The Avatar-Player Relationship and Well-Being:
The Emotional Experiences of Role-Playing Characters

Introduction

Research shows that people who engage in role-playing games (RPG), from video games to tabletop games, can derive feelings of achievement, as well as social and immersive experiences which can help them reach eudaimonic and hedonic states (Snodgrass et al. 2019). However, gaming has also been linked to negative emotions related to "problematic" and "addictive" play, related to toxic communities and compulsive gameplay. In this project, we examine how avatars — digital and imaginary representations of players — shape emotional states. Through free listing and pile sorting interviews, our results show how gamers relate to their avatars, and how these game-based characters relate to players' emotional well-being.

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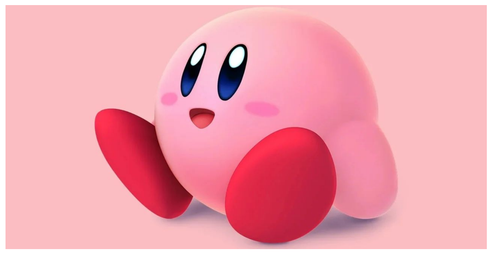

Kirby, Super Smash Bros

Caroline & Paladin, TTRPG

Steve, a Real Human Man, D&D

Figure 1: Images of gamers' avatars and characters.

Background

Avatars exist in relationship with the player and may possess traits of the actual self, ideal self, and the avatar self. Research suggests that gamers suffering from low self-esteem—the perceived disjunction between the actual and ideal self —tend to create avatars even more closely resembling their ideal selves, in order to compensate for perceived shortcomings and thereby bolster psychosocial well-being (Dengah & Snodgrass 2020).

Too, player-avatar identification lowers the amount of self-discrepancy between an individual's actual and ideal selves by providing players with the ability to embody and enact ideal traits, thus promoting well-being. However, in enacting that ideal self in gaming contexts, players can also be drawn away from commitments, which can create conflicts thus compromising well-being. The extent to which players identify with their characters/avatars—and absorb into them, with the experiences seeming to be real—can play a role in magnifying the positive gaming-related emotions as well as negative emotions. (Snodgrass et al. 2021).

Methods & Results

Data was collected via a mixed-method research design, including participant-observation, interviews, and more structured free list and pile sort activities.

Free lists are an exploratory data collection technique that asks informants to list, or brainstorm, all the items they can think of regarding a particular cultural domain. Here, we asked informations (N=22) to list *all the terms associated with your (favorite) character*; and *the emotions you feel when playing your character.*

Gender	Gaming Genre	Age
Male - 11	Tabletop - 12	18-25 - 16
Female - 9	Single Player RPG - 5	26-35 - 4
Non-Binary - 2	Massive Multiplayer Online - 4	35+ - 2
	Live Action RPG - 1	

Table 1: Free List Sample Characteristics

Via Visual Anthropac, 411 unique terms (lowercase) were consolidated for synonyms and common themes, resulting in 92 thematic categories (capitalized), displayed in the word cloud below.

Figure 2: Word Cloud of Freelist Terms Frequency.

Pile sorting allows researchers to understand the similarities and differences between different items generated from the free lists. Viewing the data in this way reveals how informants cognitively conceive and organize the aspects of a cultural domain.

We asked a separate group of informants (N = 24) to perform a constrained pile sort of 41 terms derived from the free lists (rephrased to combine common themes). Informants identified groups of terms that were associated with an important avatar. Sorts were analyzed via multidimensional scaling (MDS) for common groups.

Gender	Gaming Genre	Age
Male - 10	Tabletop – 8	18-25 - 16
Female - 12	Single Player RPG – 10	26-35 - 6
Non-Binary - 2	Massive Multiplayer Online - 6	35+ - 2

Table 2: Pile Sort Sample Characteristics

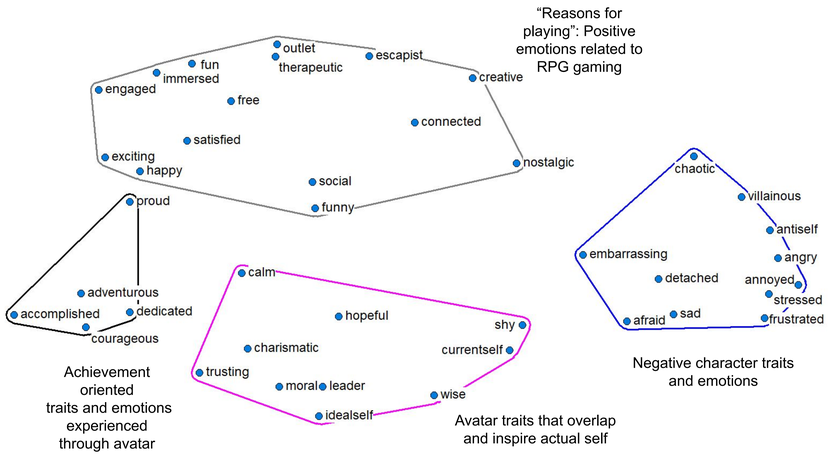

Figure 3: Multidimensional Scaling of Pile Sorts

Stress = 0.21, p < 0.01	Eigenvalue Ratio = 5.4	X Competence = .5

Discussion and Conclusions

Results from the free listing show that gamers most frequently mentioned their avatars as providing a sense of community (59% of respondents), followed by having ethics and morals (46%). Over ⅓ of gamers, when describing their avatar, said that their character was, in some way, a projection of themself, and nearly ¼ responded that their avatar was their ideal self.

The pile sort data show that gamers group avatar qualities in ways that reflect their relationship with the character. Avatar traits like *moral*, *leader*, *charismatic*, and *wise* were identified as also describing gamers actual or prefered characteristics, showing the connection and aspirational qualities avatars have for their users. Too, gamers identify the positive emotions associated with their avatars (e.g., *fun*, *therapeutic*, *outlet*, *escapist, creative),* along with achievement/success oriented traits (e.g., *accomplished, dedicated, proud*) as reasons for playing. Negative traits and emotions were most often described by informants as not relevant to the avatar-player connection or as the opposite of how the informant felt about their character.

The data suggests that the players receive positive emotional feedback from their avatars that likely encourages continued involvement in gaming. These results conflict with the media representation of gamers as socially-reclusive addicts. The avatar-player connection found in RPG video and tabletop games appears to promote a healthy style of play and self-projection. The players game for creative and therapeutic outlets, the sense of community fostering more emotional well-being, and to be inspired by their gaming avatars to be more like their moral, wise, ideal self.

> Right now I'm on a new adventure with myself and my own personal life. I'm exploring new things about myself and I'm learning new things. And I think that that's really how I feel in this game too. I am that avatar and I'm exploring this world and I'm learning the new things. **-Informant 22 on avatar 'Skeeter' from Sea of Thieves**

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