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HOW CHOICE INFLUENCES REPLAY VALUE OF NARRATIVE-DRIVEN VIDEO GAMES

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ABSTRACT

Abstract

Choice is an important factor in video games. Narrative driven games continuously offer choices to the player in different ways. Through narrative decisions, gameplay style and character creation players get encouraged to make an array of choices. These choices increase the replay value of games.

This study aimed to deconstruct the structure of narrative driven games to properly examine how replay value can be increased by choice. Choices come in many forms; some offer more value to the player than others. Case studies of the three games: Detroit: Become Human (2018), Disco Elysium (2019) and Monster Prom (2018), examined how choice is implemented.

A quantitative survey was conducted in Spring 2022 to research the likes and dislikes of players in a wide range of age groups. The survey provided valuable information on the importance of choice to the player, and discovered which types of choice are more popular. It also showcased the likelihood of replay value from the players depending on the choices available in a video game.

Future research about replay value benefits companies and consumers alike. By adding replay value the consumer will be rewarded and the company can increase the satisfaction of its customers.

Keywords: Game design, replay value, linear, non-linear, narrative decisions, choice

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Glossary of Terms

Term	Definition
Cutscene	A non-interactive animated story sequence.
DLC	Downloadable Content for games.
Mod	Modification of video game files.
Modder	The person modifying the video game files.
Rogue-like	Subgenre of RPG with focus on character progression and permanent death on defeat.
RPG	Roleplaying Game in which the player takes the role of a character in a fictional setting.
Speedrun	The goal of completing a game as fast as possible, sometimes with the intention of breaking a game's code and structure.
Speedrunner	The person attempting the speedrun and performing the inputs needed to play the game.

1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of replay value focuses on what influences a player to spend many hours and complete multiple play-throughs of a video game. Replayability adds additional value to the game, by providing unique game experiences or achievements and keeps the player engaged to explore different gameplay mechanics. It is a deep investment for publishers and customers, but it builds brand loyalty and creates a sense of achievement and customer satisfaction.

This thesis is product-based, with the primary goal of delivering a concise and illustrated guide to replay value. This guide will visualize how to create a game that will keep players engaged for more than a single play-through. The main question to be answered will be how exactly choice reflects on a player's decision to replay a game.

The focus of this thesis will be a comparative analysis of three games; Detroit: Become Human (2018), Monster Prom (2018), and Disco Elysium (2019). There is also qualitative research through a survey that will aid in making the guideline. It will provide external information from players' opinions on what keeps them engaged when playing a video game. Assessment and analysis of the collected data will assist in the creation of the guide.

The definition of narrative-driven games and their structure will be explored as an introduction to the topic. As the goal of the thesis is to write an illustrated and concise guide on replay value, the author will explore what replay value is and how other games have achieved replay value. The discovery of new ways to expand on replayability, for example, speed running, will also be reviewed.

2 NARRATIVE DRIVEN GAMES

2.1 What is a Narrative-Driven Game

A narrative-driven game's selling point relies heavily on the story it chooses to tell. There are games that only offer the main storyline with none or few optional side stories. Still, the majority that are published do not just showcase their compelling main story arc, but also optional side quests that deliver further interesting and lore-heavy content for players to enjoy and immerse themselves in. This enriches the player's experience by creating a much bigger content spread.

These games aim to sell the experience of a fictional world with a full-fledged story to the audience. The primary goal is always to advance the story so that the player can learn more about its world and characters. The focus of these games is never the gameplay; in the best-case scenario, the gameplay should be enjoyable for the player, but it is not the main selling point.

Developers implement branching story arcs that change the story in response to the players' decisions. These branches can be accessed by choosing different narrative choices or gameplay mechanics. Narrative-driven games do not always require the option of multiple branching stories, dialogues, or engagement modes and can be utterly linear in their storytelling instead.

A narrative-driven game will focus on events and actions that will influence and affect the story, such as plot twists, world-building and lore exposition. In this type of game, the player learns more about what is happening in the game world, rather than why someone made the choice that led to the current events in the game universe. A character-driven game focuses on a singular character or group of characters. The story will delve into the thoughts and actions of an individual and explore why they make certain choices. These stories describe their struggles and resolutions in which they actively partake to change the outcome for themselves. (Mueller, 2021.)

Naughty Dog and its series *The Last of Us* (2013) and its sequel, *The Last of Us 2* (2020), are excellent examples of character-driven games. In terms of story, both games are entirely linear. Still, they offer the player some choice regarding the gameplay style, either opting to use stealth to bypass and avoid conflict or to utilise a more aggressive approach if they feel confident enough in their abilities. The difference in playstyle encourages players to proceed more creatively during gameplay segments.

Roleplaying Games (RPGs) are story-driven games. They offer many experiences to the player that go beyond the scope of a linear game. By providing the player with romantic encounters, unique allies to recruit and big branching storylines, they establish the base for choices in video games.

BioWare's *Dragon Age Series* (2009 – 2014) is an excellent example of this. The player can replay the series multiple times to achieve different endings, depending on which partner they chose, whom they recruited, or what crucial decision they made in a dialogue branch.

2.2 Structure of Narrative-Driven Games

Stories from books, folktales and songs have always inspired humans. They are part of defining our culture. Stories are fundamentally important to humanity by offering ways to immerse ourselves into different universes and other people's lives and teach the norms of society. The player learns about behaviours that get punished or rewarded and takes those lessons with them. There are many ways to tell a story, as it is impossible for there to be a single model of narrativity in entertainment software (Aarseth, 2012). One narrative tool is the Hero's Story, a twelve steps formula that can be broken down into three main pieces: the call to adventure, initiation and return.

Narrative-driven games have a similar structure. The player begins their journey and is introduced to the protagonist. This is presented via a cutscene, where the main character gets introduced for the first time. In *Detroit: Become Human* (2018) by Quantic Dreams, a non-linear choice-driven game, the player takes

control of three different characters. They all have separate introductions. These introductions also showcase their abilities and gameplay mechanics.

The game *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) by Guerrilla Games follows the same model. Via a cinematic, the player is introduced to Aloy, the main character whom they see train and grow up from a child to a young woman. This game, unlike *Detroit: Become Human*, is linear, with only a few dialogue choices and a singular ending. *Horizon Zero Dawn* is a game on rails, and the storytelling cannot be influenced by the player's dialogue choices. While optional content such as collectibles exist, collecting them does not change the story's narrative.

The first chapter of the game sets the primary goal. This could be saving the galaxy from the Reapers, like in *Mass Effect* (2007), or saving your friend from dying in *Life is Strange* (2015). This will set the tone of the story for the rest of the game and underlines the importance of the main story. Once the player has become acquainted with the basic gameplay, they can explore the world and enjoy the story as it unfolds.

2.3 The difference between Linear and Non-Linear Video Games

The most common structures of storytelling are linear or non-linear. A linear game is a game on rails. The player follows a chronological path and must pass by predefined plot points to progress the story. As seen in Figure 1, the game starts at the blue field and after the first predefined plot point, indicated by the orange color, the player may explore different aspects of the game. The yellow fields demonstrate the optional tasks a player may undertake but they will eventually have to venture to the next predefined plot point. This ensures that players cannot miss any important events while also giving the illusion of choice.

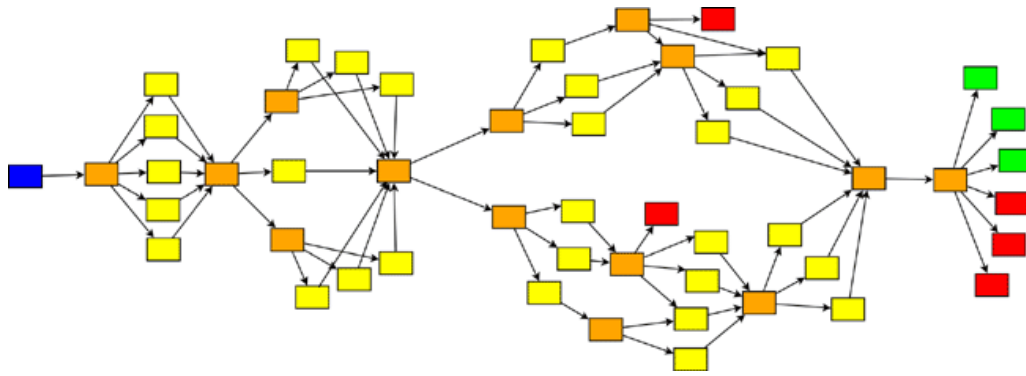


Figure 1. Branch and Bottleneck Structure all roads lead to one ending (Ashwell, 2015)

Dragon Age Inquisition (2014) by BioWare falls into this structure. The player may explore different areas of the world as the Herald of Andraste, but the story points will always have to be touched upon if they want to progress. Doing side objectives in different orders gives the illusion of non-linearity, but the ending will not change.

A non-linear game provides the player with choices that can directly influence the outcome of the game. Through their actions or dialogue choices, the player can uncover different endings. As illustrated in Figure 2, a non-linear game can feature multiple different story clusters that can all have their separate endings.

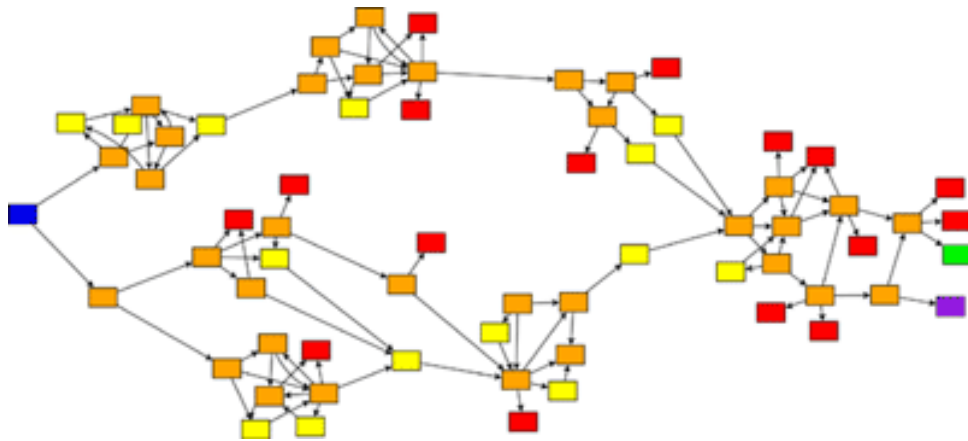


Figure 2. Quest Structure with multiple story clusters (Ashwell, 2015)

Detroit: Become

Human introduces the player to three characters. All of them can die, turn corrupt or be heroes. It depends entirely on what the player chooses. The game offers the player a wide breadth of decisions to make that can influence the story and even intersect with each other. Because of these story clusters, the player can reach many endings and outcomes.

There are also games that feature a hybrid model. These games are story-driven and give the player choices in their gameplay and dialogue branches but still restrict the player with predetermined events and endings. As seen in Figure 3, games with open map exploration encourage revisitation of previous areas to advance where they previously could not.

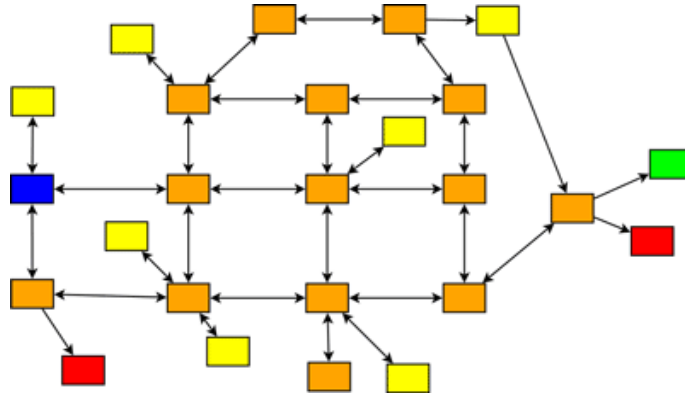


Figure 3. Open Map encourages exploration (Ashwell, 2015)

An example of this structure is the Castlevania (1986) series. In this game, the player frequently encounters roadblocks that stop their advancement and encourages them to explore areas and secret passages they have not previously been able to discover. While the endings are similar to a linear game, the journey to the ending is entirely up to the player.

It should be noted that there is no strict rule stating what is linear and nonlinear. Games are interactive and easily influenced by the player's decisions, and it is better described as a spectrum. Linear and nonlinear games cannot be seen as black and white in the gaming world because they always give the player the option of fluidity when it comes to making choices. (Arroyo, 2020.)

3 REPLAY VALUE

Replay Value indicates the number of times a player can play a game before it gets stagnant or repetitive. Replay Value is determined by factors like branching paths, procedural generation, and character creation. Branching paths allow the player to explore unique dialogue branches and narratives. Games with

procedural generation provide the players with unique areas and enemies in every play-through, and character creation allows for variety in combat styles and appearance. (Design Doc, 2020.)

Rogue-likes are the leading genre when it comes to replayability. They are a subgenre of RPGs focused on procedural generation with additional narratives and characters on every new route. *Hades* (2018) by Supergiant Games integrates these novelties flawlessly by giving players unique enemies, items, and abilities every time they restart. They also encourage replaying to forge relationships between the player and NPCs. Additionally, every bond with an NPC offers more insight into the game's lore.

Replay Value can be achieved through various means. There are two main categories. Company-based replay value and community-based replay value. Company-based replay value offers updates, branching quests or narratives. Community-based replay value instead offers mods, speedruns and challenges.

The most common type of replay value is branching stories with multiple endings. This encourages the player to replay a game numerous times to achieve all possible endings. These endings are mainly separated into the True Ending, the Bad Ending, and the Good Ending. From these, the True Ending is usually the most lore-accurate one.

The Witcher 3 (2015) has over thirty possible endings. One shows Ciri becoming a Witcher. In another, Ciri returns to her father to become empress so that she can change the world with the power of her kingdom. If the player makes unfortunate choices, they will see Geralt get swarmed by dozens upon dozens of monsters; his fate is unknown to the player as the screen fades to black.

In this example, the game gives the player multiple options for choice. Each choice has an impact on which ending they will see. The player will get a conclusion that is the culmination of all their decisions during the main story and side quests. These choices enable the player to replay the game in a completely

different way than before. With their previous knowledge, they will influence the decisions they are faced with and will be able to get a new resolution.

Besides branching stories and endings, there are more subtle but just as impactful choices the player can make to influence a game. The Dishonored Series (2012-2017) by Arkane Studios has an interesting take on this gameplay choice. Very early in the game, the player can decide to refuse the supernatural powers that would be gifted to them and only rely on their prowess, or to accept the strength of the void and become an assassin with magic skills. Depending on the player's choice, the game can change drastically from this point onwards. Combat and parkour will take an entirely different turn without any abilities. Stealth missions will become much more difficult without the aid of void powers, which might result in more civilian deaths that will worsen the rat plague.

Most of the main choices in-game will not have much effect on the player until the very end when the credits roll. Still, certain elements can be changed and manipulated solely based on the combat decision made by the player. The player might have reason to eliminate civilians in the game world, resulting in the rat plague and blood fly infestation in Dishonored (2012) and Dishonored 2 (2016), respectively, becoming much worse, with thousands of people dying and getting infected because of it.

3.1 Company-Based Replay Value, DLCs, and Updates

The replay value of games can be categorised into two broad categories: community-based add-ons and updates from the company that created the game.

Many companies offer downloadable content (DLC) to enrichen the personal game experience with additional content at a price. But what is a DLC? DLCs are digital downloadable content tied to a user's account, purchased directly over digital game distribution services or included in a games box on a pamphlet with

a one-time use code. Examples of DLC include new areas and weapons, additional story content and characters, or even exclusive outfits with unique bonuses or skills otherwise unobtainable. (Wells III, 2020.)

The most popular types of DLC add additional story content to the game, such as *The Last of Us: Left Behind* (2014), which covers the backstory of Ellie. Cosmetic DLC, which include skins or armor packs are less popular, with the Horse Armor Pack from *The Elder Scrolls Oblivion* (2006) being heavily criticised due to its price upon release. One of the leading marketing strategies is to get the players excited over a long period so that they will continuously play the game or pick it back up once the DLCs they've waited for finally get published.

During the GDC panel in 2021, Mihoyo revealed the roadmap (Figure 4.) for its newly released game *Genshin Impact* (2020). This roadmap showcased that they will release four more regions in the next four years. With the goal that the game will eventually come to finish in 2025, unless they choose to add additional content and expand the games world more. (2021,Famitsu.)

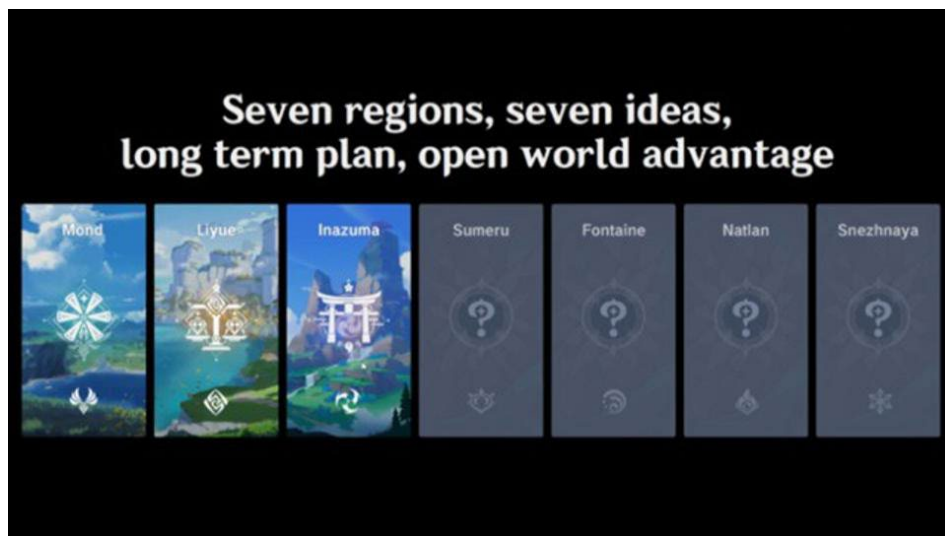


Figure 4. Genshin Roadmap (Famitsu, 2021)

Because *Genshin Impact* is an open world game, they can continuously add more characters and lore to the game with new regions, or hint to them to increase the excitement of the player base.

Of course, Mihoyo is not the only company that does this. Nintendo was one of the last companies to adopt the DLC system, with their latest extensive roadmap reveal being Hyrule Warriors Age of Calamity (2020). This roadmap (Figure 5) gives detailed descriptions of the expansion pass content, such as new costumes as a preorder bonus, and new skills, maps, and characters for later updates.



Figure 5. Hyrule Warriors Expansion Pass (Nintendo, 2020)

Naturally, game companies do not have to sell DLCs for profit to players in order to gain a higher replay value. CD Project Red, for example, released a new batch of free content for The Witcher 3 (2015). These updates contained new outfits for important characters in the story, new quests, gear players could find through scavenger hunts, and additional trading cards for Gwent, the lead character's hobby.

Good additional content has a positive effect on the company's reputation, which is good for marketing and customer satisfaction. Content that is released for free, only to force the players to pay for DLC's to complete the storyline is exploitative and leads to player alienation.

3.2 Community-Based Replay Value, Mods, Speedruns, and More

A game is nothing without its community. No matter how old a game is, if it has a flourishing community, then new and old players are not far off from enjoying a game either once again or for the first time. A welcoming game community can easily attract the attention of potential new players interested in a game.

Guides made by players or community activities can entice people to try a game. A positive community might even encourage people to commit to their purchase.

Mods

Mod is short for modification of game files. Usually, modders, the term for people who write and design the mods, take pre-existing files and modify them as they see fit to develop new ways to play a game or enhance the user experience. This can range from adding new characters, areas, and storylines to a complete sound, combat, and graphics overhaul.

This is not a new phenomenon, as mods can be dated back to 1983 when a programmer modified Castle Wolfenstein (1981) to feature Smurfs instead of Nazi soldiers and thus renamed it to Castle Smurfenstein (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Castle Smurfenstein Title Screen. (A. Johnson, 1983)

The first game that actively supported mods was DOOM (1993) by id Software, which published multiple books and guides on actively modifying the in-game content so that DOOM could be enjoyed repeatedly with different experiences.

Because the modding for this game was so accessible and DOOM was also a significant shift in the FPS genre, it quickly built a vast community focused on creating user-made content.

In the modding community, countless incredible talents do these kinds of projects for free, simply because they fell in love with the game and want to bring an even better experience to other gamers by making their content or updating issues the developer might have overlooked. An excellent example of mods is Skyrim (2011), the game with currently the most mods available and a flourishing player base that continues to deliver new content weekly, if not daily. Skyrim has such an extensive modding community that some of these new mods have been worked on for years with full-fledged releases and trailers promoting them.

A prime example of this is Enderal (2016), a complete conversion of the base game, set in its original world with a branching storyline, characters, new combat systems, and even voice actors to give the world more life. The mod is so big that players might be looking at a playtime of about 125 hours if they explore everything. This mod was created by a team of 14 modders who worked on it for over five years, and their game dialogue was voiced in English and German. The team announced an expansion called Enderal: Forgotten Stories (2016).



Figure 7. Enderal Expansion (SureAI, 2016)

Even though modding is usually entirely community based, there are instances where it influences the publishers. Modding for Skyrim and Fallout 4 (2015) got

so big that Bethesda eventually launched their Creation Club in 2017; an official collaboration between Bethesda Game Studios and the best community creators working on mods. There is an application process where modders can showcase content Bethesda might want to publish, if their application is accepted.

The Creation Club has a lot of severe backlash in the community. There are complaints about Bethesda wanting to profit off community mods and below-average compensation for the content creators. The creators get no royalties after getting their one-time payment, and Bethesda retains all rights to their content created, allowing them to work with the content as they see fit. (YongYea, 2017.)

Speedrunning

The second pillar of community-based content is Speedrunning, an event that first came to play in the online community in 1996 when Nolan “Radfix” Pflug launched a website called Nightmare Speed Demos, in which players could share their fastest play-throughs of Quake played on Nightmare level difficulty. In 2002 Radfix uploaded the first non-Quake speedrun, a video of himself completing Metroid. This set the ever-growing community for speedrunners in motion and resulted in an archive being set up to store all kinds of game attempts. (Eva, 2019)

The wonderful thing about speedruns is that no matter how old a game is or how many people think they have got the best score, there are always new tricks to discover to shave off a few more seconds to land on the leaderboard. These tricks can sometimes take years to find and are only achievable with the immense dedication of the runners.

The community quickly grew, with the first-ever Quake speedrun community meetup happening in Tampere, Finland, at Speedcon 2000. Such events became more successful and popular as time went on, and eventually lead to the launch of the Games Done Quick Event, where players participated by playing games in

front of the viewing public to collect donations for a good cause. Games Done Quick became such a huge sensation that other events of a similar mindset have been held to support charities through the collection of donations. Games Done Quick is held biannually, while the European Speedrunner Assembly is held every year in Sweden.

A popular game in the speedrun community is *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker* (2002). This game features an impenetrable barrier that requires speedrunners to go through a sequence of events to get past it. This type of problem in a speedrun attracts a lot of new players to try their best to solve the issue with incredible teamwork. Situations like this also highlight the beauty of a community built on a topic such as speedrunning. Here everyone aims to highlight the best parts of the game, making guides to help new runners out, by teaching the ways of a run and all its hidden secrets, frame-perfect inputs, and tricks.

Old games are the most interesting for the community to watch because they are so easy to break. There are many ways for players to find new shortcuts and achieve better speedrun times. Because of this, many people might want to pick up or purchase older games to try their hand at speedrunning themselves.

As the community gains more and more members and rises in popularity, some studios build games with speedrunning in mind. *Celeste* (2018) by Maddie Makes Games, a 2D platformer in which the main character must climb a mountain using dashing abilities and wall jumps in increasingly complicated patterns features an active speedrun mode.

This game took the community by storm with its incredible gameplay and speedrun clock available in the game settings. With built-in support, it is easier for a runner to make continuous runs without frame or loading issues creating additional obstacles. For these reasons, *Celeste* quickly climbed to the top of speedrun.com, with a total of over 25.000 submitted runs. By these numbers

alone, it is apparent that the replay value of a game such as Celeste is incredibly high and encourages new players to pick up the game and learn the ropes.

4 CHOICE

As games evolve, the value of choice in video games also grows. Through choice in games, developers add another layer of immersion for the player in which they can directly influence dialogue or actions in story scenarios that may or may not drastically change the story. There are many different game genres and ways to implement choice, whether through gameplay, combat actions, narrative, or dialogue.

Choice is nothing new to the gaming world. Even the very first games offer choice, just not in the grand way we are used to nowadays. The very first text adventure game Colossal Cave Journey (1976) developed by Crowther features a multitude of endings to uncover and back in the eighties, when Tetris (1984) and Pac-Man (1980) were one of the biggest titles available, players might have had minimal choices in the form of choosing which way to place a piece or which direction to move, but it was a choice, nonetheless.

4.1 Choice in Narrative-Driven Video Games

One of the essential aspects of narrative-driven video games is letting the players make their own decisions. The type of decision changes depending on the genre of the game but can range from character creation and skill trees to narrative choices that influence the flow of the game's story.

Games that make great use of choice are primarily roleplaying games (RPGs), such as Baldur's Gate (1998) or Dragon Age: Origins (2009) that make use of their combat and story system by drastically changing the story and gameplay by selecting a different race, combat class or skill tree during the game but also put much value into the narrative decisions the player makes.

It is entirely the player's decision in *Dragon Age: Origins* to either help an elven clan hidden in the forest with a werewolf problem or not. During the quest, the player learns more about the people and items that help solve the puzzle of what happened in the story before the player appeared so they can make an educated decision.

The player will have multiple choices available: to help the elves by killing the werewolves, or help the werewolves by killing the elves. If proper research was made and the appropriate dialogue was picked, they could even decide to sacrifice the leader of the elves, who was the reason the werewolves were even created in the first place to achieve peace between the two factions.

Choice makes it so that the players can feel important in the story. They can influence what happens and when it happens or stop the flow of an arc entirely if they so desire. It is a perfect tool for immersion if adequately designed and can contribute significantly to storytelling in games.

4.2 Choice-Dependent Branching Dialogue

Many games offer dialogue options that can branch out into conversations about the desired topic. In *Night in the Woods* (2017), the player takes control of Mae. As Mae, the player can ask questions or give answers, but the player usually



Figure 8. Dialogue Option *Night in the Woods* (Infinite Fall, 2017)

does not have more than two or three dialogues to pick from, and they do not change the outcome of the game besides which friend you want to spend time with.

Some games with the same type of dialogue system offer more detail and branches but still fundamentally work the same. They have the simple mechanics of picking one or two dialogues that usually set the tone of the conversation, so the player can choose the narrative approach the lead character will make. Still, they cannot influence any set dialogue by choosing different dialogue branches. *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) is one such game.

As seen in Figure 9, the player can decide what kind of person Aloy is by choosing if she answers with compassion, aggression, or logic. The dialogue does not impact the story in the game but instead shapes her character into what the player wants her to be and influences future interactions with other people.



Figure 9. Shaping the personality of Aloy with dialogue (*Horizon Zero Dawn*, 2017)

On the opposite side of the spectrum, we have games where most pieces of dialogue impact the game environment and the NPCs in more drastic ways.

Games such as *Divinity: Original Sin 2* (2017) are some of the staples of the RPG genre and can boast incredible freedom of choice. The decisions you make have

an impact. Even little side conversations with another NPC might have unforeseeable outcomes simply because the NPC took the dialogue more to heart than the player could have expected.

The game allows the player to make many types of choices, but it also forces them to live with said choices. Because the game is about 100 hours long, the player will have to accept whatever atrocities they have committed unless they are willing to replay a considerable chunk of the story that might span back to the beginning of the game. This also increases the replay value of the game. Players might want to see a different outcome of a story point and act in good instead of evil or build another unique protagonist's personality.

Another game in which dialogue plays a significant role in how the story plays out is *Life is Strange* (2015), an episodic title in which the central core loop is about Max, the protagonist rewinding time to undo actions and dialogue. Some of these decisions having immediate effects and other decisions only showing a conclusion in later episodes. The game features a variety of puzzles that can either be dialogue or action based. Instead of keeping the player locked behind choices they made, this game actively encourages rewinding time to check what the outcome of a different decision would have been. Some dialogue options only appear after rewinding specific scenarios, and relationships can be affected by Max not doing so.

4.3 Environmental Effect of Choices

Some decisions in video games do not just influence the dialogue and relationship between characters but also the player's environment. Whole towns can be destroyed. Entire armies can be saved simply because of the player's influence. It depends on how the player's moral system, playstyle, and dialogue choices affect the world around them. RPGs are the most common games to implement such changes because the player is the focal point and influencer of the story.

The Dishonored Series (2012-2017) takes place in Dunwall, set in the Victorian Era. With this setting come specific issues, such as sickness, poverty, and plagues. One such issue is the rat plague and the blood fly infestation.

As Corvo or Emily, the player can either approach missions sneakily, called a Low Chaos run, or be brutal, called a High Chaos run. Both playstyles offer pros and cons. A stealth approach takes longer, and the player will have to learn how the guards move and get rid of story targets more creatively than in High Chaos. The brutal way is to eliminate anyone standing in their way; this is precisely where the issue lies.

While both options get the job done, the murderous route has many environmental problems. They are already in the middle of a rat plague. The more death occurs, the more rats can infest the cities and taint them with more filth. Civilians are visibly distressed and sick due to the death surrounding them. Guards can be seen burning corpses in fire pits to stomp the plague out, as the rats bask in the new food sources. But just because the roads are not littered with corpses and sick people in a Low Chaos run does not mean Dunwall is not deeply corrupted at the root, just because it is not as obvious. (Roda-Gil, 2021.)

Suppose the player continues the High Chaos path in Dishonored 2 (2016), fifteen years after the first title. In that case, players will soon notice that there are not just rats swarming the streets but also blood flies, vicious insects that suck the blood out of people until they are husks. Once again, they will thrive the more death happens in the game. So, while the game starts with the assumption that Dishonored 1 (2012) was played in low chaos with limited to no deaths, the game will quickly adjust to how the player performs actions during the sequel.

Another example of environmental impact is Fallout 3 (2008), an RPG set in a post-nuclear war world. The player can customise and control their protagonist and make many choices while looking for their father. One of the first significant impacts they can have on the game is in the city of Megaton, where the player can decide between disarming a nuclear warhead or detonating it, thus determining the fate of all the inhabitants and the town itself.

The game provides a bigger monetary reward and a suite for the player if Megaton gets destroyed by the nuke. In turn, a whole faction in the game will become enemies, and former citizens might attack the player if they spot them. Additionally, they will lose massive amounts of karma, the moral system in Fallout 3. Disarming the bomb, on the other hand, provides the player with their own house in the city, positive karma, and only one faction will turn against the player.

4.4 Influence of NPCs Depending on Choice

Choice in Videogames also affects the relationship and standing between the protagonist and the characters. Dialogue choices, the story acts, and moral decisions can influence how a character gets treated or will treat the player. This can open new ways to play a game or uncover hidden story elements previously unknown.

One of the most important choices and appeals for the player in a videogame can be the romance, the player might want to become romantically entangled with one or more characters of their choice, and in turn, they will have to figure out how to appeal to them and gift them items of interest to increase chances of romance. Relationships in video games are so popular and diverse in their choices and impacts that some people might get inclined to replay games simply because they want to try dating another character. Most games that offer romance reward players by giving them optional items, cutscenes, and achievements for romancing as many different characters as possible in different play-throughs.

Bioware has set the universal standards for video game relationships in many ways, be it through the diversity of the cast, LGBTQ romances, or the unique benefits a player might receive by increasing or decreasing the relationship bar. The Dragon Age Series has a long history of turning relationships into a core gameplay part of the game. Dragon Age II (2011) does not just feature the usual approval system and an all bisexual cast, unlike Dragon Age Origins (2009), but also a rivalry system. When the player decides to actively (or accidentally) trigger

a disapproval flag on a companion, it can increase the rivalry between the player and the companion. The friendship and rivalry system locks dialogue prompts, interactions, cutscenes, and skills behind it, so replaying the game is encouraged to unlock all the hidden content.

To integrate romance into the plot, BioWare tries to make it flow seamlessly and naturally into the game. A budding romance usually starts after a friendship with the love interest to build a cohesive story. Due to this natural build-up of attraction and love, players can grow their bond and decide whether a romantic paramour is worth it or value the friendship. (Wallace, 2013.)

Dragon Age Inquisition (2014) is the first game in the series to feature NPCs that are romance locked behind playing a specific race. For example, one character will only date female elves, and another will only date female elves and humans. If the player decides to pick a different race at the start of the game, they will have to settle for the other romance options until the next play-through, in which they can build a protagonist accepted by their love interest.

5 GAME ANALYSIS

5.1 Detroit: Become Human

Detroit Become Human (2018) is a game made by Quantic Dream. It focuses heavily on decision-making in action-packed scenes and essential dialogue. According to David Cage, the game was designed to be experienced raw at the first play-through. The player is supposed to live with their decisions, and then replay the game to see more of its branching dialogue choices. The game actively encourages that when the player loses a character, they should keep going. (Arif, 2016.)

At the beginning, the game guides the player on what to do, how to react, and which way the objective is. There is no time pressure, and they can listen to dialogue in their surroundings or wander around and admire the sights. Soon after the introduction chapters are finished, the mood shifts. There is drama,

pressure on how to act, and decisions the player will not be able to take back.

Connor, the first person the player meets, is an android specifically created to solve crimes and support humans on the case with tools we do not have.

The player sees Connor on his way up into an apartment where a hostage situation is currently taking place. The perpetrator is a rogue android, a deviant, and the victim is the little girl he is supposed to care for. The hostage situation can end with many deaths and sets Connor up to meet his partner to learn more about human behaviour. Connor is a unique one-of-a-kind model, so the player will not see any other androids that look like him, or so they think until they make a choice that critically endangers Connors's life.

The second protagonist the player meets is Markus, an android designed to assist a gentleman called Carl. Carl appreciates Markus a lot, almost treating him like a son. When Carl asks Markus to paint with him, the scene gets interrupted by Carl's actual son, Leo. He wants money for drugs. This visibly distressed Carl, and he asks Markus to stand down even as Leo resorts to verbal and physical abuse. How Markusplayer's reacts in this scene will decide how humans perceive androids later.

Lastly, the player has Kara, a caretaker android. We meet her as her owner, Todd, picks her up from a repair shop. She got run over by a car and needed to get fixed. The player will soon notice that something is off, after they arrive home. Todd acts aggressively towards Kara and his daughter, Alice. Kara's entrance is very jarring and the first critical decision we make.

After every chapter, the player gets the graphic of a flowchart, showcasing every decision they made and highlighting the actions they did not partake in. This flowchart system is available automatically and can show the players' friends and global statistics. They can also select a checkpoint to replay. Because the chapters in Detroit Become Human are relatively short, it is not taxing to replay a chapter immediately, or multiple times, because of the immediate incentive.

As visible in Figure 10, multiple dialogues and action branches in the game influence the outcome of the chapter. In the scenario of chapter 1, “The Hostage”, there are six different endings, with good and bad conclusions. Every possible ending also presents the percentage of other players and how many people globally unlocked the scenario. The player must negotiate with the deviant to get the kidnapped child out of danger.

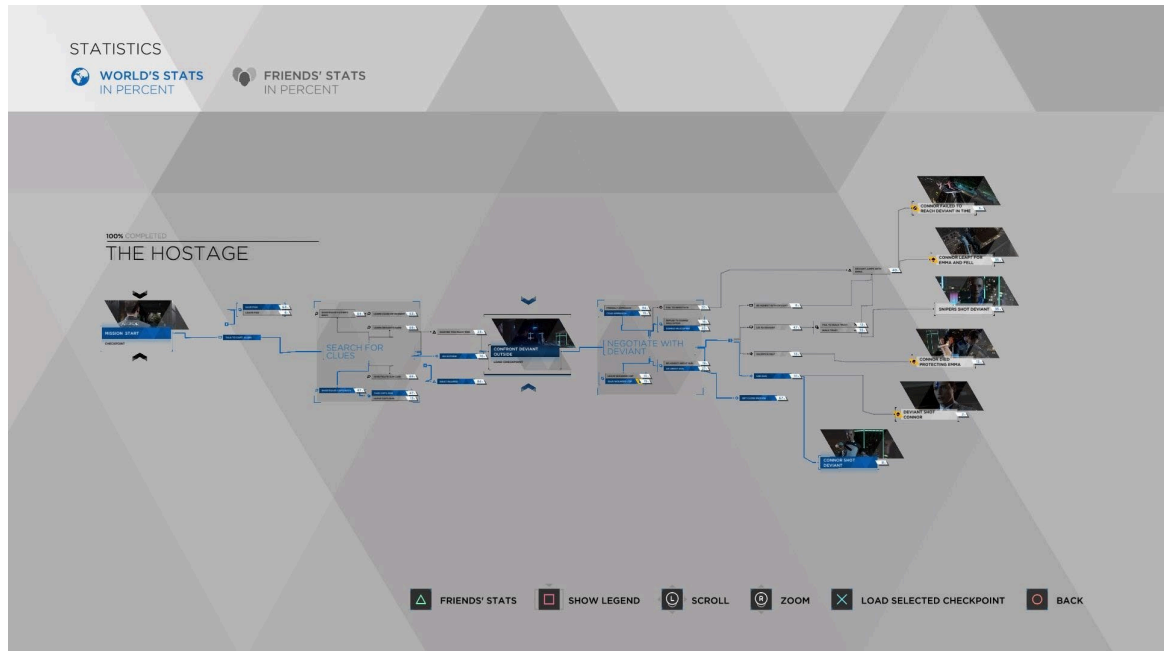


Figure 10. Flowchart of Chapter 1 and all possible outcomes.

The flowchart system offers unique statistics of the game that can help a player determine if they should be satisfied with the conclusion they got or if they want to replay a scenario to get a different outcome. Relationships between characters can be further explored by picking unique scenarios.

5.2 Disco Elysium

The game was released in 2019 by studio ZA/UM, taking a clear stance against capitalism and what can happen when succumbing to it.

Disco Elysium is a non-traditional roleplaying game that encourages dialogue resolution instead of combat conflict while still offering the basic skill set and branching skill trees that are present in traditional RPGs. Additionally, the game

features the Thought Cabinet mechanic, providing insight into the protagonist's life with occurring Thoughts and offering skill stats that change gameplay according to the Thought that is being researched and equipped.

The protagonist of the game is a lieutenant working for the RCM, the Revachol Citizens Militia, a self-organised peace corps striving to bring justice and union into everyone's life. The game starts with the protagonist waking up in a trashed hotel room with a broken window and empty bottles of alcohol strewn all over the place. He is half-naked and cannot remember who he is or his occupation. The game promptly starts with multiple skill checks. It is possible to die just by grabbing your tie from the ceiling fan if the skills have initially been poorly assigned, resulting in a heart attack and a game over. This beginning sequence, with failures around every corner of the world, sets the game's general tone. Still, failing is okay in *Disco Elysium* because most skill checks are not locked after getting stuck, and the player may attempt again later once they have gained more skills, acquired tools, or learned something new.

The core gameplay focuses on failing and trying again. Visiting locations and getting nowhere just to return later with a new item in your inventory or a necessary code phrase. Players are not punished for failing; they get rewarded for getting up and trying again. The variety of unique dialogue branches and skills make it possible to play the game in many ways and to meet a colourful cast of characters with different stories to tell. Every individual the protagonist meets can enhance the gameplay and offer up one-of-a-kind choices for the player.

The first major quest in the game is getting a body that is being hung from a tree. At first, the player cannot accomplish this task. They are either too weak, have no tools, or would ruin the crime scene without additional help. But as the days go by, the player will find witnesses, find clues, and get information from civilians. This is crucial for the task, and they gain more skill points to finally remove the rotten corpse from the tree. The game actively sends the player away, and then urges them to return later, after failing to remove the body the first few times. This

mechanic of revisiting places and retrying skill checks makes the gameplay feel incredibly rewarding.

Character and dialogue-wise, there are also many options. The player can actively choose between being a good or bad cop, friendly and caring, ruthless and brash, or an allrounder in the middle with no real faction to root for. Relationships can be increased and decreased like in other RPGs, but it feels more final in Disco Elysium. If they do not want to talk in a dialogue-based game, what other options does the player have? The chance is gone, and they must live with the choice of ruining a potentially good subject or clue for the rest of their gameplay.

5.3 Monster Prom

Created by Beautiful Glitch in 2018, Monster Prom is a Visual Novel Dating Sim in which the player, a monster in high school, must find another monster to date for prom. To find a date, the player must go through several high school days, split into morning and evening segments in which the protagonist can increase or decrease their skill scores. Every individual date appreciates the player differently, and it's for the player to figure out which monster responds positively or negatively to their choices.

The player can decide from the menu if they want to enjoy a short game of about thirty minutes or the whole experience spanning approximately an hour. Because the game is so short, and the events encountered in-game are all by chance, it is straightforward and simple to replay. Multiplayer is an additional gameplay feature on Monster Prom, which can motivate players to try completely different routes or to compete with their friends on who can get the date of their dreams.

The following factors enhance replay value in Monster Prom; collectible items, ending scenes, the protagonist, and the date. All factors besides protagonist and date are wholly random, and certain events might even trigger special endings that do not just split into the good black-and-white ending and bad ending format.

To complete these secret endings, the player must achieve special objectives, acquire distinctive items, or increase their skill stats to a specified amount to impress the character of their choice.

Monster Prom is a game that actively encourages mods and offers options to include the external content mixed into the core gameplay of the main game or focus entirely on the external content created for the game. This offers even more replay value to the game, as players can enhance their journey with events catered explicitly to them while simultaneously disabling the content they have already adapted to beforehand.

6 SURVEY

The survey was conducted during spring 2022 and had 90 participants covering a wide array of members from the gaming community. Of these participants, 49.4% were female, 36.0% were male, and 14.6% identified as other, meaning nonbinary or genderfluid identities. At the time of the survey, 9% of the participants were below 18, 53% were between the ages of 18 to 24, 33% were between the ages of 25 and 34, and 5% of all correspondents were in the age range of 35 to 49 years old.

What is your stance towards choice in videogames?

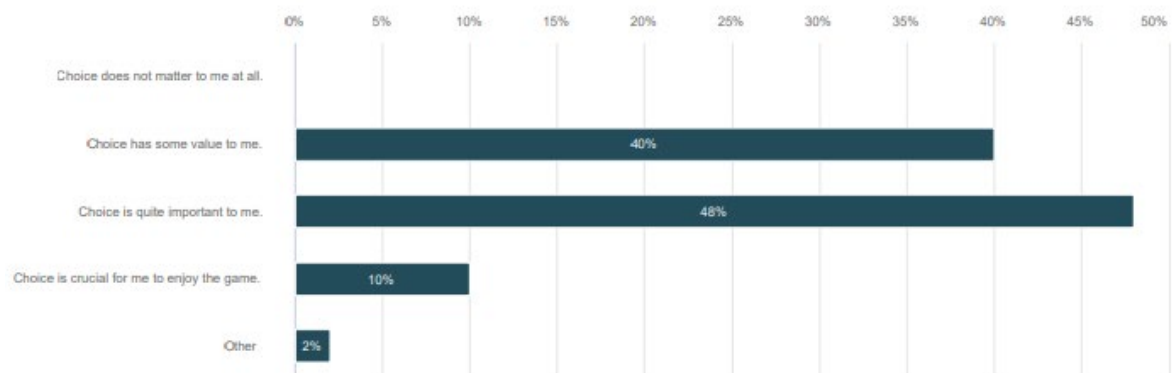


Figure 11. Answers to the 3rd question of the survey “What is your stance towards choice in videogames?”

The survey's first question was about their opinion on their value of choice in video games. As shown in Figure 11, most participants deemed the choice valuable and essential. A small percentage even deemed choice as a crucial part of their enjoyment when it comes to video games, while no participant dismissed choices in games as unimportant. Other answers mentioned that choice adds to the experience if it offers value to the player.

Figure 12 illustrates what kind of choices players enjoy the most when partaking in a video game. This question was multiple choice because it covers various gameplay choices frequently seen in narrative games, ranging from character creation and cosmetics to gameplay and combat style, which might award additional achievements in an implemented reward system.

4. What type of choice do you enjoy most in games? (Multiple Options)

Number of respondents: 90 , selected answers: 399

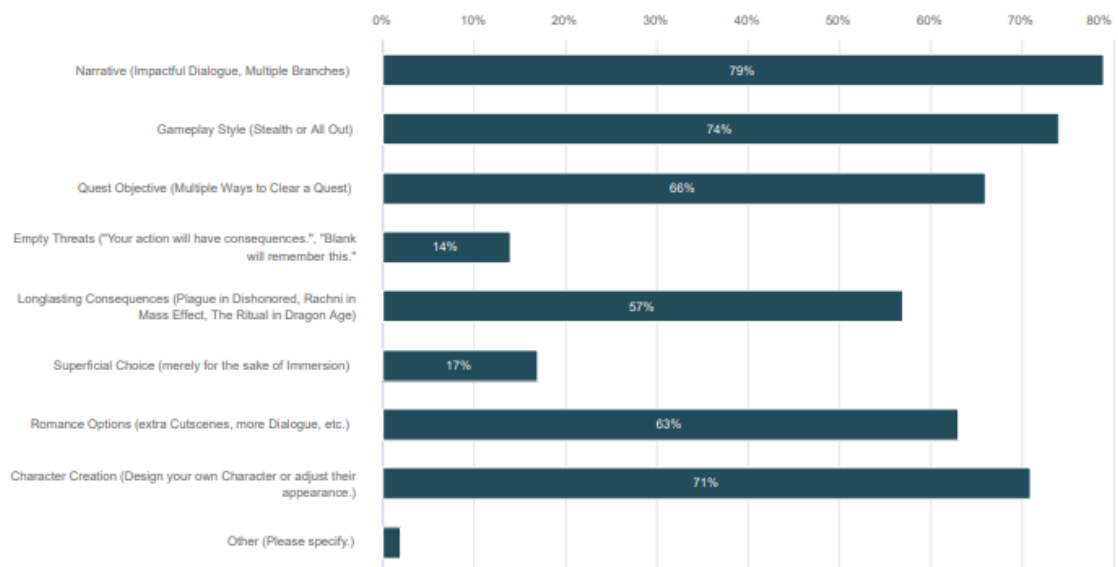


Figure 12. Answers to the 4th question of the survey. "What type of choice do you enjoy most in games?"

79% of all participants value narrative choices featuring impactful and multiple dialogue branches. In comparison, 74% enjoy playing in a self-chosen gameplay style and relish in the choice of approach in combat, 71% have fun creating their characters in games. Two-thirds of all participants find enjoyment from quest objectives being solved in many ways, and 63% wish to partake in romance because they enjoy the extra dialogue and cutscenes available. At first glance,

the answers to question 4 seem very even, but a significant drop in enjoyment comes when asked about Superficial Choice, which only has 17% of votes, and Empty Threats, with the lowest picked choice of all at 14%. Empty Threats is a tool used by many narrative-driven story games, and the choices made in those scenarios rarely change anything about the narrative besides making the player feel like they have made a good or bad decision.

Figure 13 presents how important players think the choices from Figure 11 are to them personally. Rated from 1 to 5, 5 being the most important to the respondent.

5. Please tell me how important the choices from Question 4 are to you. (1 being the least important and 5 being the most important.)
Number of respondents: 90 , selected answers: 707

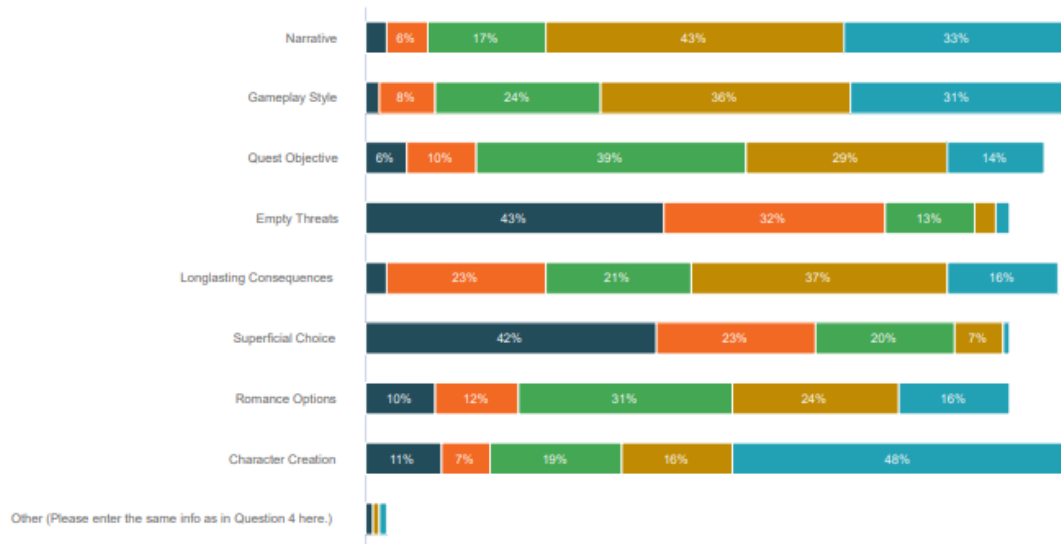


Figure 13. Answers the survey's 5th question: "How Important are the choices from question 4 to you?"

As seen in Figure 13, almost half of the respondents think that character creation is an essential form of choice to them, leading with 48% in the most valued section. Following this, they picked narrative choice with 33% and gameplay choice with 31% in the highest-rated category while also leading in the second most crucial section. On the opposite side, are empty threats and superficial choice, which both have the most votes at 43% for empty threats and 42% for superficial choice when it comes to the least important form of choice available to the player. A fascinating middle ground is the votes for long-lasting

consequences, which were deemed unimportant by 23% of the respondents and important by 37%.

Question 6 asked the participants how willing they would be to replay a game if they had the choices included from Figure 13 on a scale from 1 to 10.

Figure 14 shows that 51.1% were willing to replay a game, and 26.7% were extremely willing to replay a game with the given choices. 22.2% of respondents were less likely to replay a game with the previously named choices.

6. How likely are you willing to replay a game based on the choices from Question 4?

Detractors							Passive		Promoters	
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
n = 20							n = 46		n = 24	
22.2%							51.1%		26.7%	
0	0	2	0	4	9	5	20	26	4	20
0.0%	0.0%	2.2%	0.0%	4.5%	10.0%	5.6%	22.2%	28.9%	4.4%	22.2%

Figure 14. Answers the survey's 6th question: "How likely are you willing to replay a game based on the choices from question 4?"

Figure 15 presents how much influence the affect of the world has on respondents. The majority (74.2%) are affected by the changing environment by the world and appreciate it.

7. Does the affect of your choice, how much it influences the world around you, matter to you?

Detractors							Passive		Promoters	
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
n = 23							n = 38		n = 28	
25.8%							42.7%		31.5%	
0	0	2	2	2	4	13	21	17	9	19
0.0%	0.0%	2.3%	2.2%	2.2%	4.5%	14.6%	23.6%	19.1%	10.1%	21.4%

Figure 15. Answers the survey's 7th question: "Does the affect of your choice, how much it influences the world around you, matter to you?"

Question 8 asked respondents about their favourite changes to the scenery or NPC behaviour after making a choice. The answers varied greatly, but many

people enjoy emotional feedback from companions after making a decision and like additional feedback in the shape of cutscenes and additional dialogue options.

The second-to-last question asked respondents if they would be more willing to replay a game if it featured a flowchart system as presented in Detroit: Become Human.

12. How likely would you replay a game with a flowchart system that shows you options that you have missed, e.g. Detroit: Become Human.

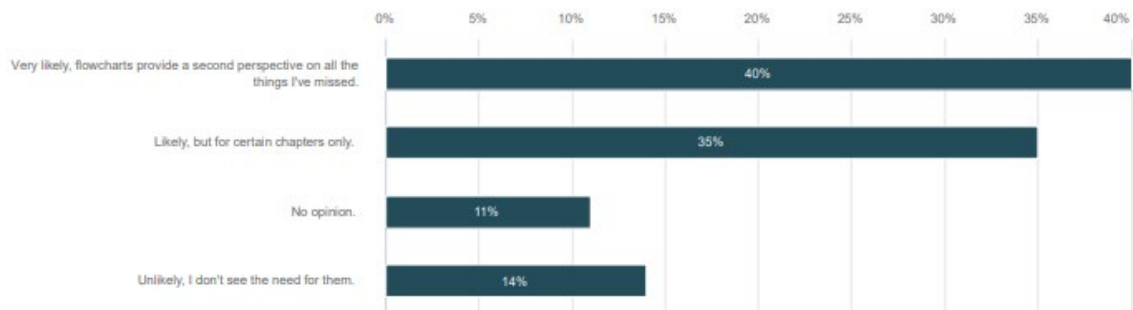


Figure 16. Answers the survey's 8th question: "How likely would you replay a game with a flowchart system that shows you the options that you have missed, e.g. Detroit: Become Human."

The response to this question was positive. 40% of the respondents would actively use the flowchart to get a second perspective on missed objectives, while 35% would make use of the flowchart for specific chapters. 11% had no opinion on additional feedback from flowcharts and 14% do not see the need for such a feedback statistic.

13. Would you feel compelled to replay a game if you can collect more achievements only available through multiple playthroughs? For example, romancing partners, collecting items.

Number of respondents: 90

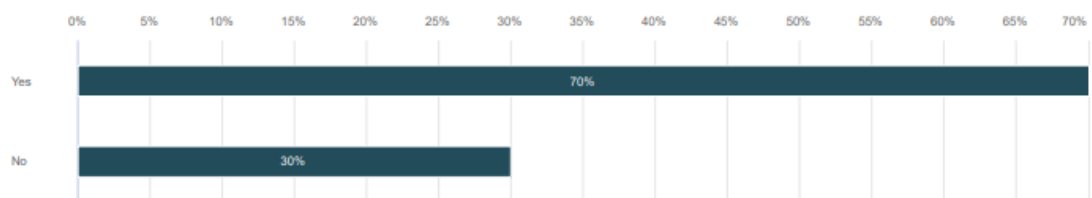


Figure 17. Answers the survey's last question: "Would you be compelled to replay a game if you can collect more achievements only available through multiple play-throughs, for example, romancing partners, and collecting items."

Lastly, the respondents were asked if they would replay a game for additional rewards. The rewards included achievements only obtainable by completing multiple play-throughs, new items or the possibility to romance a new partner.

7 CONCLUSION

Choice is an incredibly important factor in narrative-driven games; players feel empowered and immersed when they can make thought-out and important decisions by themselves. Giving players options, no matter how insignificant they might seem, makes the gameplay and narratives more enjoyable.

Narrative-driven games usually go by one of two main structures. Designing a game in a linear or non-linear way might be off-putting to some players. Still, because those structures do not strictly bind games, developers can implement a more appealing spectrum of fluidity for all kinds of customers by giving them more optional tasks to handle between important story sections or opening parts of the game world up during the story.

While players enjoy branching narratives and affect in the world around them, they do not care for baseless threats that never come to action. When developers implement choices in dialogue or actions, they should be sure that those decisions will bear fruit somehow. Even small changes and actions in retaliation for their choices are welcome.

Players like to experiment, especially on the spectrum of good and evil, and they enjoy it when their experimentation pays off. *Night in the Woods* (2017), for example, rewards the players' curiosity in almost every story branch by giving them incentives to keep exploring. Giving the player the option to spend their day with different friends or meeting strangers to spend time with keeps their experiences fresh and encourages them to replay the game. It also has an added incentive to keep players engaged by adding achievements that can only be obtained after playing through all side stories, which requires multiple play-throughs.

The analysed games feature similar player engagements. *Detroit: Become Human* actively makes the player confront their choices with the flowchart at the end of a chapter and depicts numerous activities they have not explored yet. This

flowchart enables replayability through the meticulously sorted branches, in which players can immediately spot unexplored sections. It is definitely a game for completionists.

While *Disco Elysium* (2019) did not feature a flowchart system, it still encouraged players to keep exploring. The skill checks in the game are an active reason it has so much replay value. Making the player feel like failing is not bad motivates them to experiment with dialogue choices and actions; if they fail, they can always return later and try a different option.

The author of the thesis was considering doing a comparative analysis between AAA and Indie studios, but the answers from the survey recipients led to the conclusion that the topic is more complex than first considered. The answers provided shed some light on the topic and are worthy of being researched more thoroughly. The difference in how AAA and Indie studios manage choice is a compelling subject that can also delve into ethics and budget restrictions.

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SURVEY QUESTIONS

Demographic

1. What is your age? (*Pick one* – List of age ranges)
2. What is your gender? (*Pick one* – Female – Male – Other)

Choice

1. What is your stance towards choice? (*Pick one* – choice does not matter – choice has some value – choice is quite important – choice is crucial for my enjoyment - other)
2. What type of choice do you enjoy the most? (*Pick one* – Narrative – Gameplay Style – Quest Objectives – Empty Threats – Long lasting Consequences – Superficial Choice – Romance Options – Character Creation)
3. Sort the options from the previous question by importance. (*Rate Options* – 1 to 5 – least important to most important)
4. How likely are you to replay a game based on the options from the previous question? (*Pick one* – unlikely – likely – very likely)

Influence

1. Does the effect of your choice matter to you? (*Pick one* – It doesn't matter – It matters – It matters a lot)
2. Please specify your favourite changes in videogames. (*Voluntary* - Custom Answers)

Triple A and Indie

1. Which AAA Games with choices have you played? (*Select all that apply* – The Witcher 3 – Dishonored – Detroit: Become Human – Dragon Age – Mass Effect – Deus Ex – Fallout – Cyberpunk 2077 – Other)
2. Which Indie/AA Games with choices have you played? (*Select all that apply* – Stardew Valley – Disco Elysium – Hades – Orwell – Nonary Games – Undertale – Life is Strange – TellTaleGames – Oxenfree – Other)
3. Would you say Indie/AA or AAA studios handle choices in video games better? (*Pick one* – Indie – Triple A)

Special Features

1. How likely would you replay a game with a flowchart system? (*Pick one* – unlikely – no opinion – likely – very likely)
2. Would you feel compelled to replay a game if you can collect more achievements? (*Yes or No*)

Initial Survey Results

What is your age?

90 out of 90 people answered the question

- 18 – 24 years, 43 / 53%
- 25 – 34 years, 30 / 33%
- Under 18 years, 8 / 9%
- 35 – 49 years, 4 / 4.5%
- 50+ years, 0 / 0%

What is your gender?

90 out of 90 people answered the question

- Female, 44 / 49.4%
- Male, 32 / 36%
- Other, 13 / 14.6%

What is your stance towards choice in videogames?

90 out of 90 people answered the question

- Choice is quite important to me, 43 / 48%
- Choice has some value to me, 36 / 40%
- Choice is crucial for me to enjoy the game, 9 / 10%
- Other, 2 / 2%
- Choice does not matter to me at all, 0 / 0%

What type of choice do you enjoy most in games? (Rate Options)

90 out of 90 people answered the question and selected 399 answers

- Narrative, 71 / 79%
- Gameplay Style, 67 / 77.4%
- Character Creation, 64 / 71.1%
- Quest Objectives, 59 / 65.6%
- Romance Options, 57 / 63.3%
- Longlasting Consequences, 51 / 56.7%
- Superficial Choice, 15 / 16.7%
- Empty Threats, 13 / 14.4%
- Other, 2 / 2.2%

Please tell me how important the choices from question 4 are to you. 1 being the least important and 5 being the most important.

90 out of 90 people answered the question, 707 answers sorted

- Narrative, Average of 4.0
- Character Creation, Average of 3.8
- Gameplay Style, Average of 3.8
- Longlasting Consequences, Average of 3.4
- Quest Objectives, Average of 3.4
- Romance, Average of 3.3
- Superficial Choice, Average of 1.9
- Empty Threats, Average of 1.8

How likely are you willing to replay a game based on the choices from question 4?

90 out of 90 people answered the question

- Likely, 46 / 51.1%
- Very likely, 24 / 26.7%
- Unlikely, 20 / 22.2%

Does the effect of your choice, how much it influences the world around you, matter to you?

89 out of 90 people answered the question

- Yes, 38 / 42.7%
- Most certainly, 28 / 31.5%
- A little, 19 / 20.3%
- No, 4 / 5.5%
- Absolutely not, 0 / 0%

If you are willing to elaborate, what are you favorite changes to NPCs (dialogue, behavior, etc.) or the environment (broken environment, change of scenery, etc.) after making a choice? Please specify the games, if you can.

43 out of 90 people answered the question

Which AAA Games with choices have you played? (select all that apply)

84 out of 90 people answered the question, 304 answers selected

- The Witcher, 52 / 61.9%
- Fallout Series, 47 / 56%
- Horizon Zero Dawn, 35 / 41.7%
- Dragon Age Series, 33 / 39.3%
- Cyberpunk 2077, 31 / 36.9%
- Mass Effect Series, 29 / 34.5%
- Detroit: Become Human, 28 / 33.3%
- Dishonored Series, 27 / 32.1%
- Other, 13 / 15.5%

Which Indie/AA Games with choices have you played? (select all that apply)

81 out of 90 people answered the question, 243 answers selected

- Stardew Valley, 46 / 56.8%
- Undertale, 41 / 50.6%
- Life is Strange Series, 41 / 50.6%
- Hades, 37 / 45.7%
- Telltale Games, 34 / 42%
- Disco Elysium, 14 / 17.3%
- Other, 12 / 14.8%
- Oxenfree, 10 / 12.3%
- Orwell, 4 / 4.9%
- Nonary Games, 4 / 4.9%

Subjectively looking at the games you have played, would you say Indie/AA or AAA studios handle choices in video games better?

90 out of 90 people answered the question

- Indie/AA, 40 / 42.6%
- Equal, 27 / 30.6%
- AAA, 23 / 27.3%

How likely would you replay a game with a flowchart system that shows you options that you have missed, e.g. Detroit: Become Human.

90 out of 90 people answered the question

- Very likely, 36 / 40%
- Likely, 31 / 34.5%
- Unlikely, 13 / 14.4%
- No opinion, 10 / 11.1%

Would you feel compelled to replay a game if you can collect more achievements only available through multiple playthroughs? For example, romancing partners, collecting items.

90 out of 90 people answered the question

- Yes, 63 / 70%
- No, 27 / 30%

GUIDE ON REPLAYABILITY

BY KATHI
HAUER



WHAT IS REPLAYABILITY?

The replayability of a game dictates how much value a player gets out of restarting a game, either from a new save or as a new game plus. The more replay value a game has, the more likely it is that players will do multiple play-throughs to unlock and discover more unique dialogue, cutscenes or collectibles. These factors provide the players with a multitude of branching paths and new areas or characters to discover, these kinds of options make a player more likely to replay a game to experience new things.

A good example is Dragon Age Origins, where the player can pick one of six origin stories. The differences between an elf origin and a human origin are quite big in certain parts of the story and some NPCs might be more willing to trust a human than an elf and vice versa.

Depending on the genre of game, different types of replayability are possible. In a visual novel it might be a locked path not yet discovered because the wrong dialogue option was chosen. While in an RPG the choices might be much wider spread, with more options and choices to make. For example, the race or character class the player picks in the beginning might have lasting impact on people or environments around the player.

HOW DO GAMES ACHIEVE REPLAYABILITY?

Games can achieve an increase in replay value by focusing on a variety of factors. Players appreciated feeling valued, by giving players the choice to make their own decisions in-game and making them feel accomplished for even the smallest feats they are already more inclined to replay a game, but several other options also play into the replayability of a game.

The options are as follows:

Achievements
Dialogue Trees

Recruitable Companions
Romance Options

Long Lasting Changes
Character Creation

Every player appreciates these factors in varying amounts, but having a few of these options in your game, no matter how small the option, immediately increases a player's enjoyment by giving them a choice. Most players value choices no matter how insignificant they may seem to the developer. Just having the option of petting an animal for example already makes the player happy about the option. The categories listed above are only a small selection of things that can be implemented to increase the value of a game to a player, but these are the most popular categories presented in most video games nowadays.



ACHIEVEMENTS

Achievements have been an integral part of gaming for years now. In 2005 Microsoft launched Halo with its achievement system in which you can acquire gamerscore to show off your prowess in the game, which later got adapted by Valve and then Sony.

These Achievements are so popular to some people that a new category of gamers called Achievement Hunters came to start. Achievement Hunters will play a game until they have every single one unlocked, this can increase their gamerscore on Xbox, their badge collection on Steam or their trophy showcase on Playstation. The majority of players will try to get all the achievements of their favorite titles, by including hidden achievements and achievements that can only be unlocked by an additional play-through; it's almost guaranteed that players will replay the game once more. This is a very simple way to capture a player's long standing interest in the game and can be implemented into almost every game without any issues.



RECRUITABLE COMPANIONS

Companions in video games are the most common in an RPG setting, they are NPCs who keep the protagonist company and lend their skill to the player to accomplish tasks or fulfill quests. Some companions can only be recruited once the player has fulfilled certain requirements, others might be willing to travel with the player for some simple coin. In some games the player has to make an active decision to recruit specific companions, if the wrong choice was made the companion might be locked forever or will even die in the story.

Because some companions are locked behind story choices, the player might feel inclined to replay the game for the sake of recruiting a companion that was previously unavailable to them. In *Fire Emblem Awakening* for example, the player is able to recruit people directly on the battlefield. If the player accidentally kills them instead of speaking to them they will miss the chance to recruit a potentially important character for their army later on, or will miss up on an opportunity to romance them.

Other times the companions the player picks might completely dictate the direction that the story takes, does the player choose to side with good or evil, do they take the moral high ground or work together with the villains. In those instances the player will be encouraged to replay the story to experience the world from a different perspective.



DIALOGUE TREES



Choice in dialogue keeps players entertained and makes them think about possible outcomes. Dialogue trees don't have to be complicated or lore heavy for a player to appreciate its existence and even something as simple as a different emotional response can already evoke a positive reaction from the player. By giving the player a choice to make a narrative choice, they will not just feel more included in the game itself but might also feel the urge to explore the other available options presented to them. Dialogue can be presented in a person to person setting or side dialogue presented to the player by having a different combination of characters in the party of the player.

While dialogue related choices might be more difficult to implement into a small game it is almost always worth the trouble to at least add a few additional options of dialogue that don't necessarily change any of the narrative in itself. Players like to feel included and dialogue is a surefire way to make a player feel immersed into the world, even if it's just a different greeting or reference to something the player has already accomplished in the story.



LONG LASTING CHANGES

Changes to the environment and the way NPCs react to the player after making critical decisions is a very common way to make the player feel deeply involved into the story and its world, in fact the majority of players greatly enjoy seeing an environmental or moral change reflected in the world. By giving the player consequences to live with, and having them decide between different sides of a moral dilemma the developer can create changes in the world of the game.

In Assassins Creed Odyssey, the player can choose to help a family running from a plagued village, swearing that they are not sick. Let them live and the plague will inadvertently spread over the whole island. When the player visits the island later on they will discover that everyone is dead. This decision will follow the player around for quite a while, as one of the supporting characters from that island will appear later in the game and will confront the player about their decision.

Players also enjoy more subtle approaches. NPCs in Skyrim have different dialogues depending on the race that was chosen by the player or Emily in Dishonored drawing pictures corresponding to the choices Corvo made.



CHARACTER CREATION

The most popular option of choice in games is character creation. Giving the players the chance to create a character in their own image or being able to replicate an existing figure from a different piece of media gives them unlimited options. Character creation plays such a crucial part in games nowadays that some people might even turn away from a purchase if it doesn't offer a character creator or at least the option to choose the gender of a player character.

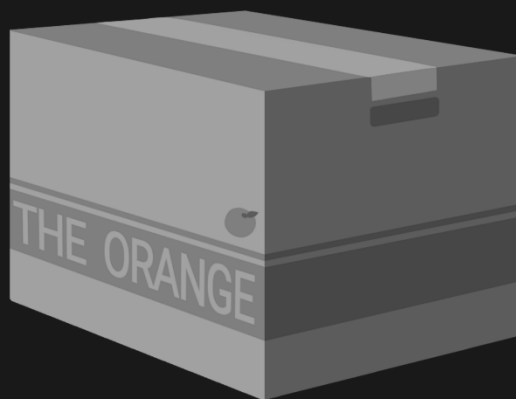


Giving the players a multitude of hair options, skin colors, physical attributes and other characteristics to pick from makes them feel included and immersed in the world of the game. Due to character appearance usually having no influence on dialogue choices in video games, besides fantasy setting RPGs, it is wholly possible to implement even the simplest sort of character creator. Simply by offering the choice of gender, skin color and hair players will already be pleased. A good example is Stardew Valley. All characters use the same base but you can adjust basic attributes to feel comfortable with the protagonist's appearance.



REMEMBER!

Regardless of how many things you add to make your game more replayable, if the player is not having fun they won't replay it. No amount of fun goodies and gadgets you implement will be able to convince a player to play a game they don't enjoy.



This infographic was created as a project for my thesis
"How Choice Influences Replay Value of Narrative Driven Video Games"