

An Analysis of the Player Avatar Protagonist in Video Game Narratives

Authors

Murat Doğa Turgay^{1*}

Affiliations

¹Master's Program in Animation Design, Yeditepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences, 34724, Istanbul, Turkiye

*To whom correspondence should be addresses; E-mail: muratdogaturgay@gmail.com

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Abstract

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

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

Such games usually provide players with a protagonist whom they can’t customize, whose skills are largely set-in stone and the story simply strings the player along its narrative rather

than letting them actually make any meaningful decisions. Despite this lack of control, games still try to force the player into the protagonist role by featuring a “silent protagonist”, not allowing the protagonist to vocally speak or show a significant amount of personality, with the expectation of the player pretending to be the protagonist. However, as mentioned above, the player still has no true control over such a protagonist: The protagonist still acts as required by the narrative and the player has no real control over this protagonist, despite the game expecting the player to insert themselves into the protagonist role. This results in the protagonists of such games being stuck in a state between trying to be both an avatar for the player and also their own character as required by the narrative.

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

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

For this, literature research was performed on terms relevant to this context. Descriptive content analysis was performed on selected video games in order to give real-life examples of different methods of designing the protagonist(s) in a game’s narrative and how it can relate to the player’s ability to role-play or experience the game’s story. Finally, surveys were conducted through the internet to obtain quantitative data on player opinions and preferences regarding this topic.

RESULTS

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

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

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

DISCUSSION

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

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

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

Games of the JRPG genre may often find themselves in this conflict where the games focus on telling a single, linear story, yet still force a player avatar protagonist that the game is not built

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

CONCLUSION

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

Characters especially hold an important place in video games, as they can serve as the backbone of not just the fantasy story, but also the gameplay as well. Characters serve as a mask for the computer and can make the player believe they are not interacting with a lifeless, dull machine, but interesting characters with their own personalities and stories instead. These characters can enhance the overall game experience by adding more depth to gameplay mechanics and providing players with a feeling of socialization as they interact with these characters, even when performing basic game functions such as using a shop. Among the

characters, the protagonist stands out as an especially important one as the story will usually revolve around this character and the player will spend most of their time with this protagonist.

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

Finally, providing a truly non-linear role-playing experience is very difficult due to technical limitations of video game development. It is also arguable how much players seek to role-play in a story focused game in the first place. There are numerous video games that feature little to no story with the intention of acting as a blank canvas for the player to create their own scenarios and stories in. Such games can provide much larger freedom than one that is restricted to the limits of its own story. The argument this thesis raises is that in a heavily story-focused game, attempting to force the player into the role of protagonist may significantly hinder the position of the protagonist within the story while also failing to provide a satisfactory role-playing experience. Even if such a protagonist design is ultimately not a hinderance to the overall story of the game, if it does not positively affect the player’s experience and fails to achieve its goal of allowing the player to role-play, then the game in question should simply feature a normal protagonist instead.

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APPENDIX

Figure 6.1

How old are you?
246 responses

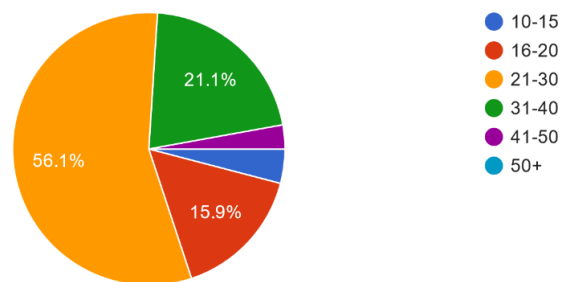


Figure 6.2

Which platforms do you play games on?
246 responses

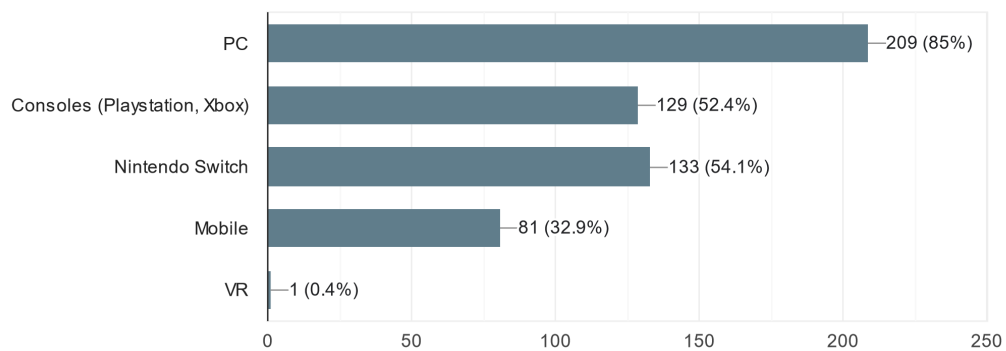


Figure 6.3

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

246 responses

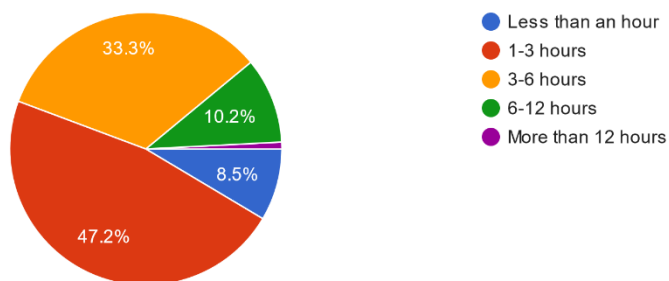


Figure 6.4

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

246 responses

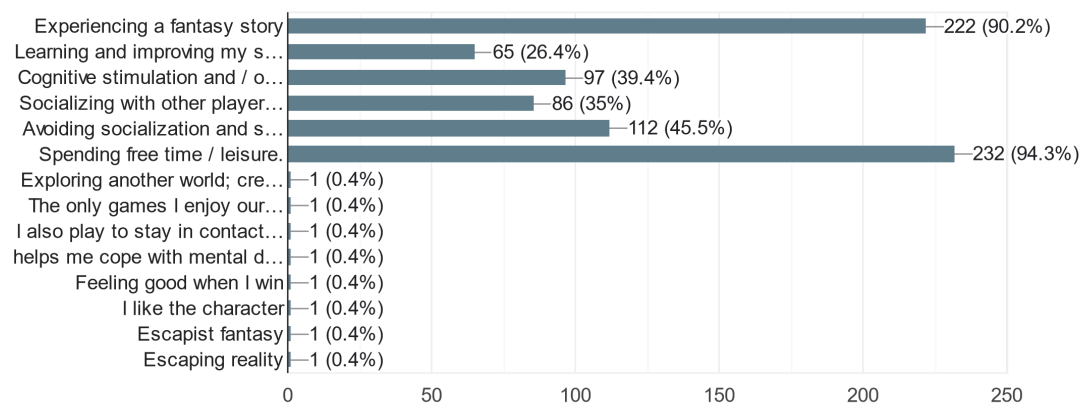


Figure 6.5

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

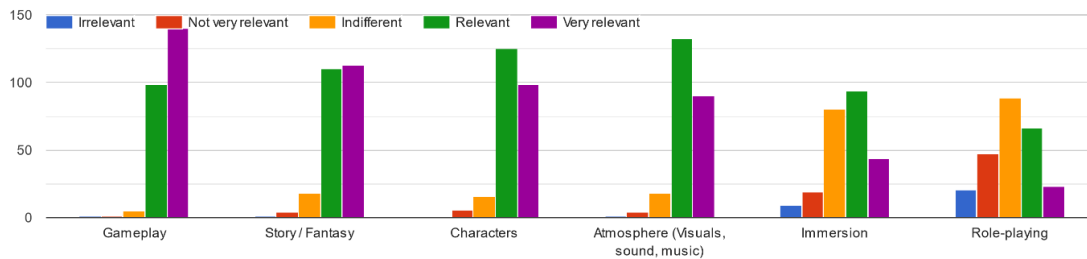


Figure 6.6

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

246 responses

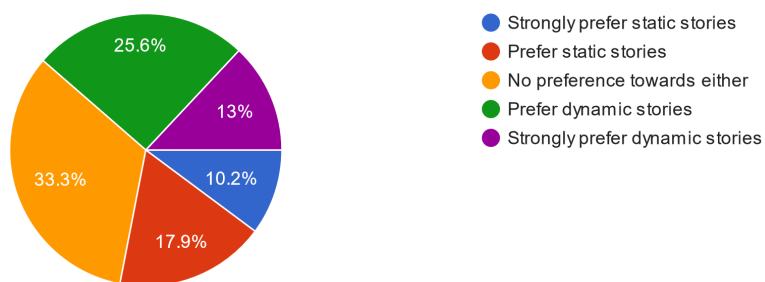


Figure 6.7

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

246 responses

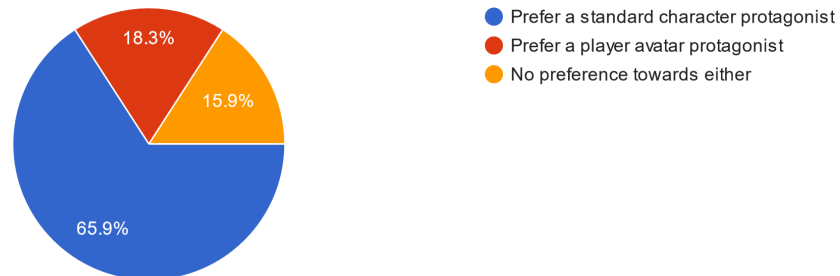


Figure 6.8

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

246 responses

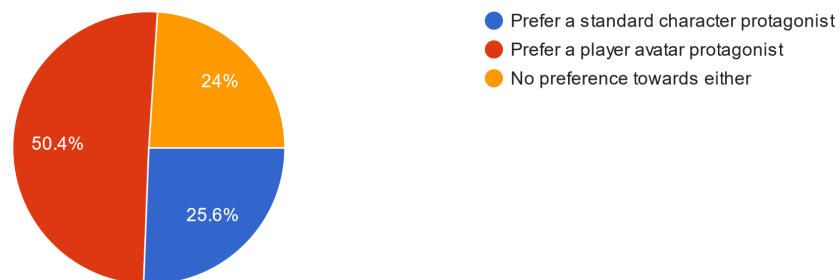


Figure 6.9

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

246 responses

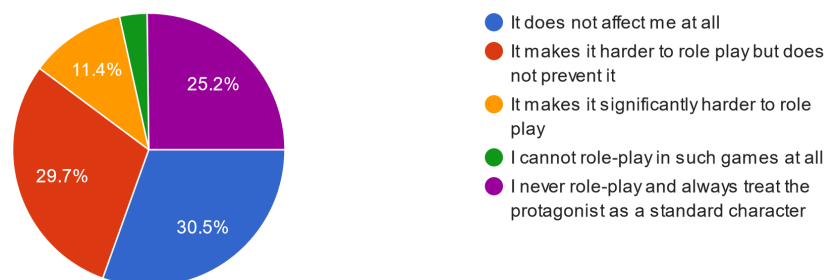
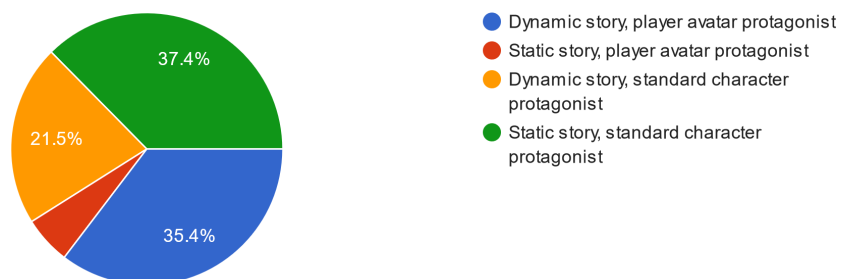


Figure 6.10

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

246 responses



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