss* or *Yennefer*. These choices come with emotional consequences that extend beyond mere gameplay, prompting players to reflect on their own romantic inclinations and priorities. The moral ambiguity of *Geralt*'s journey also fosters emotional reflection, as players grapple with the weight of their decisions in the complex narrative of the game. The resonances of *Geralt*'s relationships and the ethical dilemmas he faces stay with players after the game ends, deepening their connection to the game's themes.

In addition to romantic and moral dilemmas, familial bonds play a significant role in emotionally resonant experiences. The father-son relationship between *Kratos* and *Atreus* in *God of War* is a prime example. Throughout the game, *Kratos* struggles to connect with his son, while *Atreus* yearns for his father's approval. The emotional tension between them mirrors real-world parental dynamics, where communication, growth, and understanding are central to building relationships. Players who experience similar dynamics in their own families are likely to reflect on these moments long after the game concludes, carrying the emotional weight of *Kratos* and

Atreus's journey into their real-world perceptions of fatherhood and mentorship.

Friendship dynamics also offer emotional depth. In *Life is Strange*, the bond between *Max* and *Chloe* forms the emotional core of the narrative, with Max's ability to rewind time creating moral dilemmas that test their relationship. As players progress, their decisions shape the friendship, often leading to difficult choices that force them to reflect on the nature of loyalty, sacrifice, and regret. The weight of these decisions lingers beyond gameplay, especially in how players relate to their own friendships and moral boundaries.

Similarly, *Tales from the Borderlands* builds its emotional engagement through friendship and camaraderie, particularly between characters like *Rhys*, *Fiona,* and *Loader Bot*. While the game is filled with humor and lighthearted moments, the emotional stakes rise when players face unexpected moments of loss, such as the belief that *Fiona* has sacrificed herself. These moments add emotional depth to the otherwise comedic narrative, prompting players to reflect on the significance of friendship and sacrifice in both the game and their real lives.

Doki Doki Literature Club! exemplifies how games can manipulate expectations and create lasting emotional shock. The game begins as a seemingly innocent exploration of friendship and romance within a literature club, but it soon takes a dark psychological turn, subverting the typical dating-sim structure and breaking the fourth wall, the game forces players to confront their emotional investment in the characters. The horror elements are amplified by the emotional

manipulation that occurs, as players are made to feel responsible for the fates of the characters they thought they understood. This emotional shock resonates far beyond the game, leaving players to reflect on the fragility of relationships and the unexpected ways emotional connections can be manipulated.

The emotional connections players form in these games are not fleeting; they extend beyond the game into the player's real life, becoming part of their ongoing reflections and personal narrative. As Calleja (2011) describes, incorporation involves both micro-involvement — the moment-to-moment engagement during gameplay — and macro-involvement, the broader, reflective engagement that persists after the game has ended. This concept explains how the emotional experiences players undergo during gameplay continue to affect them in meaningful ways, shaping how they think, feel, and engage with their real-world emotions and relationships.

For instance, players of *The Last of Us* may find themselves continuing to reflect on *Joel*'s moral choices and how they align with their own ethical beliefs. Similarly, those who played *Mass Effect* or *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* might reevaluate their real-life romantic relationships or the nature of their friendships based on the emotional dynamics they experienced in-game. The emotional journey does not end with the credits; instead, it extends into the player's broader life, illustrating the profound impact video games can have on emotional and cognitive processing.

The emotional engagement experienced in video games is not confined to the digital world. Through incorporation, players carry the emotional weight of their in-game experiences into their everyday lives, continuing to reflect on the decisions, relationships, and ethical dilemmas they faced during gameplay. Whether through romantic entanglements, familial bonds, or deep friendships, the emotional journey that begins in the game world often extends beyond it, shaping how players think, feel, and relate to the world around them. Games like *The Last of Us*, *Mass Effect*, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, *God of War*, *Life is Strange*, *Tales from the Borderlands* and *Doki Doki Literature Club!* serve as powerful examples of how emotional connections forged within games resonate long after the player has put down the controller, demonstrating the profound potential for video games to shape real-life emotional experiences.

8. Conclusion

The exploration of emotional engagement in video games highlights the fundamental role of player agency, immersion, involvement, incorporation, and suspension of disbelief in shaping how players connect with game narratives, characters, and fictional worlds. These foundational concepts work together to create an environment where players are not only participants but also co-creators of their emotional experiences, offering meaningful choices and opportunities for immersion. Games have the inherent ability to enable players to form lasting emotional connections that mirror real-life experiences.

The narrative strategies employed by game designers further amplify this emotional engagement, crafting scenarios that explore romantic relationships, familial bonds, and friendships. The player's ability to influence these dynamics

through their choices deepens their connection to the game, transforming gameplay into a personalized emotional experience. As explored through examples like *Mass Effect*, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, *The Last of Us*, *Life is Strange*, *God of War*, *Doki Doki Literature Club!* and *Tales from the Borderlands*, the emotional connections forged in games resonate beyond the screen, impacting how players reflect on relationships and personal values in their real lives.

Understanding how emotional engagement works in video games is essential not only for academic study but also for game design. The integration of these concepts allows game designers to craft more immersive and emotionally resonant experiences that leave lasting impressions on players. The potential of games to evoke deep emotional responses opens new avenues for storytelling and personal connection, establishing video games as a powerful medium for meaningful, transformative experiences.

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