

Narrative choice

Opinions about narrative choices in role-playing video games

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Abstract

Storytelling in video games is a debated subject. Opinions are divided on whether games can and should tell stories: some game researchers claim that they constitute an entirely new media for storytelling and challenge the traditional definition of narrative, while others claim that games simply cannot include narrative. Interactivity is said to be the primary unique feature of computers and interactive narrative is seen as the future for storytelling in games.

Interactivity is today applied to the narrative of games mainly through the implementation of choices posed to the player, defined by us as narrative choices. The implementations of narrative choices can follow different strategies and make use of various structures, such as branching trees or foldback schemes. The opinions of players regarding these choices have not been researched and we therefore set out to investigate these opinions. While conducting a pilot study we identify three aspects that affect the view of players on narrative choices: type of game, motivation of the player and the actual implementation of the narrative choice.

Hoping to expand on this pilot study, we research what opinions players have of the implementation of narrative choices in role-playing video games, aiming to construct one or several hypotheses regarding the topic. These hypotheses could then form the base of future research. We use a qualitative research strategy supported by quantitative data and conduct an Internet-based survey where we quantify and describe the results. The survey targets players of role-playing video games and is published on online video-game forums.

From the results of our research we manage to construct four hypotheses. There is a demand for a larger supply of both meaningful and ethically complex narrative choices, as well as a demand for a greater amount of narrative choices in general in role-playing video games. Lastly, the inclusion of a larger supply of meaningful narrative choices in role-playing video games would increase the willingness of players to replay these games. Apart from the hypotheses our research and results reveals several potential topics for future research.

Keywords

Narrative choice, video games, role-playing, storytelling, implementation, opinions

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	3
1.1	Storytelling in computer games	4
1.1.1	Computer games as a young medium for storytelling	4
1.1.2	Writing stories for computer games	4
1.1.3	Narrative and interactivity	5
1.2	Choice in computer games	8
1.2.1	Narrative choice	8
1.2.2	Implementation of narrative choice	8
1.2.3	The lack of player input	11
1.3	Pilot study	12
1.3.1	The initial report	12
1.3.2	Problems with the method	13
1.3.3	The results	14
1.4	Direction and research question	16
1.4.1	The direction of this thesis	16
1.4.2	Research question	16
1.4.3	Delimitation	16
1.4.4	Purpose	17
1.4.5	Outline	17
2	Method	18
2.1	Choice of method and techniques	18
2.2	Method description	20
2.2.1	Substance-specific questions	20
2.2.2	Demographical questions	23
2.2.3	Control-question	23
2.3	Selection	25
2.4	Reliability and validity	26
2.5	Possible problems	27
2.6	Expected results	28
3	Results	29
3.1	Non-response	29
3.2	Compilation	30
3.2.1	Demographical questions	31
3.2.2	Substance-specific questions	35
4	Analysis	48
4.1	Encountered problems	48
4.2	Discussion	49

4.2.1	Demographical data	49
4.2.2	Distribution	49
4.2.3	Supply and appreciation of meaningful narrative choices	49
4.2.4	Appreciation of moral meters	51
4.2.5	Appreciation of changing character appearance	51
4.2.6	Satisfaction with amount of narrative choices	51
4.2.7	Satisfaction with the amount of contextually realistic options	52
4.2.8	Supply and appreciation of ethically complex choices	52
4.2.9	Replay frequency	53
4.2.10	Suggestions for implementing narrative choices	55
4.3	Conclusions	56
5	Concluding remarks	57
5.1	Future research	57
6	Sources	58
6.1	Bibliography	58
6.2	Ludography	60
	Appendices	61
A	- Survey	61

List of Figures

Figure 1-1: Branching tree.....	9
Figure 1-2: Foldback scheme	9
Figure 3-1: Age	31
Figure 3-2: Ages 16-25	31
Figure 3-3: Gender	32
Figure 3-4: Nationality	33
Figure 3-5: Distribution site	34
Figure 3-6: Perceived supply of meaningful narrative choices	35
Figure 3-7: Appreciation of meaningful narrative choices	36
Figure 3-8: Appreciation of moral meters	37
Figure 3-9: Appreciation of changing character appearance	38
Figure 3-10: Satisfaction with amount of narrative choices	39
Figure 3-11: Satisfaction with the amount of contextually realistic options.....	40
Figure 3-12: Perceived supply of ethically complex narrative choices	41
Figure 3-13: Appreciation of ethically complex narrative choices	42
Figure 3-14: Replay frequency	43
Figure 3-15: Effect of meaningful narrative choices on tendency of replay	44
Figure 3-16: Potential appreciation of automatic save before narrative choices.....	45
Figure 3-17: Potential appreciation of automatic save after narrative choices	46
Figure 3-18: Potential appreciation of time limits during narrative choices	47
Figure 4-1: Perceived supply of meaningful narrative choices among players who appreciate such choices.....	50
Figure 4-2: Perceived supply of ethically complex choices among players who appreciate such choices	53
Figure 4-3: Perceived supply of meaningful narrative choices among players with an increased tendency of replay due to such choices	54

1 Introduction

Imagine this: you are a brave medieval knight bowing in front of your king. He charges you with the quest of ridding the kingdom of an evil knight-eating dragon. A sudden chill of fear ignites doubt in your mind. You are posed with the options of becoming a late-night snack or losing your head for disobedience. Gathering your courage, you look at your king and say “I respectfully decline, your Highness”, wishing for a swift and painless death. The king stares at you long and hard, until he speaks: “Oh, come on. Please, can’t you do it?” You repeat your statement, as does the king. This goes on for some time until you lose your patience and accept the quest, whereupon the king stands up and announces: “All hail the brave hero!”

This scenario might seem comical, but even when playing video games praised for their storytelling it is quite possible that a player can stumble upon similar situations. Storytelling in video games is still under development and has not yet reached its full potential.

In this thesis we will investigate how interactivity is combined with storytelling in video games and how the players perceive this combination.

Throughout the thesis we will mention both “video games” and “computer games”. We make no difference between these terms and use them synonymously. We include games both for computers and for gaming consoles in these terms.

1.1 Storytelling in computer games

1.1.1 Computer games as a young medium for storytelling

Computer games have long been seen as mere light entertainment, as stated by Andrew Rollings and Ernest Adams in their game design book *On Game Design* (Rollings & Adams 2003, p. 75), but over the years the interest in them as a media, and even a form of art, have increased steadily. One of the earliest and most visionary works in this area is Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (Murray 1997). Murray speaks of computers in general as a "fertile new medium of communication" and of computer games as formats for storytelling within this medium. She explains how the computer must evolve from an additive medium, a combination of previous media, to an expressive one with its own narrative traditions. She also compares the development of computers as a medium to that of books and cinema, stating that the first decades after their emergence constituted periods of incunabula¹. Murray claims that the computer still is an "incunabular medium" and that we should not judge the products of such a medium by comparing those with products from older media, such as books or cinema, seeing as it has not yet come into its own. (ibid., pp. 28-29, 66-67 & 93)

Rollings and Adams (2003, pp. 75-76) also speak of how computer games as a medium has the potential to engage players emotionally just as theatre, books or cinema does. They also claim that computer games could, and should, be viewed as an art form, but that does not necessarily entail that every computer game is a work of art, just as not all novels or movies are. Still, Rollings and Adams propose that interactive entertainment needs some sort of groundbreaking movement in order to make these changes happen. They say that for the medium to reach artistic recognition three things must change in the computer game industry: it must begin to specifically award artistic efforts, it needs game critics in addition to the many game reviewers present today and it must create new aesthetic principles unique to computer games (ibid., pp. 561-566).

Lee Sheldon, a game designer and author, states in his book *Character Development and Storytelling for Games* (Sheldon 2004) that in order to engage players at a deeper emotional plane game designers need to reach the "human spirit" and that the way to do so is through storytelling (ibid., p. 6). This is supported by Chris Crawford in his book *On Interactive Storytelling* (Crawford 2005, p. 15), where he explains how games are traditionally based around things, while stories centers on people.

1.1.2 Writing stories for computer games

Despite of this, storytelling seems to have a low priority in today's computer game industry. In *Extra Credits* a weekly video serial hosted by the online computer game magazine *The Escapist*, Portnow, Floyd & Theus claim that few games are actually based on stories to start with (Portnow, Floyd & Theus 2010a, 1:54) and that the writers who author these stories are "often brought in pretty late in the development cycle, so they usually have to work around whatever [development has] come before them." (ibid., 2:09) They also say that many writers who author stories for computer games are inexperienced with writing for the medium and that they are brought in "from outside the game industry" (ibid., 3:54). They carry on by explaining how traditional writing techniques are not necessarily applicable to writing for computer games:

¹ The word *incunabula* is used for books printed before 1501 and is described by Murray as "derived from the Latin for swaddling clothes and is used to indicate that these books are the work of a technology still in its infancy." (Murray, 1997, p. 28)

Video games are a fundamentally different medium from all other mass-media to date. You can't just write for it using old techniques from different media and expect it to work. You wouldn't write a movie script the same way you would write a novel, and you wouldn't write a newspaper column the same way you would a stage play. So why would you expect writing for video games to be the same as for any of these other media? (ibid., 4:40)

This is supported by Murray who states:

Authorship in electronic media is procedural. Procedural authorship means writing the rules by which the texts appear as well as writing the texts themselves. (Murray 1997, p. 152)

The reason that authors who are experienced in writing for more traditional media is having a hard time adapting their craft to this new procedural one is, according to Portnow, Floyd and Theus (2010a, 3:54), the interactive nature of computer games as a medium. Interactivity is regarded as a major, if not the primary, unique quality of computers and computer games. Crawford (2005, p. 43) states that it is the computer's "fundamental basis of competitive advantage" and Rollings and Adams (2003, p. 40) argue that interactivity is the "fundamental principle" of computer games. Murray (1997, p. 71) also points out the importance of interactivity in digital environments. She claims that the entertainment industry have seen the computer as "merely a new delivery channel" for traditional forms of entertainment (ibid., p. 252), which could explain the lack of writers specialized in writing for computer games.

1.1.3 Narrative and interactivity

How, then, does the interactivity of computer games alter the way stories are told in the medium? Portnow, Floyd & Theus states:

Video game storytelling isn't just about the writing and the dialog. Because video games are an interactive medium, the gameplay and the mechanics of the world are just as important to telling the story. Narrative, not writing, is what we should actually be talking about here. (Portnow, Floyd & Theus 2010a, 1:05)

By talking about narrative instead of mere writing the concept of storytelling in computer games is greatly broadened but the term also brings about some restrictions and contradictions when applied to an interactive medium.

Firstly, it should be noted that there are opinions on whether narrative can be found in the context of video games at all. In his article on video game studies, Markku Eskelinen (2004, p. 37) derives his definition of narrative from the narratological theories of Gerald Prince and Gérard Genette. According to this definition, narrative consists of two components: "... a temporal sequence of events ..."² and "... a narrative situation ..."³. Eskelinen claims that due to the nature of games the temporal sequences of events in them do not constitute narratives, and that narrative situations do not appear in games, with some reservations. Further, Eskelinen states that the "dominant user function" in video games is configurative while it in arts such as literature and film is interpretative. The goals of playing video games are therefore reached by overcoming obstacles instead of interpreting what is presented in them (ibid., p. 38). We will not delve deeper into the field of narratology or the discussion about whether games can contain narrative, but it is important to point out that the latter is not a certain fact.

² This is defined by Eskelinen as a "plot", although he notes that making this analogy is to "... water down the concept ..." (Eskelinen 2004, p. 37).

³ A narrative situation should, according to Eskelinen, contain "... narrators and narratees for starters." (Eskelinen 2004, p. 37)

Rollings and Adams (2003, pp. 10 & 113-115) defines narrative in computer games as “the non-interactive, presentational part of the story.” They claim that there is an “inherent tension between interactivity and narrative” and that the story of games can be divided into an interactive part, gameplay, and a non-interactive part, narrative. The two requires balance in order to engage players but still make them feel that they are in control. Murray (1997, p. 191) touches on this issue, claiming that more improvisational control for the player leads to less control over the plot for the author, while limiting the player’s interactive options also limits her feeling of agency⁴.

Richard Bartle also discusses video game narrative in his book *Designing Virtual Worlds* (Bartle, 2003/2004). While Bartle focuses on *virtual worlds*, a collective term he uses for massive multi-player online computer games, the fact that interactivity is a property of the computer itself suggests that many of his arguments could be applied to offline computer games as well. Bartle claims that “Narrative is seen as an important artistic feature that is often lacking in computer games ...” (ibid., p. 655) and also explains that virtual worlds cannot have the same narrative control as film “... because players don't follow scripts.” (ibid., p. 651)

In their book *Rules of Play* (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, p. 383) game designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman divide narrative in two structures: embedded and emergent narrative, terms defined by Marc LeBlanc during the Game Developers Conference in 1999⁵. They describe the two structures as such:

Embedded elements are the narrative structures directly authored by game designers that serve as a frame for interaction. Emergent narrative approaches emphasize the ways that players interact with a game system to produce a narrative experience unique to each player. (ibid., p. 384)

This brings to mind the division of story into gameplay and narrative that Rollings and Adams speaks of, and Salen and Zimmerman also points out: “Virtually every game combines embedded and emergent elements.” (ibid., p. 385) This suggests that the balance between gameplay and narrative pointed out by Rollings and Adams could be the same as one between embedded and emergent narrative.

The definitions of embedded and emergent narrative by Salen and Zimmerman seems to tie interactivity mainly to emergent narrative while embedded narrative merely provides a context in which interactivity can take place. But could interactivity not also be integrated with embedded narrative, in order to further develop computer games as a medium for storytelling? Opinions are divided on whether this could, and should, be done.

Rollings and Adams (2003, p. 93) claims that it is the player who should be the storyteller in games and that interactive stories, in the sense that the actions of the player generates the embedded narrative, wouldn’t be possible with our current level of technology (ibid., p. 119). They do, however, also claim that that interactive fiction is the aspect of computer game design that has been the focus of most academic research and claim that the reason to this is “because it challenges traditional conceptions of what narrative is and does.” (ibid., p. 445)

⁴ Agency, as Murray (1997, p. 126) defines it, is “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices.”

⁵ According to Salen & Zimmerman, LeBlanc presented these terms during a talk at the Game Developers Conference (GDC) in 1999. However, viewing the conference slides at LeBlanc’s homepage (<http://algorithmancy.8kindsoffun.com> [2011-04-02]) suggests that these terms were defined at the GDC in 2000.

Bartle (2003/2004, p. 668) argues that a story can only be told once it has ended. This statement suggests that embedded narrative could not be interactive due to its static form. However, such a suggestion would be paradoxical, seeing as interactive embedded narrative would no longer be static. Perhaps the division of embedded and emergent narrative is too strict in its nature, or perhaps adding interactivity to embedded narrative would transform it into emergent narrative?

Sheldon (2004, pp. 6-11) claims that it is a myth that interactive storytelling is something new, resulting from the emergence of computers as medium. He says that interactivity has been a part of storytelling for as long as it has existed and that the usage of it in computer games is "... a far more natural approach to storytelling than one might at first suppose ...". He also emphasizes the demand from players to be able to affect the story in games and states that the challenge to create interactive storytelling lies in the writing for and design of computer games:

Players want freedom of choice and action. Linear storytelling clearly limits their choices and actions. They want the world affected by their actions. It's a technical hurdle to add bullet holes in walls and make most objects destructible. It's a writing/design craft hurdle to create moments of story and character based on their decisions. (ibid., p. 301)

Portnow, Floyd and Theus also discuss how choice in particular is an important narrative construct in computer games and that it strengthens the engagement of the player:

This is the unique power of video games as a medium: they ask us to live our decisions. In this medium, we cannot be spectators. We are forced to confront our own actions, and that forces upon us a level of introspection. (Portnow, Floyd & Theus 2010c, 4:14)

1.2 Choice in computer games

Where do we find the interactivity in computer games? Crawford states: "Interactivity depends on the choices available to the user." (Crawford 2005, p. 41) He also talks about the "richness" of the choices and how this affects the quality of the interaction in the game (ibid., pp. 40-41). He states that the choices must be relevant to the situation and satisfy the needs of the player by both offering enough relevant options and leading to the expected results. A lower richness leads to less satisfactory interactivity in the game.

Portnow categorizes the design of decisions into two categories; problems and choices (Portnow 2009). He describes a problem as something that can be solved with a clear best answer. In contrast a choice is made without a way to calculate a best answer that would give the most back in in-game rewards. Portnow gives an example of a choice between apples and oranges. If the fruits have no price connected to them then it is not possible to calculate which fruit would give you the highest reward and the player would choose based on their own preference, or their perceived preference of the character they control, making it a choice. But if the apple would cost five dollars and the oranges ten dollars the player would be able to calculate the best option and potentially turn the decision of which fruit to pick into a problem. As Portnow puts it: "Any decision that has a definitive best answer is a problem and not a choice." (ibid.)

1.2.1 Narrative choice

The choices players are confronted with can give them options that affect the gameplay, e.g. through items that can be used by the character that the player controls, the embedded narrative of the game or both. We define the choices that affect the embedded narrative as narrative choices. The player's decision affects the narrative by having a short or long-lasting impact. It could be something apparent to the player immediately or later on in the game. Narrative choice is a concept we will use throughout the rest of our work.

1.2.2 Implementation of narrative choice

The traditional way for game developers to create the narrative is through a linear structure that transports the player through the story in a single path (Sheldon 2004, pp. 299-300). This type of linear structure has been successful in other media and more people are familiar with it than nonlinear structures (ibid., p. 300). Since there is only one path without any intersections leading to other paths, the player is not offered any narrative choices. As mentioned earlier, Sheldon states that players want to have more freedom in games and that a linear structure limits the choices available to them (ibid., pp. 300-301).

To give the player more freedom, the *branching tree* structure introduces choices to players by splitting the story in different paths. The illustration in figure 1-1 shows how the structure is designed.

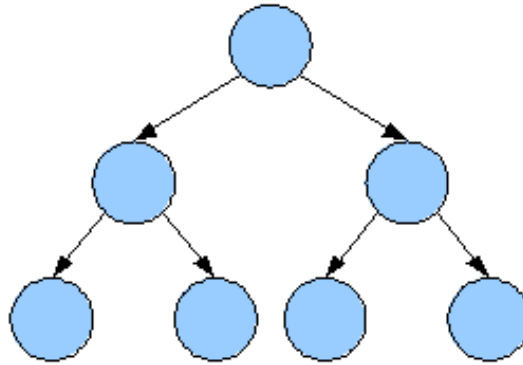


Figure 1-1: Branching tree

The player reaches an intersection and then gets a choice that moves him or her down one of the branches. With the branching structure the player is able to make choices that affects the outcome of the story and gives a different storyline on each playthrough of the game.

Randi Cohn and Ben McIntosh have experience as game developers, while Lindsay Grace is a professor who teaches video game design at the Miami University. Together, they have written an article about the creation of non-linear narratives where they state:

From the production perspective, the more options you give the player, the more time and resources it takes to design each possibility, as well as to generate the assets associated with each scenario. (Cohn, Grave & McIntosh 2008)

Crawford also points out the amount of effort it takes to give the player more paths to choose between in a branching tree structure (Crawford 2005, p.124).

To battle this problem developers have combined *foldback schemes* with branching trees to try to control the expansion of the tree (ibid., pp. 126-127). The illustration in figure 1-2 shows how the foldback scheme is constructed.

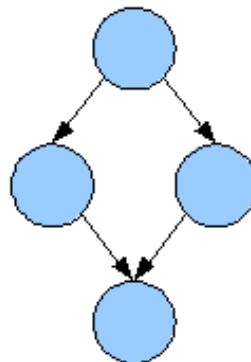


Figure 1-2: Foldback scheme

The foldback scheme lets the player choose one of several options, but all these options lead down to the same path (ibid., p. 126). Crawford's main criticism against foldback schemes is that they render some of the choices made by the player meaningless, because they only give the player an illusion of choice (ibid., p. 127). He states that the players will "... feel cheated ..." when they notice that the choices they made had no impact on the game world, though he also claims that they will only notice it after they have played through the game more than once. A question arises regarding if the player actually replays the games, since Rollings and Adams point out that "Research has shown that a great

many players never finish their games at all ...”⁶ (Rollings & Adams 2003, p. 447). Will the player notice the foldback schemes and illusions if they never replay the game?

Portnow, Floyd and Theus point at the lack of distinction between problems and choices as another factor that could disappoint players (Portnow, Floyd & Theus 2011b, 05:22). The player could have made a decision, believing it to be a choice, but it is later revealed to have been a calculatable problem. He also mentions that many of today's games include decisions that are introduced as choices but can be calculated and turned into problems at the time the player is faced with them (ibid., 04:21).

A possible reason for the masking of problems as choices could be to lead the player into what Sheldon calls the *golden path*⁷. He defines the golden path as the path that the developer wants the player to traverse and lets the player “... experience the game design to its fullest.” (Sheldon 2004, p. 169) By giving a higher reward the player could subtly be led into the wanted direction. A more direct approach used is the *kill'em if they stray* strategy, as defined by Crawford (2005, p. 130), by killing the player's character if he, or she, wanders off too far away from the developers intended path.

Crawford distinguishes between the options implemented by the game's designers and the options that are relevant to each situation (ibid., pp. 210-211). The player should have the option to do what he, or she, wants and take the consequences of that decision. The player should also afterwards be able to go back and change their decision (ibid., pp. 316-317). Crawford points out that the ability to experience the consequences of choices without them being permanent is an integral part of usage of computers.

Since narrative choices have impact on the narrative they could also change the character's personality directly or through the world. A current example can be taken from *Dragon Age 2* (Bioware 2010b). When the player's character ventures into the *Deep Roads*⁸ the player can choose to bring their brother, or sister, with them. Depending on what the player chooses the brother, or sister, could die and never appear in the game again. The developer could have used the opportunity after the choice was made to affect and change the player's character emotionally. Rollings and Adams mention that changing the character through what he or she experiences is something to strive for while developing games, as it creates a more believable game experience for the player (Rollings & Adams 2003, p. 58).

As previously mentioned, Crawford talks about the richness of choice and how the relevance of the options affect it. Crawford also states that in order to keep the player immersed in the game the options available have to be relevant for the character (Crawford 2005, p. 53). Facing the player with options that go against the controlled character's previously established personality breaks the immersion, which is what Rollings and Adams also state (Rollings & Adams 2003, p. 58). An example of this can be seen in *Star Wars: Knight of the Old Republic* (Bioware 2003). Near the end of the game the player gets the option between joining the dark or light side. This choice is not at all affected by previously made choices by the player and one of the options could go completely against the character's personality that could have emerged through the choices the player made. Though Rollings and Adams argue that restricting the options available to the player based on the personality of the player's character makes sense, they also mention that freedom should be given to the player to choose

⁶ It is worth mentioning that Rollings and Adams do not provide any references to this research.

⁷ The term is borrowed by Sheldon from Zen Buddhism, meaning “... the Buddha's eight-fold path to nirvana or enlightenment”. (Sheldon 2004, p. 170)

⁸ The Deep Roads is a location in the video game *Dragon Age 2* which consists of a network of underground pathways and is shown as a place filled with dangers.

such options. However, should players choose such an option they would have "... to face the dire consequences." (Rollings & Adams 2003, p. 361)

In *Mass Effect 2* (Bioware 2010b) the player is given the option to change the faith of one of the races in the game; the *Geth*. The Geth consist of sentient artificial intelligences that seek to kill the player's main character throughout the game. The player has the option of either choosing to reprogram them and stop them from being a threat or completely destroy them. It is an option between genocide and removal of free will. It could be argued that both options are ethically questionable, but in the end one of the options reward the player with *paragon* points and the other with *renegade* points, which are the equivalent to *good* and *evil* in other games. Instead of letting the players evaluate the situation and come to their own conclusions of the ethical aspect of the options the developer labels the options for them.

Rollings and Adams point to the fact that many games that have tried to implement ethical choices, at least during and before the release of their book *On Game Design* in 2003, do so by a two-way scale with good in one end and bad in the other (Rollings & Adams 2003 p. 78). By creating this two-way ethical scale the designers and writers of the game are forced to create choices that fit into this scale, which limits the freedom of the player (Portnow, Floyd & Theus 2010a, 02:23).

1.2.3 The lack of player input

The movement that Rollings and Adams call out for would probably involve changes not only in the industry but also among the consumers. They state that most players "... think that the purpose of playing games is to have fun ..." and that the term *fun* is limiting the range of emotion games can explore (Rollings & Adams 2003, p. 76). Portnow, Floyd & Theus supports this by pointing out the importance of an increased demand among consumers for more emotionally engaging games:

... the game industry is never going to get its *Godfather* or its *Blade Runner*, much less its *Seventh Seal* or its *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* unless we start asking for it. (Portnow, Floyd & Theus 2010d, 6:36)

This, however, presumes that players are actually in demand of more emotionally engaging games. It is apparent that the authors of the material we have looked at have opinions on if, and how, choice could affect players, based on their experience developing and researching games. What we found lacking was the opinions of the people that play the games. To our knowledge this has not been researched and this is what led us to conduct our pilot study: to try to see how the views of game designers and researchers on choices in games are related to the opinions of the players.

1.3 Pilot study

1.3.1 The initial report

Our interest in researching players' opinions about narrative choice was originally raised during the fall of 2010 when we as part of our education attended a course in scientific methods and writing at the University of Stockholm. In our report for that course we set out to answer the following question:

*What effect do choices that affect the story in games have on the gaming experience?*⁹

We had not been able to find any research on the subject and as such we did not know what effects to look for. This led us to keep the extremely broad term *gaming experience* undefined in our research question. By the same reasons we argued that a qualitative approach to answering our question would be appropriate as we did not have a clear hypothesis to confirm or falsify (Bryman 2001/2009, p. 249). We were approaching the problem inductively, hoping to build a theory of how narrative choice affected the gameplay experience. To that end, avoiding to define gaming experience beforehand allowed us to include all aspects found in our research when answering the research question.

Our method consisted of conducting a survey with free-text answers and building a theory based on the data collected. The survey consisted of six questions (translations from Swedish, original formulations in footnotes):

1. What is your view of games with choices that affect the story? Do these choices affect your gaming experience and if so, how?¹⁰
2. What dictates your decisions in these choices? What motivates you to pick a certain option above others?¹¹
3. Do you think that choices that affect the story in games should be changed in any way and if so, how? Should more or fewer games containing such choices be developed?¹²
4. Pick one game that you have played that have allowed you to, in a meaningful way, develop the story through choices. Which game is it?¹³
5. Describe one of the choices in the game. What options were you given, what did you choose and why?¹⁴
6. If you had designed the game, would you have changed this choice in any way and if so, how?¹⁵

⁹ Translated from Swedish: "Vilken inverkan på spelupplevelsen har val som påverkar berättelsen i spel?"

¹⁰ "Hur ser ni på spel med valmöjligheter som påverkar berättelsen i spelet? Påverkar dessa val din spelupplevelse och i så fall hur?"

¹¹ "Vad styr era beslut vid dessa val? Vad motiverar er att välja en viss valmöjlighet över de andra?"

¹² "Tycker ni att valmöjligheter som påverkar berättelsen i spel borde förändras på något sätt, och i så fall hur? Skall det utvecklas fler eller färre spel med sådana val?"

¹³ "Välj ett spel ni spelat som på ett betydelsefullt sätt låtit er utveckla berättelsen genom val. Vilket spel är det?"

¹⁴ "Beskriv ett av dessa val i spelet. Vilka valmöjligheter hade ni, vad valde ni och varför?"

¹⁵ "Om ni hade designat spelet, hade ni ändrat på detta val på något sätt, och i så fall hur?"

The survey was conducted over the Internet using Google Documents¹⁶ and was published on Swedish gaming forums Loading and FZ¹⁷ as well as on the internal conference system of the Department of Computer and Systems Sciences, University of Stockholm. Loading and FZ were chosen because they are focused on general gaming and have large communities. The Department of Computer and Systems Sciences offer a bachelor's program in game development and that fact together with our ease of access to the internal conference system led us to publish the survey there too. It was open from September 30th 2010 until October 5th 2010 and generated 15 replies. No demographic requirements were made and no such details were collected.

1.3.2 Problems with the method

In retrospect the questions in our survey had several problems. First off, several questions contained multiple questions in themselves dividing the focus of the respondents. What were they supposed to put most emphasis on in their replies? Due to this it was possible that one of the parts of a question remained unanswered, something that we indeed noted in the resulting data.

Secondly, choice and gaming experience were left undefined and respondents could find this to be hindering their ability to respond the questions. When viewing the results one respondent found the lack of definition of gaming experience confusing but still left valuable replies while another stated that since choice was undefined he or she could not reply to our questions. As previously stated the lack of a definition for gaming experience was intentional. We reasoned that by leaving interpretation of the term up to the respondents they would not be inhibited or guided in their reasoning. In their article *Fundamental Concepts of Gameplay Experience*, Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä (2005, p. 7-9) provides a model for *gameplay experience* that could have been used as a base for our survey, though this model have a few problems in the context of our research. Their SCI-model¹⁸ only takes immersion into account when evaluating gameplay experiences, while we were also interested in aspects such as effects on the emotions and expectations of the player. This is a problem that Ermi and Mäyrä themselves note (*ibid.*, p. 12). Further, their model is based on interviews with "... Finnish children who actively played digital games ..." and their parents "... who mostly did not play such games themselves."¹⁹ (*ibid.*, p. 5) Though we could not find any clear data on the average age of European players the American trade association ESA²⁰ reports that the average age of players in the U.S.A. in 2010 was 34, with only 25% of the players being under the age of 18²¹. This suggests that a model for gameplay experience based on experiences of children might not be representative for the experiences of players in general. This in addition to the fact that the remaining respondents to our survey were able to use their own definitions of gaming experience when answering the questions signals that providing a definition for the term in the survey was neither easily done nor highly

¹⁶ <http://docs.google.com> [2011-04-10]

¹⁷ <http://www.loading.se> and <http://www.fz.se> [2011-04-10]

¹⁸ SCI stands for sensory, challenge-based and imaginative, the three aspects of immersion Ermi & Mäyrä identifies.

¹⁹ Ermi & Mäyrä do not specifically state the age range of the children interviewed but the excerpts from the interviews used in their report are citations from children in the ages 10 to 12 years old.

²⁰ Entertainment Software Association.

²¹ http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA_Essential_Facts_2010.PDF [2011-04-10]

important for the validity of the results. Defining “choice” or even “narrative choice” could have been helpful to our respondents, though after viewing the replies given we determined that the respondents had interpreted the term as we intended.

Finally, our selection presumed that anyone willing to respond was an active player of computer games. Using an Internet survey not aimed at specific individuals gives no such guarantees, although the details of the replies suggest that this was actually the case. Further, conducting a survey written in Swedish and published exclusively on Swedish online forums probably only yielded answers from Swedish respondents. The results could therefore not be representative for all computer game players in the world, but since our report had a qualitative approach we were mainly hoping to build a theory that could later be confirmed or falsified when applied to a more general selection of players.

1.3.3 The results

After compiling and analyzing the results of our survey we realized that an answer to our research question would be hard to give without further research. The effects narrative choices have on the gaming experience seemed to depend on three factors: the type of the game²², the way narrative choice is implemented in the game and the motivations and expectations of the player playing the game.

The dependency on game type was brought up by several respondents and there was a general consensus that narrative choice did not fit in all types of games. However, few indications were given on which genres were more or less suited for narrative choices, the only clear example being that first-person shooters such as *Call of Duty*²³ should not contain them. One respondent commented that this kind of choice is often present in particular game genres and gave role-playing games²⁴ as an example. This was supported by the fact that almost all of the games given as examples in the last three questions were part of that genre, the only exception being Quantic Dream’s *Heavy Rain*²⁵. Whether more or less games should contain narrative choices was only discussed by some of the respondents. From the respondents that shared their thoughts of the amount of games that contained narrative choices it could be gathered that most wanted to see more such games. One respondent stated that he or she wanted fewer games with narrative choices, referring to interactive stories as a narrow genre best maintained by a few developers.

²² Or genre, a term more often used in the game development industry. We will use type and genre of games as synonyms.

²³ A popular franchise of war-themed first-person shooters, owned and published by Activision. Common to all first-person shooter (FPS) games is that the player sees the game world through the eyes of the player character he is controlling (first-person view) and that the character uses violence in some form as his or her primary means of progressing the game, usually through the use of firearms.

²⁴ A genre sprung out of traditional role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, where the player character (and often a party of other characters accompanying the player character) increases in skill and knowledge as the game progresses, often by receiving experience points for performing various challenging actions. These games usually have rich and complex stories, some recent examples being *Bioware’s Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* franchises.

²⁵ Of the traditional game genres *Heavy Rain* mostly resembles adventure games, a genre focusing mainly on the story of the game. Rollings & Adams (2003, p.443) even define adventure games as interactive stories.

The implementation of narrative choice in games was also discussed in many of the replies. One of the main aspects that affected the gaming experience was the effect choices had on the story of the game. Generally, choices that entailed notable changes in the story and the game world were seen as a positive feature, while choices without impact on the story could have a negative effect on the experience. This being said, a few respondents preferred the opposite, that the story in games was unaffected by the player's decisions. Further, several details in the implementation of narrative choice in contemporary computer games were brought up as having a negative effect on the gaming experience. Choices where the outcome of the options was very easy to predict and options consisting purely of ethical extremities were both described as such details. Two popular implementation strategies for narrative choices, moral meters and changes to the characters physical appearance, were also mentioned but no real emphasis was put on their effect on the gaming experience.

As for player motivations and expectations, the wide spectrum of different opinions of how narrative choice was, and should be, implemented signaled that the respondents had varying motivations to playing games in the first place. While some welcomed choices, one respondent explained how he or she felt anxiety when faced with a choice, fearing that another path in the story than the one taken would have been more fun. This respondent also explained that he or she had no interest in replaying games while another respondent said that choices that affected the story actually increased the possibility of replay. This indicated a variation among players both in demand for interactive narrative as well as in the tendency to replay games. In addition to this there were various ways in which the respondents approached choices. Some based their decisions on their own morals and ethical values, others on the perceived or explicit values of the player character and others still on the in-game value of rewards given. From this we reasoned that the respondents had varying motivations and expectations when playing games that affected their opinions about narrative choices and their implementation.

Some suggestions on implementation of narrative choice, aimed at improving the gaming experience, were also made. These involved automatically saving the game before a choice is made in order to allow the player to go back and remake his or her decision, saving the game after a choice has been made in order to prevent the player from doing the same and limiting the time the player had in making his or her decision. The two diametrically opposed suggestions regarding automatically saving the game supported the notion that players have varying motivations for playing games. Being allowed to return to a choice and remake it facilitates for players who want to have full insight in the narrative possibilities and the ability to use this insight to choose their preferred development of the story. On the other hand, preventing the decisions to be altered by saving the game after it is made caters for players who want to experience the consequences of their decisions. This painted the picture of two fundamentally different approaches to playing games with interactive narrative. The suggestion of applying a time limit to choices was proposed as a means to increase the realism of situations wherein choices are made, just as the suggestion of saving after each choice.

Based on all this, the only straight answer we could find to our initial question was that choices that affect the story in games seemed to have an effect on the gaming experience of players but that this effect could be either positive or negative depending on the motivations of the player, the type of game and the ways the choices are implemented. Clearly, as an answer this was not very enlightening but our findings could serve as grounds for further research. In this thesis we hope to build on this foundation and provide some of that research.

1.4 Direction and research question

1.4.1 The direction of this thesis

We feel that in order to reach any valuable results within this thesis we have to limit ourselves to one of the aspects that determines how narrative choices affect the gaming experience identified in our pilot study. While we find all three aspects interesting and in demand of research we argue that focusing on the implementation of narrative choice would be preferable considering our education in game development. However, there could exist causal relations between these three aspects and to be able to research one aspect separately we need to decide how to handle the possible influence of the other two on our results.

We reason that the influence of the aspect of game type could be limited by focusing on the implementation of narrative choice in one specific type of games. Among the data collected during our pilot study the most prominent genre containing narrative choices was role-playing games. This, in addition to our backgrounds as active players of role-playing video games, indicates that focusing our study on this genre would yield a valuable contribution to the knowledge of video game design.

As for the influence of the aspect of player motivations, this is not as easily handled. We could limit our selection to players with a certain motivation for playing but this would demand previous research into the aspect of player motivations. While some research into this area has been made²⁶ none of it has been focused on the effect player motivation has on the opinions of narrative choice. Nor has much research conducted been focused on the motivations of players of role-playing games. The only notable exception to this would be John H. Kim's *Threefold Model*²⁷, although this model focuses on traditional "pen-and-paper" role-playing games. A mapping of player motivations affecting the opinions of narrative choice in role-playing video games is needed and is best handled in a study of its own. We will therefore aim our research at players of role-playing video games but disregard their motivations for playing these games, keeping in mind that varying motivations could have effects on our data.

1.4.2 Research question

Having made these considerations we have arrived at the following question that we want to answer in this thesis:

*What are the opinions among players about implementations
of narrative choice in role-playing video games?*

1.4.3 Delimitation

As the results of our pilot study showed, three variable aspects affect the opinions of narrative choices in computer games. We will not investigate the causal relations between these three variables but we still need to handle their possible effects on each other. By fixating the game type variable to role-playing games we are limiting our research and making it applicable to games within the role-playing

²⁶ Noteworthy are Bartle's player types (Bartle, 2003/2004) and Nicole Lazzaro's four keys (from *Why We Play Games: Four Keys to More Emotion Without Story*, 2004, available at http://www.xeodesign.com/xeodesign_whyweplaygames.pdf [2011-04-16]).

²⁷ <http://www.darkshire.net/~jhkim/rpg/theory/threefold/> [2011-04-16]

game genre only. Since we are not able to fixate the player motivation variable in the same way we will instead disregard any possible causal effects this variable have on our data. This will broaden our population but might impose limitations on the generalizability of our results.

The implementations referred to in the research question are limited to strategies of implementation identified in our pilot study as having an effect on the gaming experience, as well as relevant additional strategies identified through our theoretical sources.

1.4.4 Purpose

The primary purpose of this thesis is to build a base for future research, seeing as no studies have been done within our specific research area. In the long run, we hope to give developers of role-playing video games a better understanding of the demands of their customers. With more insight in player expectations and their view on implementations of choices, developers will have a greater capacity of providing games that meet the players' expectations. This will benefit both the players, who will have games available more tailored to their needs and wishes, as well as the developers who by providing these games could increase their revenue through increased sales.

1.4.5 Outline

In the subsequent chapters we will describe how our research is carried out and what conclusions we arrive at, hopefully reaching an answer to our research question.

In chapter two, *Method*, the choice of our research method and techniques will be discussed. We will describe, in detail, how our method is designed and what results we hope to gain from executing it. Further, the population we are directing our research at will be defined and we will describe how we intend to make our selection from it. We will also discuss potential problems that may arise due to the choice and design of our method, as well as the concepts of reliability and validity.

Chapter three, *Results*, will hold a description of how we executed our method and a detailed compilation of the results. We will also address any non-responses that emerge when compiling our data.

In chapter four, *Analysis*, the results from our executed method will be further examined. We will discuss what hypotheses can be constructed and how these hypotheses are supported by or in conflict with earlier research. In this chapter we will also mention any problems encountered while analyzing the collected data and reflect over possible unforeseen weaknesses with our method or execution. Lastly, we will try to answer our research question by drawing conclusions based on the earlier discussion.

Chapter five, *Concluding remarks*, will hold a brief section where we talk about how future work could expand on our conclusions.

A bibliography and a ludography detailing our sources will be provided in chapter six, "Sources", followed by any appendices referenced in the thesis.

2 Method

2.1 Choice of method and techniques

The formulation of our research question suggests that a suitable answer would detail the opinions among players in a descriptive manner (Ejvegård 2009, pp. 34-35). Our pilot study resulted in a battery of opinions about strategies for implementing narrative choices in computer games. We will use these opinions as a base for our current research and investigate to what extent they are shared with other players. Additional strategies were mentioned in our pilot study without any opinions about their effect on the gaming experience. We will include these strategies in our investigation, as well as relevant strategies identified through our sources. While the answer to our question would still be descriptive, the base for this description would be formed by quantifying opinions (*ibid.*, pp. 38-39).

From this we then hope to formulate one or several hypotheses of how players in general view different implementations of narrative choice in role-playing video games. Our approach would therefore be an inductive and qualitative one based on the description of qualitative research strategies given by Bryman (2001/2009, pp. 22, 33-36 & 249-250). Bryman states that it can be difficult to define what qualitative strategies involve but describes them as being inductive, meaning that theories are generated based on research, and interpretative, describing social contexts from subjective and individual points of view. As we aim to gather data based on the opinions of individuals and construct hypotheses from these data we are clearly taking a qualitative approach, according to Bryman.

However, quantification of data is a technique usually associated with quantitative research strategies. Bryman describes such strategies as distinct from qualitative ones in that they adopt a deductive approach, meaning that research is conducted as a means to verify or falsify hypotheses derived from theory (*ibid.*, pp. 20-21). Quantitative strategies are also derived from the natural sciences and imply that there exists an objective and consistent social reality (*ibid.*, pp. 33-35). As previously mentioned we are not taking this approach. Instead, we aim to describe how individuals perceive occurrences of narrative choice and generate hypotheses from these descriptions. The usage of quantification in such an approach is not uncommon according to Bryman (*ibid.*, pp. 405-406) and could be seen as using a quantitative approach to support a qualitative one. Our method therefore consists of multiple strategies but with the main strategy being qualitative. While the usage of multiple strategies is debated, mostly due to the inherent differences earlier mentioned, we determine that it is suitable when attempting to find an answer to our research question (*ibid.*, pp. 409-411).

Further, while an entirely quantitative approach could be suitable for examining opinions, it does not seem possible for several reasons. Apart from having no clear hypotheses to verify or falsify, we would not be able to define a specific frame of selection or even a clear population (*ibid.*, p. 101). It is difficult to delimit "players of role-playing video games" since there are no global or even national records over these players to make a selection from. Thus, we do not know how large our population is or how it is divided demographically. A simple random sample (*ibid.*, pp. 104-105) is therefore not possible and any quantitative conclusions would lack external validity (*ibid.*, pp. 44-45), meaning that they could not be generalizable to a larger population than the individuals within our sample.

We suspect that our targeted population, players of role-playing video games, is not bound by any geographic similarities and it would therefore be favorable to the relevance of our results not to limit our selection to players of a certain nationality. Thus we need to adopt a technique that allow us to

collect data from anywhere in the world. At the same time we strive to obtain as large a sample as possible. These two factors suggest that a survey would be most advantageous for our research. Since no statistical data for the opinions we are researching exist, making secondary analysis impossible and structured observations are more suited for studying behaviors rather than attitudes or opinions (ibid., p.173), the only other relevant technique would be structured interviews (ibid., p. 123). Interviews have some advantages over surveys such as allowing the researcher to clarify questions for respondents should any obscurities arise. (ibid., p. 147) However, we would not have the potential of reaching the same amount of players using interviews as we would have using surveys. Also, according to Ejvegård, surveys are preferable over interviews when "... ordinary people ..." ²⁸ are questioned about opinions or attitudes (Ejvegård 2009, p. 55).

²⁸ Translation from the Swedish formulation "vanligt folk". This is contrasted to interviewing experts.

2.2 Method description

To be able to formulate hypotheses relevant to our research question using our chosen method we need a body of data to quantify and analyze. As stated we will be using a survey to gather these data. This survey will be conducted over the Internet using Google Documents and will consist of 18 questions. There will be one control-question regarding the definition of role-playing video games and four demographical questions, allowing us to examine the age, nationality and gender of our respondents as well as the site of distribution where they came upon the survey. The remaining 13 will be substance-specific questions designed to provide information about the respondents' views of strategies for implementing narrative choices.

Most of the substance-specific questions will be based on concepts concerning the implementation of narrative choices in video games previously identified in our pilot study. In the case where a question does not correspond a specific concept or the concept has not been indicated in our pilot study this will be discussed along with the specific question below. The questions will be grouped into five sections: *General questions*, *Consequences*, *Options*, *Replay value* and *Possible implementations*. The sections are to be provided as a help both to us and to the respondents to navigate the survey seeing as it will be presented as one single scrollable page. We will choose this layout over a multi-page one to allow the respondents to view the entire scope of the survey at once. Since our survey will consist of only 18 questions a one-page layout will still be of adequate size. This will hopefully minimize non-response that could occur with a multi-page layout: a potential respondent faced with a multi-paged survey could tire halfway through and not complete his or her reply. While Bryman (2001/2009, p. 147) points out that the order that questions are answered in cannot be guaranteed if respondents are allowed to see all the questions at once, we will not define a desired order in which the questions should be answered.

2.2.1 Substance-specific questions

Since we want to quantify the answers, each substance-specific question will be provided with an odd number of mutually exclusive options. This facilitates for possible numerical coding during our analysis. All substance-specific questions will have an additional option resembling "No opinion", should the respondent wish to or have trouble with answering a specific question, as recommended by Ejvegård (2009, pp. 59-60). A commentary field will also be provided to these questions, filling two purposes. Firstly, comments may reveal possible misinterpretations or reservations rendering the specific answer unusable in our analyses. Secondly, they may serve as a relevant source for useful definitions or new angles of approach when discussing the results. These considerations are also supported by Ejvegård (ibid., p. 58).

Here follows a description of each substance-specific question and a description of the strategy of implementation it concerns. The questions can all be viewed in full together with explanatory texts and available options in appendix A.

Consequences

- *How many of the role-playing video games that you have played do you feel contain narrative choices that have long-lasting impact on the story?*

Indicates the perceived supply of *meaningful narrative choices*. We define a meaningful narrative choice as having a real effect on the narrative of the game, in opposed to merely

providing the illusion of effect such as through foldback schemes or mere graphical or statistical feedback. Effect by narrative choices on the story in games was brought up many times in our pilot study as having an impact on the gaming experience.

- *In general, do you appreciate role-playing video games with narrative choices that have long-lasting impact on the story?*

Indicates the appreciation of meaningful narrative choices in role-playing video games.

- *Do you appreciate so called “moral meters” (in any variation)?*

Indicates the appreciation of moral meters as a strategy for implementing consequences of narrative choices.

- *Do you appreciate the feature that your character's appearance changes as an effect of your narrative choices?*

Indicates the appreciation of changing character appearance as a strategy for implementing consequences of narrative choices. Both this strategy and that of moral meters asked about in the previous question were explicitly discussed in our pilot study as specific strategies used in games, though no opinions were expressed on how these affect the gaming experience. We include these questions to examine the opinions about these strategies.

Options

- *In general, do you feel that you are faced with enough narrative choices in role-playing video games?*

Indicates the satisfaction with the amount of narrative choices given in role-playing video games. In our pilot study we asked if the respondents felt that more or less games containing narrative choices should be developed. We now rephrase this question in order to have the respondents focus on how narrative choices are actually implemented in role-playing video games. Whether players want more or less games containing narrative choices would not tell us much about the opinions of the actual implementation of said choices. The perceived frequency of such choices within a game is more interesting for our present research question. Although this concept was not directly discussed in our pilot study we determine that it could hold information of value to us in our research and therefore worth posing a question about.

- *Are you satisfied with the amount of realistic options given during narrative choices?*

Indicates the satisfaction with the amount of *contextually realistic options* provided in narrative choices. We define a contextually realistic option as an option realistic to the character in the setting and the situation of the game. This is the only concept derived directly from theory, more precisely the thoughts on relevance of options by Crawford discussed in section 1.2.2. We reason that this concept could affect the opinions about the implementation of narrative choices among players and therefore it seems logical to include a question about it in our survey.

- *In general, do you feel that the options during narrative choices in role-playing video games are ethically complex?*

Indicates the perceived supply of *ethically complex narrative choices*. We define an ethically complex choice as providing options that do not represent moral extremes such as “good” or “evil”. Instead, the options provided in an ethically complex choice are hard to morally define

and represents moral and ethical trade-offs. In our pilot study, narrative choices with options representing moral extremes were discussed as having a negative effect on the gaming experience. We are therefore interested in what extent players find the narrative choices in role-playing video games to be ethically complex.

- *Do you appreciate when the options given during narrative choices are ethically complex?*
Indicates the appreciation for ethically complex narrative choices in role-playing video games.

Replay Value

- *How many of the role-playing video games that you have completed have you replayed?*
Indicates the tendency of replaying role-playing video games. We define completion of a game as having reached the end of the main storyline. This was also communicated to the respondents in an explanatory text next to the question in the survey. Although our pilot study hinted that the tendency to replay games depends on player motivations, the act of replaying a game could reveal lack of effect on the story from narrative choices or foldback schemes. According to Crawford this can have a negative effect on the players, as mentioned in section 1.2.2. It is therefore interesting to examine in what extent role-playing video games are being replayed. A high tendency to replay could increase the importance of implementing meaningful narrative choices, provided players appreciate them. A low tendency, on the other hand, could decrease their importance.
- *How do narrative choices that have long-lasting impact on the story influence your willingness to replay a role-playing video games?*
Indicates the effect meaningful narrative choices have on the replay tendency. Provided that developers of role-playing video games wish to maintain a high replay tendency for their games, the influence that meaningful narrative choices have on this tendency could affect the importance of implementing said choices.

Possible implementations

- *Would you appreciate if a game saved automatically BEFORE each narrative choice, so that you could easily go back and change your decision?*
Indicates potential appreciation of saving the game automatically before narrative choices as a strategy for implementation. This, along with the two following strategies, was specifically mentioned by respondents to our pilot study as suggestions for improving the implementation of narrative choices. We include them here to examine if players would appreciate usage of them in role-playing video games.
- *Would you appreciate if a game saved automatically AFTER each narrative choice, removing your previously saved game and preventing you from going back and changing your decision?*
Indicates potential appreciation of saving the game automatically after narrative choices as a strategy for implementation.

- *Would you appreciate if you only had a certain amount of time to pick your option during a narrative choice?*

Indicates potential appreciation of applying time limits to narrative choices as a strategy for implementation.

2.2.2 Demographical questions

The reason to include the demographical questions is primarily to facilitate for possible secondary analysis of our data. Covariances between demographics and substance-specific data could very well arise, although we do not intend to focus on such analyses. By still collecting demographic data, however, we make it possible to investigate such possible covariances in future research based on our results. It could also be of interest to compare the demographics of our selection to that of video game players in general, or players of role-playing video games in particular, should such statistics become available.

The data collected will be age, gender, nationality and site of distribution. Age and nationality are typed into free-text boxes while gender and site of distribution will be selected from pre-determined options. The reason for this variation in response procedure is purely technical. To avoid loss of data we want the respondents to state their exact age. Some sort of drop-down menu would be best suited for this, however Google Documents do not provide such a feature when composing surveys. The only other option would be mutually exclusive buttons, one for each exact age, placed vertically which would result in a very long web page that we suspect would both give an unprofessional impression and be tedious to scroll past. For the same reasons, listing every country on Earth would not be suitable. Instead we chose to let the respondents type in their age and nationality freely. Gender does not imply the same problems and as such we are able to pose this question with mutually exclusive buttons for each option. Since our main objective is not demographic analysis and we do not wish non-responses due to mandatory demographic data, age and nationality will both be optional to provide and the question regarding gender provides a “Prefer not to say” option. The question regarding how the respondents came upon the survey will not be optional but will provide an “Other” option combined with a text-box should any respondent come across the survey in some other way than through our chosen sites of distribution. The sites will be listed in section 2.3, *Selection*.

2.2.3 Control-question

In our control-question we will ask the respondents to give examples of role-playing video games they have played. The examples of games will be used to identify non-response due to misinterpretations of what we mean by the term role-playing video games. Our definition of the term is based on the two characteristics that Rollings and Adams (2003, p. 347) claim are present in almost all role-playing video games: “Configurable player-characters that improve with experience” and “Strong storylines”. Today, however, games of many different genres incorporate these characteristics while still not being marketed as role-playing video games. Two examples are *Killzone 3* (Guerilla Games 2011) and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Infinity Ward 2009). They both include improvement for the player-controlled character through experience in the multi-player modes of the games while the single-player modes lack this functionality. Single-player instead holds strong storylines which is lacking in multi-player. Due to this we find that our definition is in need of some expansion. For a game to be a role-playing video game we therefore state that it has to incorporate the two characteristics identified by Rollings and Adams together in the largest part of the game.

In the survey, we choose to define role-playing video games as “... those for gaming consoles and computers.” By not providing the more detailed definition for the term we leave it up to the respondents to specify what games they find lying within its limits. Although this opens up for the possibility of many non-responses, should our own definition differ greatly from that of our selection, we argue that the term is so widely spread and used both by industry and players that this should not be the case. The advantage of not providing a detailed definition is that it allows the respondents to consider the questions more freely without having an external definition guiding their answers. We also want to keep the descriptions and definition text areas to a minimum in order to try to get more respondents and not tire them out from the start, which could lead to a higher number of non-responses between the questions.

2.3 Selection

We want to target people who play role-playing video games. As there is no current mapping of gamers and specific groups with types of gamers we made our selection from online communities that are associated with video games. The chosen locations for our surveys are eight different communities; five connected to video games in general and three to companies that are established as developers that have previously created role-playing games and plan to release more of them in the future.

Following is a list of these locations:

- *FZ forum*²⁹, Swedish online gaming forum for general gaming.
- *Loading forum*³⁰, online forum for general gaming, run by *Reset Media* that also publishes the Swedish monthly gaming magazine *Level*.
- *GameInformer forum*³¹, online forum connected the American monthly gaming magazine *GameInformer*.
- *Gamespot forum*³², online forum for the American online gaming community *Gamespot*.
- *The Escapist forum*³³, online forum connected to the online gaming magazine *The Escapist*.
- *Bethesda official forum*³⁴. Bethesda is a developer of role-playing video games. They are known for their *Elder Scrolls* and *Fallout* series.
- *Bioware official forum*³⁵. Bioware is a developer of role-playing video games. They are currently known for their *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* series.
- *Eidos official forum*³⁶. Eidos is a developer and publisher of games in several different genres, one of which is role-playing games. They are known for their *Deus Ex* series.

Our survey will be open to anyone who has access to these online forums and is willing to respond. The reason for us using an open survey is also related to us not finding a mapping of gamers that play role-playing video games. However, our survey specifically target players of role-playing video games.

²⁹ <http://www.fz.se/forum/> [2011-05-04]

³⁰ <http://loading.se/forum.php> [2011-05-04]

³¹ <http://www.gameinformer.com/forums/default.aspx> [2011-05-04]

³² <http://www.gamespot.com/forums/> [2011-05-04]

³³ <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/forums/> [2011-05-04]

³⁴ <http://forums.bethsoft.com/> [2011-05-04]

³⁵ <http://social.bioware.com/forum/1/index> [2011-05-04]

³⁶ <http://forums.eidosgames.com/> [2011-05-04]

2.4 Reliability and validity

We will evaluate our method with the concepts of reliability and validity assimilated for qualitative studies (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982 see Bryman, 2001/2009, pp. 257-258).

External reliability, meaning the possibility to replicate a study, should be strong due to the extensive descriptions of our method and techniques. Seeing as we are two researchers the internal reliability is also of interest, being defined as an agreement of interpretation among researchers. Having pre-defined the purpose of each question in the survey we have agreed on the interpretation of the results prior to the execution of our method. This facilitates for initial internal reliability and by constantly reviewing and discussing each other's interpretations of the data we are strengthening it further.

Internal validity, meaning that the observations we make through our method correspond to the hypotheses we construct, should be strong. Our selection is not a specific social group and we cannot attain the long-lasting participation that usually strengthens internal validity in qualitative studies, but the fact that we are both active players of role-playing video games should be sufficient for us to properly interpret our observations.

External validity, how the results of our research can be generalized to a larger population than our selection, is questionable. We cannot guarantee that the selection we make is actually representative for anything else than itself. However, our aim is not to provide generalizable results but hypotheses that can later be tried against a more representative selection.

2.5 Possible problems

One of the problems of having an open survey is the possibility of no, or a low amount, of respondents, or that the ones who respond are not within our target population. There is also the possibility that the members of the community will not be able to gain access to the survey if the forum post would be removed. This could happen if the moderators of the community forum would deem the sharing of the survey as a breach against their rules.

We do not share our definition of the role-playing genre but instead let the respondents choose which games they see as fitting this game genre. The distinction between role-playing games and games with role-playing game elements might not be obvious. This could lead to non-responses, as we are looking for respondents that have experience playing role-playing video games and not video games with role-playing game elements. Further, should our definition of role-playing video games differ from that of our selection, the non-response could be extensive.

2.6 Expected results

What results do we expect to reach with our chosen method and how will these results help to answer our research question? Firstly, we want to gain information about what opinions a larger selection of players has towards the concepts and strategies for implementation of narrative choice that we have identified. By gaining this information we should then be able to construct one or several hypotheses that can be verified or falsified in future research. We also think that the data gathered with our method can be used by others to produce additional hypotheses through secondary analysis.

By taking a mainly qualitative approach we to some degree claim that there is no such thing as complete objectivity while studying social realities. We, as researchers, can therefore not be fully objective and it would therefore be suitable to mention what we at least see as possible outcomes from our method. Should then the actual results coincide with these predictions, future research aimed at verifying or falsifying our hypotheses could show if we have constructed them without influence from our own subjective opinions.

We speculate that the results from our method will show that the opinions expressed in our pilot study are shared with a larger selection of players. Both meaningful narrative choices and ethically complex ones should be appreciated and perceived as scarce in role-playing video games. We suspect that the appreciation of both moral meters and changes to the physical appearance of player-characters is low and that the amount of narrative choices as well as the contextually realistic options provided in these choices is less than satisfying. Further, we think that players rarely replay role-playing video games that they have completed but that meaningful narrative choices increase the tendency to do so. As for the suggestions of implementation, players would probably not appreciate that the game is saved automatically before or after choices. Time limits in narrative choices should not be a strategy of implementation that appeals to many players either.

3 Results

The survey was posted to our eight chosen locations on March 10th 2011 and was open until March 31st 2011. It attracted a total of 336 respondents.

3.1 Non-response

The survey was posted at Gamespot, though only a short while afterwards it was removed by the moderators because of a breach against their rules. We were not able to post it there again and we got no respondents from that specific community.

We reviewed the control-question to determine if the respondents' definition of role-playing video games corresponded to the one presented and discussed in section 2.2.3. We decided that all games given as examples in the control-question had to fall within our definition for the reply to be valid. If this was not the case, it could not be excluded that the respondent's definition of role-playing video games was different from ours. We also decided that at least two specific games or game series had to be mentioned to assure that the respondent shared our definition. In the cases where games unknown to us were given as examples we examined online gameplay videos and official marketing web pages for the games and tried to discern whether they fell within our definition. Our education in game development and experience in playing role-playing video games were also useful in these cases.

24 non-responses were identified using this procedure, leaving 312 valid responses. In 19 cases the respondent gave non-role-playing video games as examples of role-playing video games they had played. Two respondents only gave examples of video game developers and although these had developed many role-playing video games they had also made several non-role-playing video games. One respondent had written the abbreviations *WRPG* and *JRPG*, standing for western role-playing games and Japanese role-playing games, but did not give any specific examples of games in these genres. One respondent listed several pen-and-paper role-playing games but no role-playing video games and one gave no reply at all. The respondent not replying also replied "No opinion" or its equivalent for every question, being the only respondent doing so.

A few respondents who did seem to share our definition of role-playing video games had used non-role-playing video games as examples when discussing various concepts in their comments. We determined, however, that these examples were given in lack of role-playing video games containing the concepts and that their definition still corresponded to ours.

3.2 Compilation

The responses to each question except for the control-question will here be presented. For each question a frequency table (Bryman, 2001/2009, pp. 230-231) will be provided detailing the number of respondents that chose each option along with the percentage they constitute out of the total number of respondents. For the sake of clarity, all percentages will be rounded to one decimal. In the case where the sum of the rounded percentages does not equal 100, we will look at additional decimals and adjust the percentage that lies closest to the rounding limit. While this might not be as accurate as the usage of more decimals, we aim at clarity and will not draw conclusions based on narrow majorities.

A bar chart will also be provided for each question as a graphical representation of the division of respondents among the available options. Bryman (ibid., p. 231) states that these are well suited for ordinal variables³⁷ as the ones presented here. The demographic question regarding age of the respondents actually constitutes a ratio variable³⁸ which, according to Bryman (ibid., p. 232), is best presented using a histogram. Unfortunately, the statistical features of Google Documents does not include this type of chart and seeing as only one question is affected we will instead use a bar chart for this question as well.

Any internal non-responses due to misinterpretations are noted at the specific question. All analysis and discussion regarding the results are left to the next chapter.

³⁷ *A variable that holds values that can be sorted but that do not have a fixed range between each other. (Bryman, 2001/2009, p. 229)*

³⁸ *A variable that holds values that can be sorted and have a fixed range between each other. (Bryman, 2001/2009, p. 229)*

3.2.1 Demographical questions

Age

Since this question was answered by the respondent optionally typing in his, or her, age in a text box a portion of the respondents gave no reply. Also, all entries not representing a specific age in numbers or in text are regarded as no reply. To be able to better present the results the replies have been sorted into age groups. The ranges of these groups are based on the distribution of the replies.

<u>Age group</u>	<u>Number of respondents</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
< 16	19	6.1
16 - 25	187	59.9
26 - 35	61	19.6
36 - 45	11	3.5
> 45	3	1
No reply	31	9.9
Total	312	100

The average age of the respondents stating their age was 23 while the median age was 21. As can be seen in figure 3-1, the most prominent age group is 16 to 25 years. It can therefore be of interest to take a look at the internal distribution of ages within this group. This distribution can be viewed in figure 3-2.

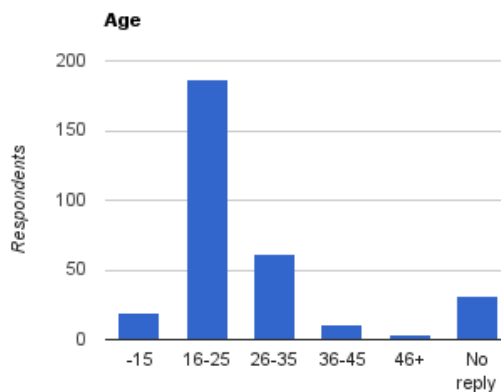


Figure 3-1: Age

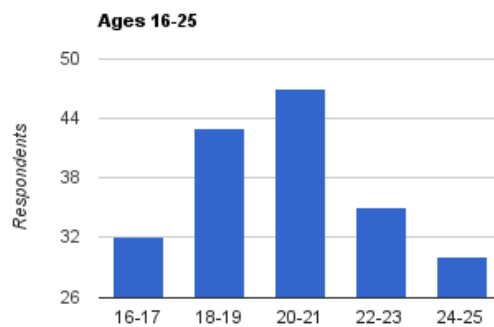


Figure 3-2: Ages 16-25

Gender

Although this question was mandatory it did provide a “Prefer not to say” option, chosen by a few respondents. As figure 3-3 shows, a large majority of the respondents were male.

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Male	269	86.2
Female	38	12.2
Prefer not to say	5	1.6
Total	312	100

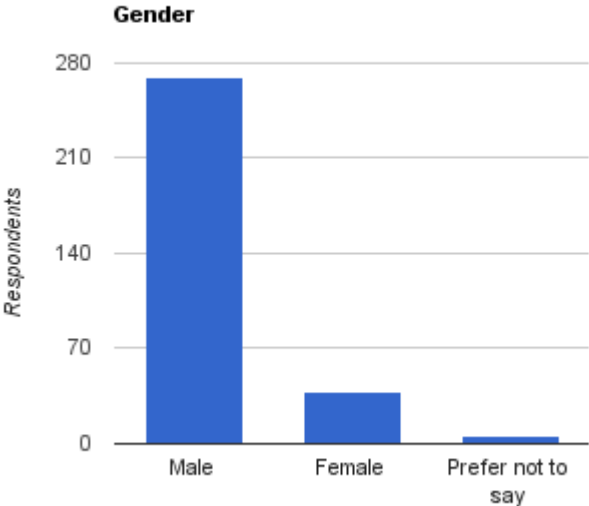


Figure 3-3: Gender

Nationality

A diverse range of nationalities were represented among the respondents. For clarity all nationalities with less than ten respondents have been grouped in the category “Other”³⁹. The largest portion of the respondents came from the U.S.A., followed by an equal share from Sweden and respondents that did not specify a country. The bar chart for this question can be seen in figure 3-4.

<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Canada	15	4.8
Netherlands	11	3.6
Sweden	54	17.3
UK	45	14.4
USA	90	28.8
No reply	54	17.3
Other	43	13.8
Total	312	100

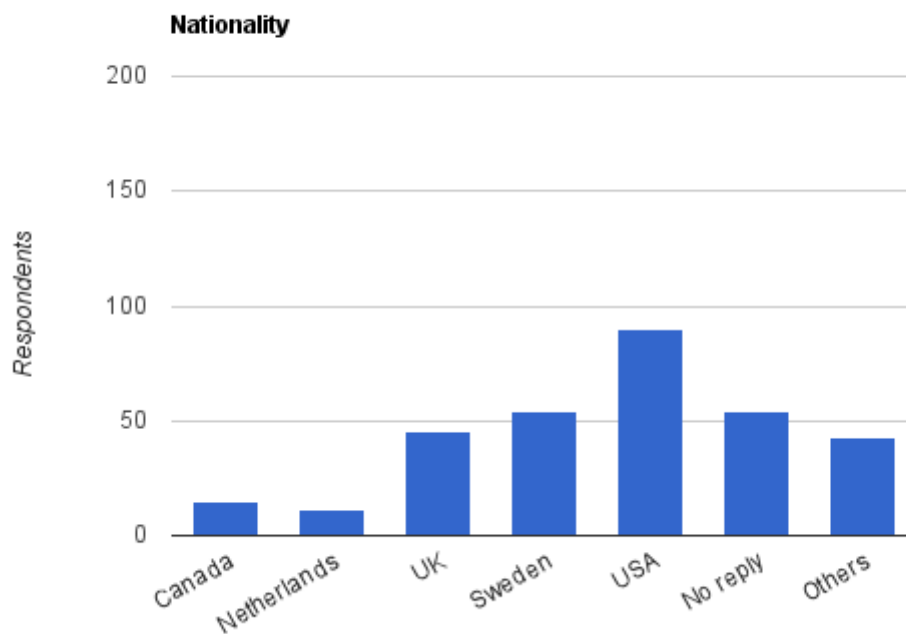


Figure 3-4: Nationality

³⁹ These are Australia, Austria, Belgium, China, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Indonesia, Ireland, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Slovenia and Switzerland.

Distribution site

Since the survey was removed from GameSpot before it had the chance to generate any replies this distribution site is not included in the statistics. Among the remaining sites The Escapist generated the largest number of respondents followed by the official forum of Bethesda as figure 3-5 shows.

<i>Distribution site</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
GameInformer	8	2.6
FZ	28	9
Loading	27	8.7
The Escapist	138	44.2
Bethesda official forum	74	23.7
Bioware official forum	30	9.6
Eidos official forum	5	1.6
Other	2	0.6
Total	312	100

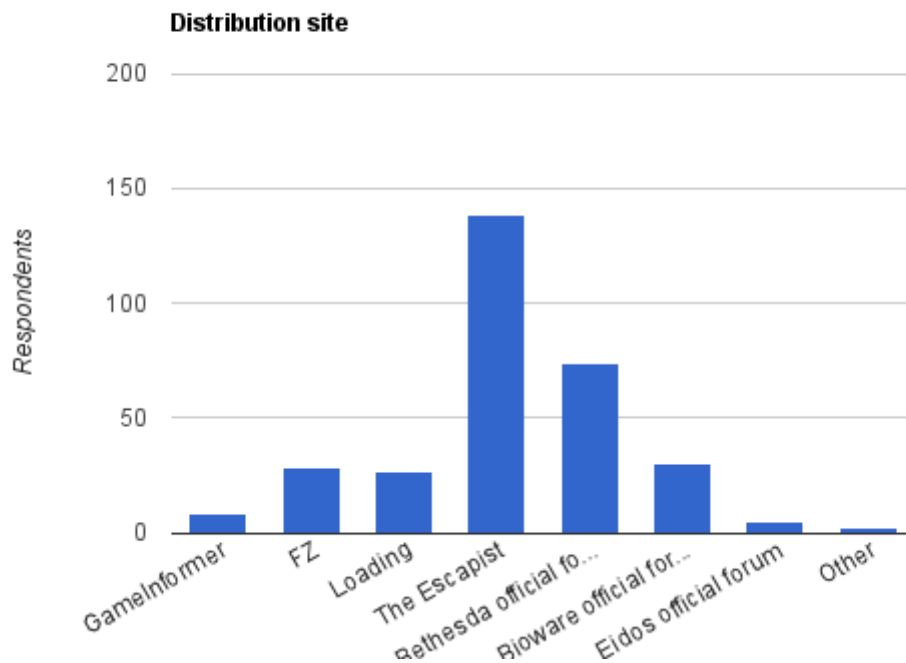


Figure 3-5: Distribution site

3.2.2 Substance-specific questions

Perceived supply of meaningful narrative choices

The question regarding the perceived supply of choices with long-lasting impact on the story shows that 46.2% of the respondents thought that few role-playing video games contained such choices, followed by 31.1% who found them in some of the games. For a graphical representation, see figure 3-6.

<i>Portion of games</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Very few or no games	34	10.9
Few games	144	46.2
Some games	97	31.1
Many games	22	7
Most or all games	13	4.2
No opinion	2	0.6
Total	312	100

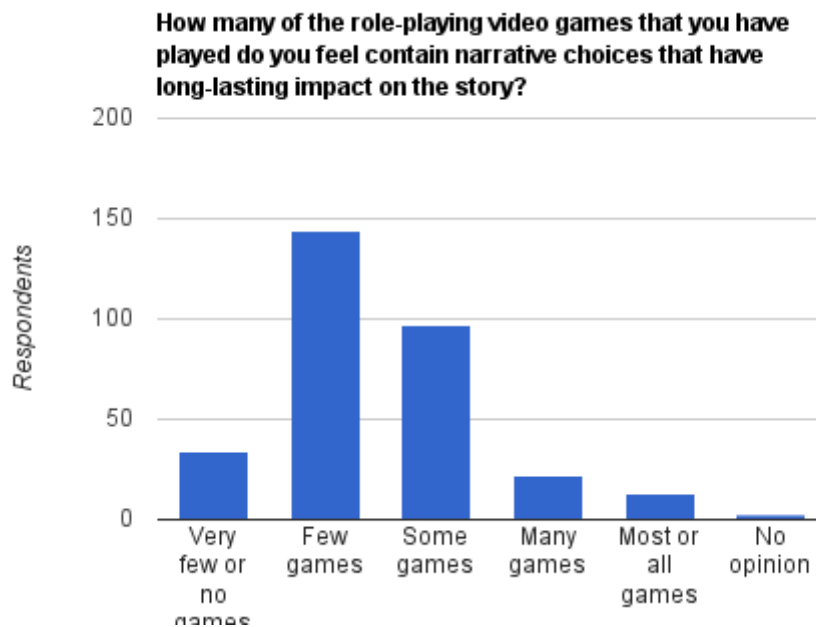


Figure 3-6: Perceived supply of meaningful narrative choices

Appreciation of meaningful narrative choices

A majority of the respondents, 84.9%, claimed that they often or always appreciate narrative choices with long-lasting impact on the story in role-playing video games. The bar chart for this question can be seen in figure 3-7.

<i>Appreciation</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Never	2	0.6
Rarely	4	1.3
Sometimes	37	11.9
Often	100	32
Always	165	52.9
No opinion	4	1.3
Total	312	100

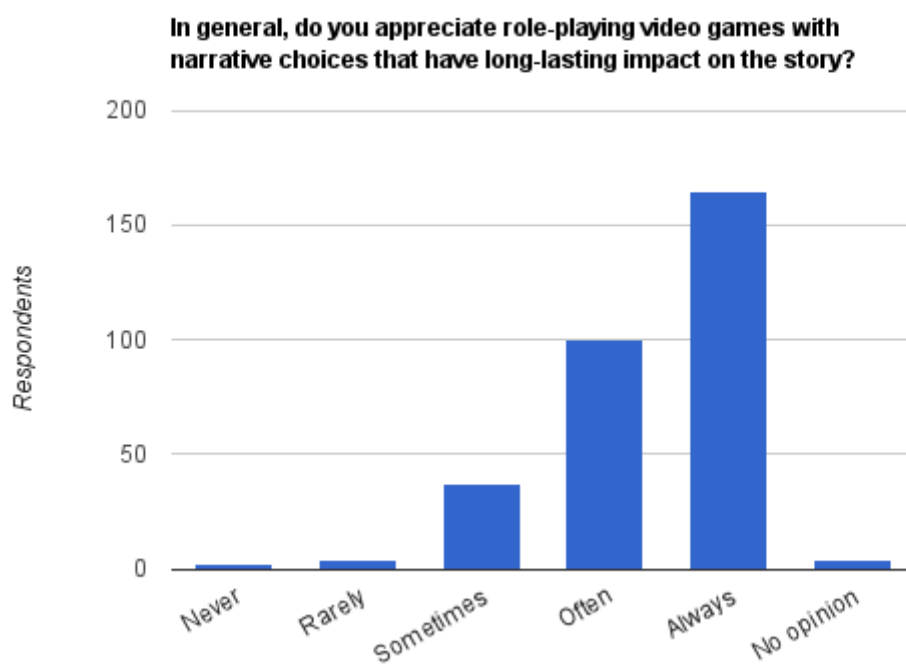


Figure 3-7: Appreciation of meaningful narrative choices

Appreciation of moral meters

Judging by the somewhat evenly distributed replies to this question, the appreciation of moral meters as a strategy for implementing consequences of narrative choices varied among the respondents. As figure 3-8 shows the option chosen by the largest part of the respondents was “Sometimes”. 36.5% rarely or never appreciate moral meters while 25.3% often or always appreciate them.

<i>Appreciation</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Never	40	12.8
Rarely	74	23.7
Sometimes	109	35
Often	48	15.4
Always	31	9.9
No opinion	10	3.2
Total	312	100

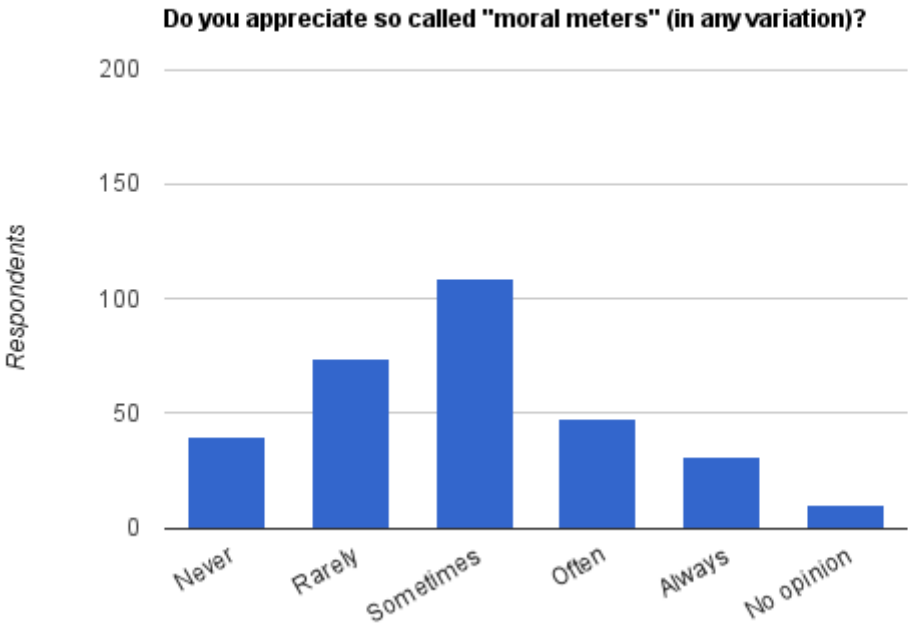


Figure 3-8: Appreciation of moral meters

Appreciation of changing character appearance

The opinion of changing character appearance as a strategy for implementing consequences of narrative choices was somewhat clearer than that towards moral meters. While the largest single part of the respondents gave “Sometimes” as their reply, the options “Never” and “Rarely” were chosen by 48.2% in contrast to the 17% that chose “Often” or “Always”. Figure 3-9 gives a graphical representation of these results.

<i>Appreciation</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Never	60	19.2
Rarely	91	29.2
Sometimes	99	31.7
Often	34	10.9
Always	19	6.1
No opinion	9	2.9
Total	312	100

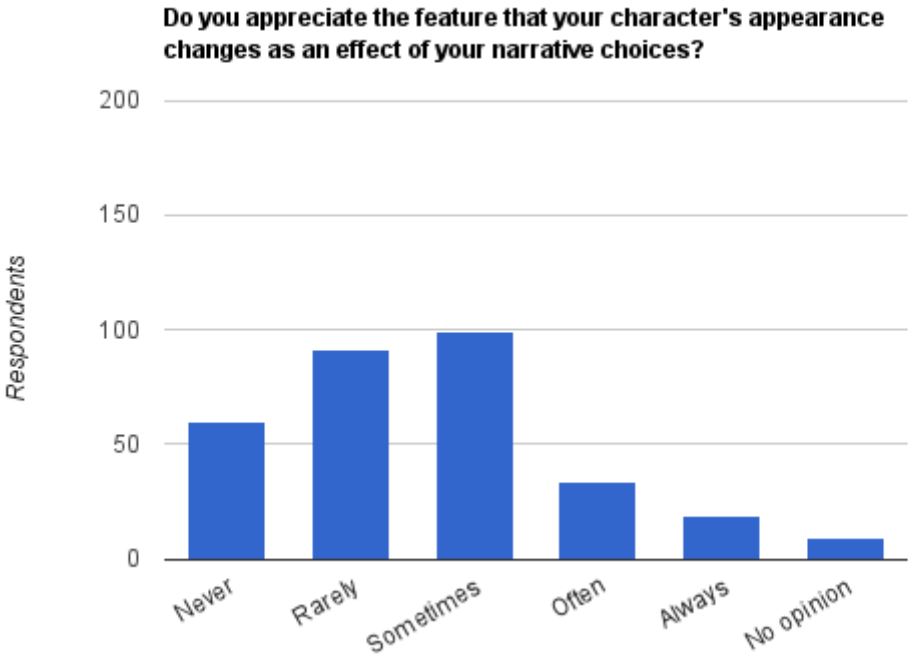


Figure 3-9: Appreciation of changing character appearance

Satisfaction with amount of narrative choices

49% of the respondents answered that they thought the amount of narrative choices in role-playing video games was “Less than enough”, making it the most popular option. Together with the respondents that chose “Far too few” they constitute 67.9% that were unsatisfied due to lack of narrative choices. The respondents unsatisfied due to too many narrative choices, being the ones that chose “More than enough” or “Way too many”, constitute 5.1%. The respondents who were satisfied with the amount of narrative choices constitute 25.7%. The bar chart can be seen in figure 3-10.

<i>Amount of choices</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Far too few	59	18.9
Less than enough	153	49
Enough	80	25.7
More than enough	15	4.8
Way too many	1	0.3
No opinion	4	1.3
Total	312	100

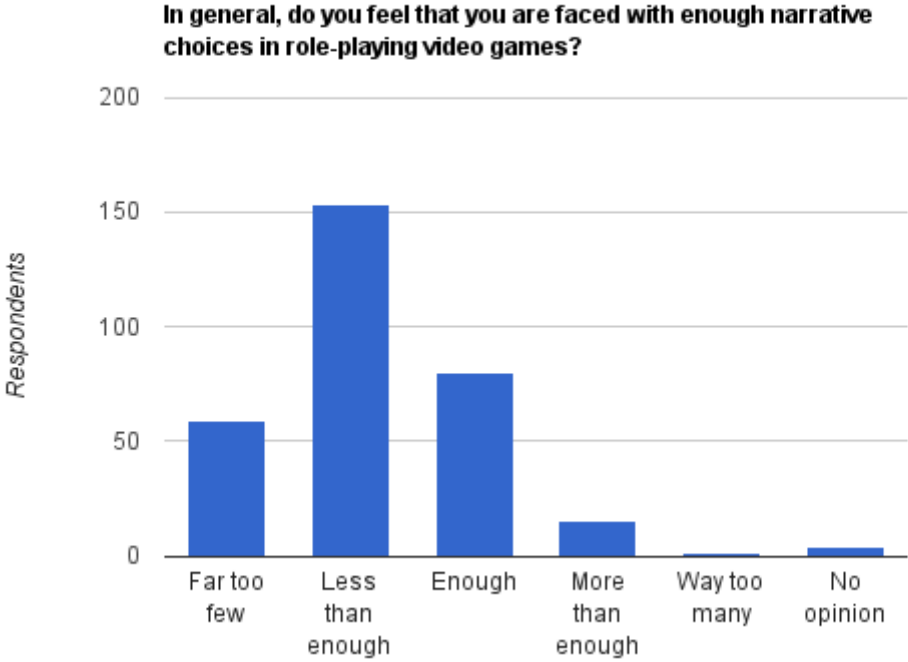


Figure 3-10: Satisfaction with amount of narrative choices

Satisfaction with the amount of contextually realistic options

No clear trend can be discerned from the replies to this question. The largest portion of the respondents, 40.7%, seem to be satisfied with the amount of contextually realistic options given in narrative choices, having chosen “Yes, quite satisfied” or “Yes, very satisfied”. However, the respondents that gave the answer “No, quite unsatisfied” or “No, very unsatisfied” constitute a substantial percentage of the total amount of respondents, as do the ones that chose “Neither yes nor no”, as can be seen in figure 3-11.

<i>Satisfaction</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
No, very unsatisfied	15	4.8
No, quite unsatisfied	82	26.3
Neither yes nor no	77	24.7
Yes, quite satisfied	116	37.2
Yes, very satisfied	11	3.5
No opinion	11	3.5
Total	312	100

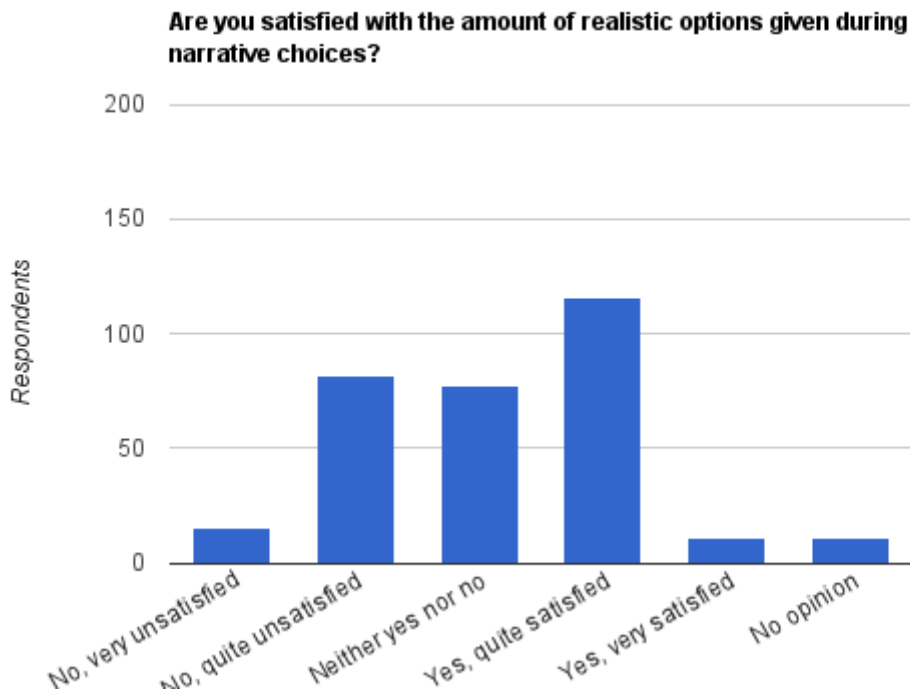


Figure 3-11: Satisfaction with the amount of contextually realistic options

Perceived supply of ethically complex narrative choices

The formulation of this question might have been misleading for measuring the perceived amount of ethically complex choices, seeing as it focuses on the options given and not the actual choice. This is expanded upon in section 4.1, *Encountered problems*.

“No, rarely” and “Sometimes” were the two most popular options here. Notable is that the respondents that chose “No, rarely” or “No, never” make up 52.9% while the ones that chose “Yes, often” or “Yes, always” make up only 7.1%. See figure 3-12 for a visual representation.

<i>Are options ethically complex?</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
No, never	13	4.2
No, rarely	152	48.7
Sometimes	123	39.4
Yes, often	19	6.1
Yes, always	3	1
No opinion	2	0.6
Total	312	100

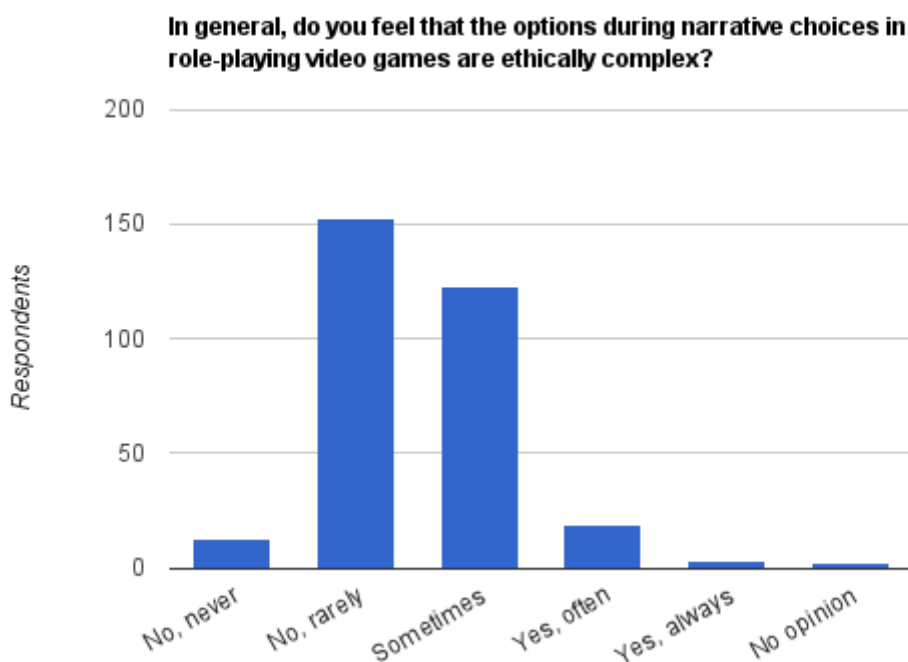


Figure 3-12: Perceived supply of ethically complex narrative choices

Appreciation of ethically complex narrative choices

As visualized in figure 3-13, there was a clear appreciation for ethically complex choices among the respondents. 56.1% answered “Always” and together with the respondents answering “Often” these make up 83.3% of the total amount of respondents. This can be contrasted to the 3.2% that chose “Rarely” or “Never”.

However, this question has the same potential problem regarding its formulation as the previous one, focusing on options rather than the actual choices. As previously mentioned, this will be further discussed in section 4.1.

<i>Appreciation</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Never	2	0.6
Rarely	8	2.6
Sometimes	35	11.2
Often	85	27.2
Always	175	56.1
No opinion	7	2.3
Total	312	100

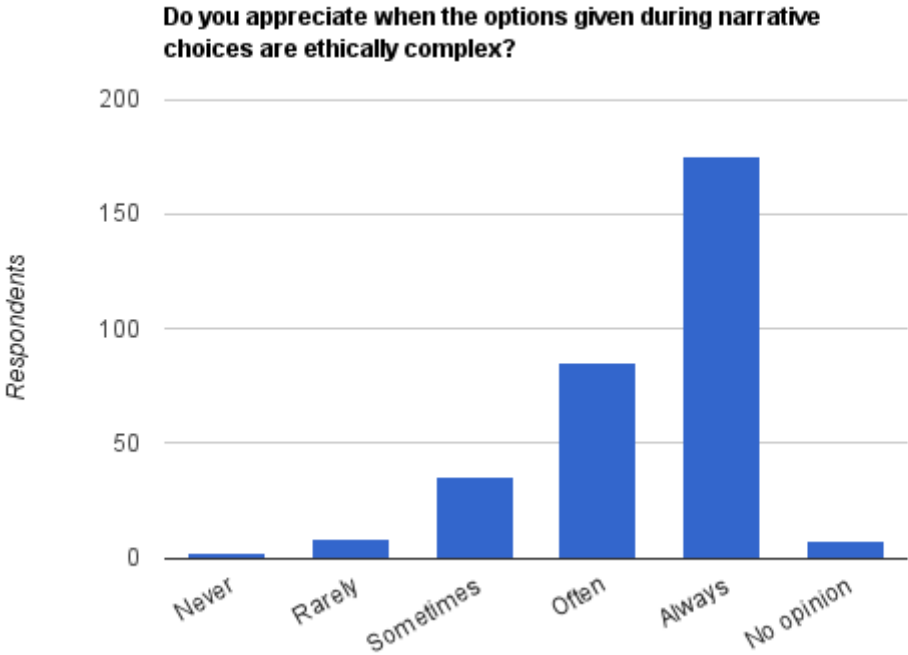


Figure 3-13: Appreciation of ethically complex narrative choices

Replay frequency

Two cases of internal non-response were found among the replies to this question. Both respondents stated that they replayed “Many” role-playing video games, while in their comments explaining how they seldom complete the main storylines but still restart the games with new characters. If this is to be considered replaying it could affect the validity of the results of this question. This is further discussed in section 4.1.

56.8% of the respondents replay “Many” or “Almost all or all” of the role-playing video games that they complete, although the division of respondents among the options were somewhat even. See figure 3-14 for a graphical representation of the results.

<i>Replayed games</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Almost none or none	19	6.1
Few	63	20.3
Some	52	16.8
Many	94	30.3
Almost all or all	82	26.5
Do not know	0	0
Total	310	100

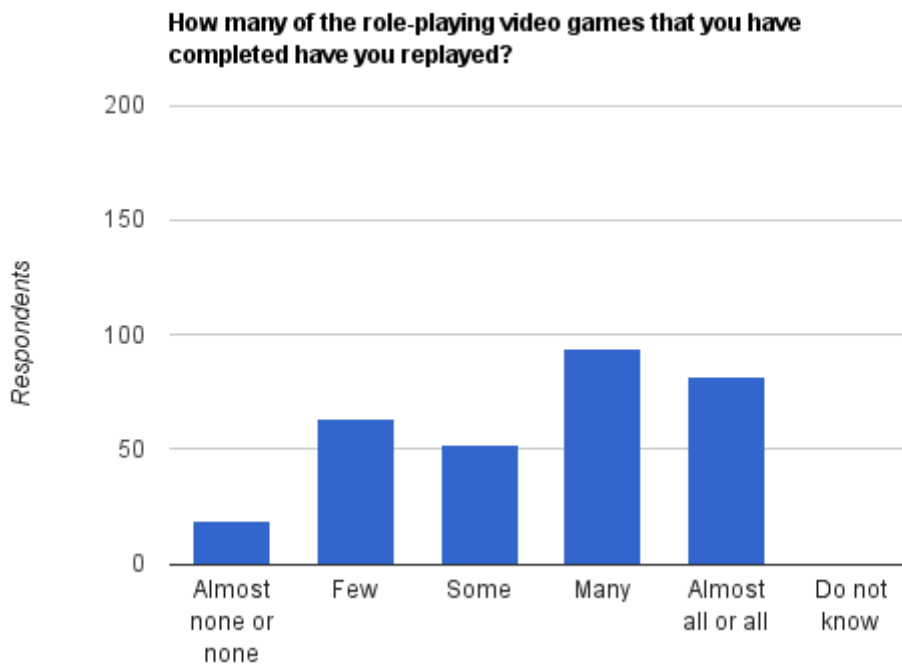


Figure 3-14: Replay frequency

Effect of meaningful narrative choices on tendency of replay

A large majority of the respondents, 81.7%, stated that meaningful narrative choices makes them “More willing” or “Much more willing” to replay a role-playing video game. Only 2% replied that they are “Less willing” or “Much less willing” to replay games as a consequence of such choices. The bar chart for this question can be seen in figure 3-15.

<i>Effect on willingness</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Much less willing	3	1
Less willing	3	1
No influence	42	13.4
More willing	104	33.3
Much more willing	151	48.4
Do not know	9	2.9
Total	312	100

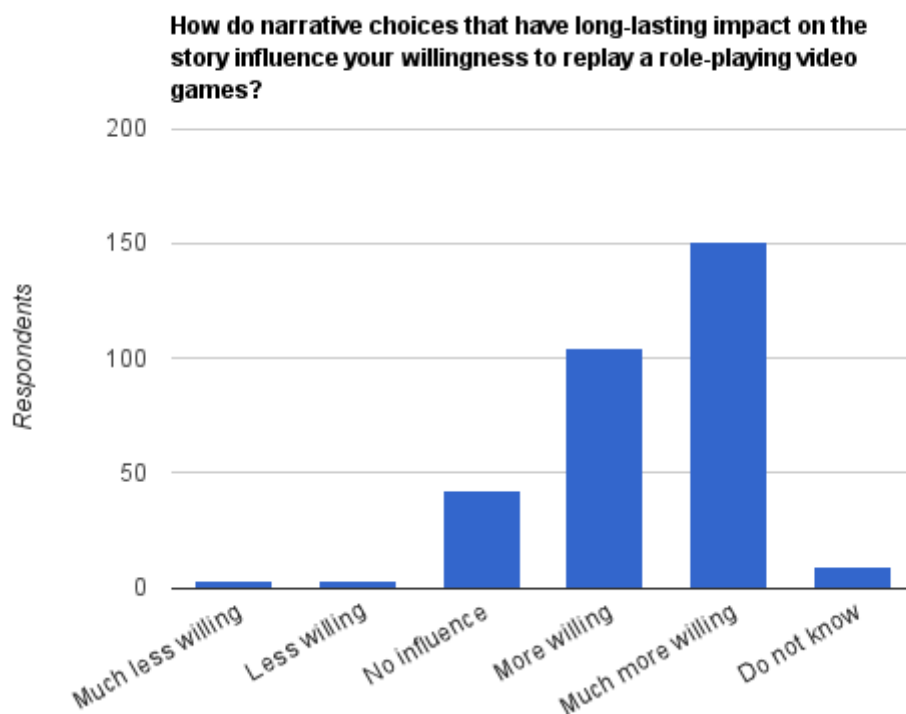


Figure 3-15: Effect of meaningful narrative choices on tendency of replay

Potential appreciation of automatic saves before narrative choices

Notable here is that a relatively large portion of the respondents, 21.5%, chose to reply “No opinion”, in comparison to earlier questions. The most popular option was “No”, although only by a slight margin as can be seen in figure 3-16.

<i>Potential appreciation</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Yes	111	35.6
No	134	42.9
No opinion	67	21.5
Total	312	100

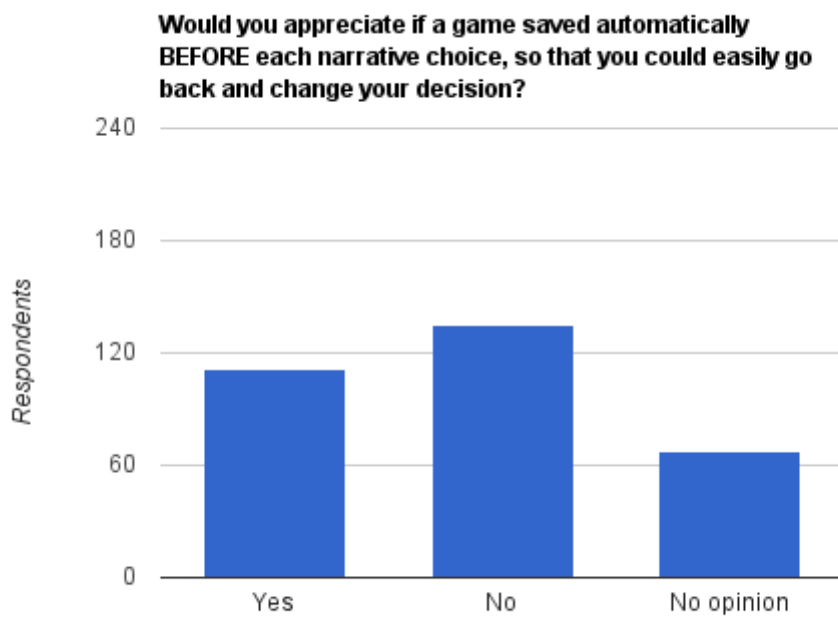


Figure 3-16: Potential appreciation of automatic save before narrative choices

Potential appreciation of automatic saves after narrative choices

By looking at figure 3-17 it is obvious that a clear majority stated that they would not appreciate that the game was saved automatically after narrative choices. In addition, the number of respondents that chose “No opinion” constitutes 15.4% of the total amount of respondents. Just as in the previous question, this is a relatively large portion compared to earlier substance-specific questions.

<i>Potential appreciation</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Yes	53	17
No	211	67.6
No opinion	48	15.4
Total	312	100

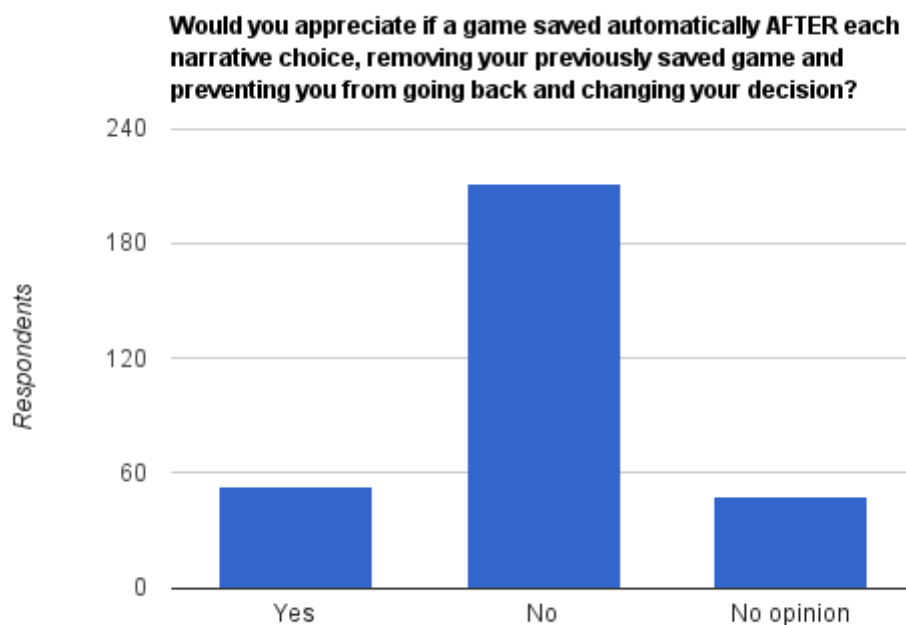


Figure 3-17: Potential appreciation of automatic save after narrative choices

Potential appreciation of time limits during narrative choices

As in the case of the two previous questions the amount of respondents answering “No opinion” was considerably larger than for earlier substance-specific questions. A slight majority stated that they would not appreciate the application of time limits on narrative choices while 25.9% stated that they would. See figure 3-18 for the bar chart visualizing these results.

<i>Potential appreciation</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Yes	81	25.9
No	174	55.8
No opinion	57	18.3
Total	312	100

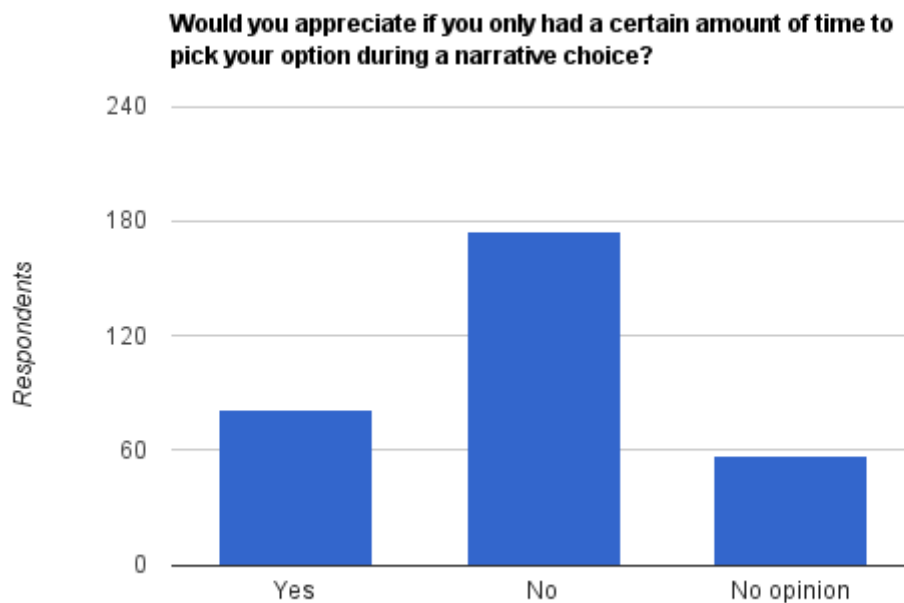


Figure 3-18: Potential appreciation of time limits during narrative choices

4 Analysis

4.1 Encountered problems

The term role-playing video games was kept largely undefined in our survey. What we noticed from the answers was that some respondents classified games that focused on the storyline or games with role-playing game elements, such as item customization, as part of the role-playing game genre. As we wanted to look at role-playing video games and not video games with role-playing elements it led to several non-responses. However, having 24 non-responses out of 336 replies constitutes less than 8%. We can therefore conclude that our definition of role-playing video games is shared with the majority of our selection.

We did not specifically ask about the predictability of the outcome of options available in narrative choices. The predictability of options was something seen as negative by respondents in our pilot study, but our current results do now show if that is an opinion shared by a larger group of players.

Several of the substance-specific questions were posed as affirmative questions, stating a positive sensation, such as appreciation, and asking the respondents if they shared it. This could have had a guiding effect on the respondents when answering, although we did not find any indication that this was the case when reviewing the given replies or the comments.

Question 12 and 13 were phrased so that they asked about the options available during a choice and if these were ethically complex. What we wanted to see was if the respondents felt that the whole choice was ethically complex. We see the ethical complexity of a choice as dependent on the ethical complexity of all available options. If one option gives a superior outcome compared to the others then the ethical complexity of the choice is lowered. One respondent even gave an example of a situation in *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2009) where this happened. The player's character is faced with a situation where he or she has to choose how to destroy a demon that has possessed a child and threatens to kill another character that is of importance to the player's characters goal. The player can choose to kill the boy and thus also kill the demon, sacrifice the boy's mother to exorcise the demon or go to a nearby location and get help to exorcise the demon without any character dying. The third option removes the dilemma of the choice and gives the player a best solution with the minimum amount of loss and thus lowers the ethical complexity of the other options in the choice.

Question 14 asked if the respondent had replayed role-playing video games that he or she had completed by reaching the end of the main storyline. Some respondents chose to answer this question with the option "Some" or higher even though they had not completed the games. One respondent even chose to comment that the question should be changed to allow respondents to answer how many times they replay the game, even if they have not completed it. This could mean that more respondents chose to interpret the question in the same way without commenting about it or misinterpret it. The problem will be taken into consideration when discussing the question.

Questions 16 to 18 were not specified as focusing on role-playing video games, though they were meant to be. There were no apparent misinterpretations from the respondents, but we could have been more specific in order to ensure that the respondents answered with role-playing video games in mind.

4.2 Discussion

4.2.1 Demographical data

The American trade association Entertainment Software Association (ESA) reported that the average age of players in the U.S.A. was 34 in 2010. The average age of our respondents, 23, was well below this. We cannot draw a conclusion from our results on why the averages differ because of several reasons. The first reason is that the respondents did not have to answer with their age and could instead choose to not answer at all. This means that the average age of our respondents is only applicable on those that gave their age. Further, our selection was made from online forums and we focused on the role-playing video game genre. This population differs from that of the ESA report. In addition, we do not have the data to determine if the average age of our selection could be generalized to players that play role-playing video games that do not visit these online forums. What we can say is that the average age from our results could be used as an indicator and starting point for further data gathering that focus more on demographically mapping of either gamers that frequently visit online gaming forums or gamers that play role-playing video games.

According to the same report from ESA 40% of the gamers in the U.S.A. are female. The data shows that a greater majority, 86%, that answered were male. There is a chance that the results are affected by the same variables as the age data. The results from the nationality question reveals that most of the respondents that chose to answer it came from the U.S.A., Sweden or the U.K., with the U.S.A. having the largest amount of respondents, 28.8%. FZ and Loading, two of our chosen online gaming forums, are Swedish and most of our Swedish respondents came from them. All the other forums were English-speaking and could have contributed to the fact that we got many respondents from the U.S.A. and the U.K. All of the demographical questions were meant to be used in a secondary analysis by future studies.

4.2.2 Distribution

As mentioned earlier, Gamespot did not generate any data because of the removal of our forum post. The Escapist and Bethesda's official forums generated the most respondents and together they gave us the majority of our results. The Escapist offers a wide variety of online video serials, ranging from pure reviewing ones, such as *Zero Punctuation*, to more development focused ones, such as *Extra Credits*. This could attract a lot of different visitors and could have been the reason we got a lot of respondents from the site. They do not focus on role-playing games exclusively, compared to Bethesda's official forum. Bethesda is best known for their role-playing game series *Elder Scrolls*. As such, Bethesda's official forum could have given answers that reflected the fact that they release role-playing video games. We cannot find any major differences when we compare the results from The Escapist and Bethesda's official forum and this reveals that the results are not dependent on the location they came from. We choose to compare these specific communities because they together generated the most respondents and one of them is a more general gaming community, while the other is specific to a company that creates role-playing video games.

4.2.3 Supply and appreciation of meaningful narrative choices

The majority of respondents, 57.7%, perceived that few or very few role-playing video games had narrative choices with long-lasting impact on the story. Many of the respondents, 31.1%, chose to answer with the middle option, "Some games". Comparing this to the amount that chose the two options that many or most role-playing video games had these kinds of narrative choices, 4.8%, it is

revealed that from those that answered our survey most felt that role-playing video games did not contain them.

In their comments, some respondents mentioned that the choices only give an illusion of having an impact and as such does not qualify as a narrative choice with long-lasting impact. This could be because of the usage of foldback schemes, as defined by Crawford. As the implementation of an expanding branching tree is time consuming the developers could opt to instead create an illusion of having it. It could also be that the choices are in reality what Portnow defines as problems.

On the question regarding the appreciation of narrative choices with long-lasting impact a majority, 84.9%, answered “Often” or “Always”. The middle option, “Sometimes”, was chosen by 11.9% of the respondents. From our data it is clear that narrative choice with long-lasting impact is something our respondents appreciate.

The following table is a combination of the respondents that chose that they “often” or “always” appreciate meaningful choices and their view on the amount of games that have these choices. See figure 4-1 for a visual representation.

<i>Perceived supply</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Very few or no games	22	8.3
Few games	122	46.1
Some games	88	33.2
Many games	21	7.9
Most or all games	12	4.5
No opinion	0	0
Total	265	100

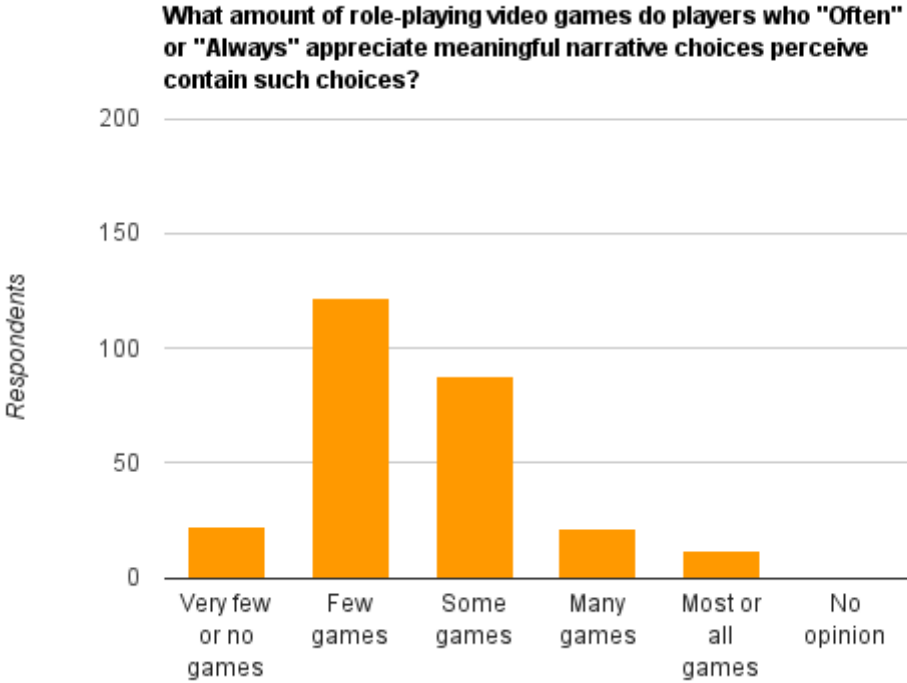


Figure 4-1: Perceived supply of meaningful narrative choices among players who appreciate such choices

There was a majority constituting 54.4% out of the 265 respondents that said that they often or always appreciated these choices that also felt that they were present in few, very few or no games. They made up 46.2% out of the total 312 respondents to the survey.

4.2.4 Appreciation of moral meters

The results were fairly evenly spread over the options on the question about the appreciation of moral meters and there was no clear majority. 31.7% of the respondents chose the middle option, “Sometimes”, making it the most frequently chosen option.

A more interesting view on the results can be found through the comments that the respondents wrote. One respondent chose the “never” option and wrote that “Morality meters usually reward extremes and punishes deviation which limits role-playing.” Several respondents had a similar view on moral meters and pointed out that the extremes were restricting. By having a moral meter the available options have to fit the extremes available, as noted by Portnow.

Others instead saw the moral meters as guidance to how the choices you make impact the world at that moment instead of later on in the game. One respondent saw it as a goal to fill up the meter in one direction and that developers should extend it in order to make it more challenging to reach the end of the axis.

4.2.5 Appreciation of changing character appearance

The respondents answered similarly to the question about the appreciation of narrative choices that change the appearance of the played character. Again, the middle option was chosen by most respondents, more specifically 31.7%. A total of 48.2% chose “Never” or “Rarely”, which was higher than the previous question regarding moral meters.

Some of the comments from the respondents showed that the appreciation of the character’s appearance was dependent on how it changed from the choices made. Some pointed out that it could restrict the player by changing the character’s appearance from the two extremities; “good” and “evil”. They felt that they were forced into an appearance instead of choosing it on their own. Others stated that they did not appreciate if the appearance changed depending on how “good” or “evil” the character was but that it was something to strive for if it changed depending on the situations the character had been through. An example was given where the character received scars during battles that were permanent.

The game *Fable* (Lionhead Studios 2004) was mentioned more than once for its implementation of character appearance that changes between an angelic or demonic look. This kind of extreme change was seen as something positive, in contrast to the previous comments, for this specific game.

The contrast between these comments could indicate that the opinions about the implementation of choices that change the character’s appearance is dependent on the game itself and the individual player’s motivation for playing the game. Our study was not focused on the motivation for playing and making decisions and thus we cannot reach any conclusions from the results of this question.

4.2.6 Satisfaction with amount of narrative choices

A total of 25.7% of the respondents thought that the amount of narrative choices they were faced with were enough, though the majority, 67.9%, said that there were less than enough or far too few narrative choices. From these results we can establish that there seems to be a demand for more narrative choices.

One respondent chose the option “Enough” and commented: “Very rarely do the choices matter so there seems little reason to include them.” This statement supports the results of our pilot study: having choices that are not meaningful and do not lead to any changes in the world can lead to disappointment for players and lower the enjoyment of the game. Among the comments there were also mentions of choices giving the illusion of freedom, but that in the end gave the same result and led down the same path. This could again be because of the usage of problems and foldback schemes.

4.2.7 Satisfaction with the amount of contextually realistic options

There was no clear majority on the question about the satisfaction of the amount of realistic options given during a narrative choice. The highest number of respondents, 37%, chose “Yes, quite satisfied” and 24.8% chose the middle option, “Neither yes nor no”. Because the results are even between the options near the middle it is hard to draw any conclusions, though the low amount of respondents that chose “Yes, very satisfied” or “No, very unsatisfied” could be an indication of the question being hard to answer or just an uncertainty from the respondents. There was no clear indication from the comments that the question was misinterpreted.

4.2.8 Supply and appreciation of ethically complex choices

The perceived supply of ethically complex options during a narrative choice had a majority, 52.9%, that answered on the two negative options. A large group, 39.4%, chose the middle option. The answers show that a majority feel that the options are not ethically complex. What the comments revealed was that many respondents felt that the options available to them were extremes and could be labeled as clearly “good” or “evil”. This was seen as something negative which could break the immersion and make it easy to predict the outcome of the options.

One respondent said that “Far too often it's black and white, with ‘evil’ choices having no justification apart from being evil.” Apart from the options being extremes they are also added as padding to fill up the available options to the player. Several comments pointed out that the respondents’ motivations and goals for playing affected their opinion of ethically complex choices.

A large majority, 83.3%, answered that they appreciated when the options given were ethically complex. It shows that the implementation of such options in narrative choices is something that the respondents want to experience.

One respondent commented with a question asking “If you don't feel conflicted about a decision, is it really a decision at all?” This relates to the difference between problems and choices pointed out by Portnow.

The following table shows how the respondents that chose “often” or “always” on the question regarding appreciation of ethically complex choices answered on how many role-playing video games contain these options. See figure 4-2 for a graphical representation.

<i>Are choices ethically complex?</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
No, never	7	2.7
No, rarely	136	52.3
Sometimes	104	40
Yes, often	11	4.2
Yes, always	2	0.8
No opinion	0	0
Total	260	100

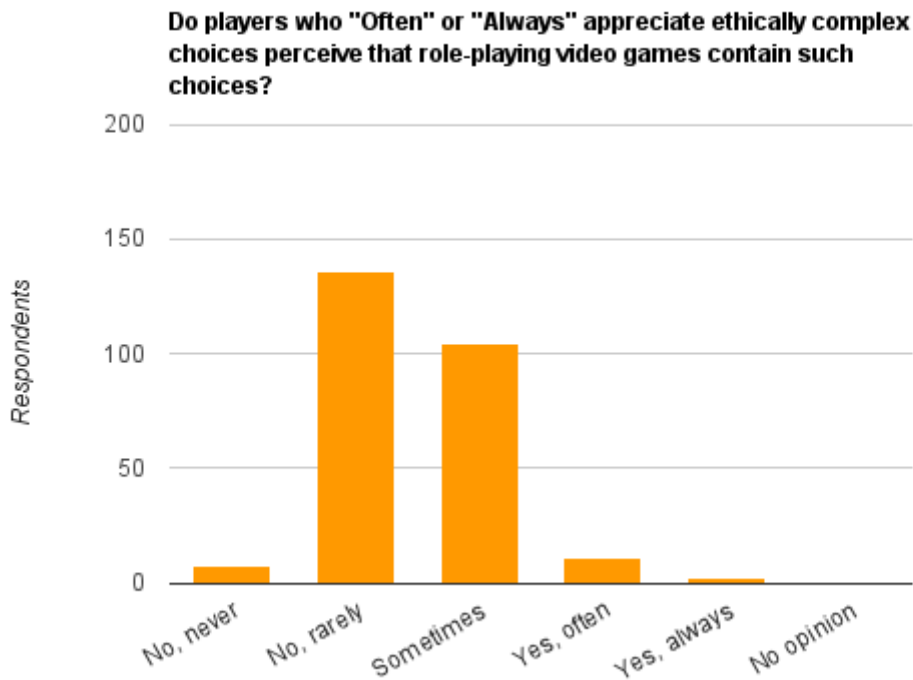


Figure 4-2: Perceived supply of ethically complex choices among players who appreciate such choices

A majority of 55% out of the 260 respondents that “Often” or “Always” appreciate ethically complex narrative choices also stated that they rarely or never found the options of narrative choices to be ethically complex in role-playing video games. This corresponds to 45.8% of the total 312 respondents.

4.2.9 Replay frequency

The answers were somewhat evenly spread over the five options in the question about the amount of role-playing video games the respondents replayed after completing them. The majority (56.8%) answered that they replayed many, almost all or all games. We cannot confirm if the results from this question give data that is relevant to the question. This is because of the comments we got from some respondents that was mentioned in our encountered problems. The number of misinterpretation could be much larger than visible from the comments given. With this in mind we can only say that the numbers show that games do get replayed, but we cannot say if they are played through completely or only to a certain point before being replayed. Even if the games were not played through till the end the usage of foldback schemes and problems instead of choices could still be visible to the player.

The question about the effect of meaningful narrative choices on the willingness to replay games shows that the majority, 81.7%, see themselves as more willing to replay role-playing video games if

they contain these choices. Of these respondents 93.3% also stated that they “Often” or “Always” appreciate meaningful narrative choices.

The respondents stated in their comments that these types of narrative choices made them more willing to replay the game and some even expressed that they were more willing to buy the game too if they knew beforehand that the game contained this kind of choices. They also stated that they wanted to replay the game completely just to experience the differences the choices they made had on the story.

If we examine how the respondents who are “More willing” or “Much more willing” to replay role-playing video games if they include meaningful choices have answered on the question regarding the perceived supply of such choices, we see that 55.3% out of the 255 respondents feel that few, very few or no role-playing video games contain such choices. This corresponds to 45.2% of the total 312 respondents. Figure 4-3 gives a visual representation of the distribution.

<i>Portion of games</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Very few or no games	24	9.4
Few games	117	45.9
Some games	82	32.2
Many games	21	8.2
Most or all games	11	4.3
No opinion	0	0
Total	255	100

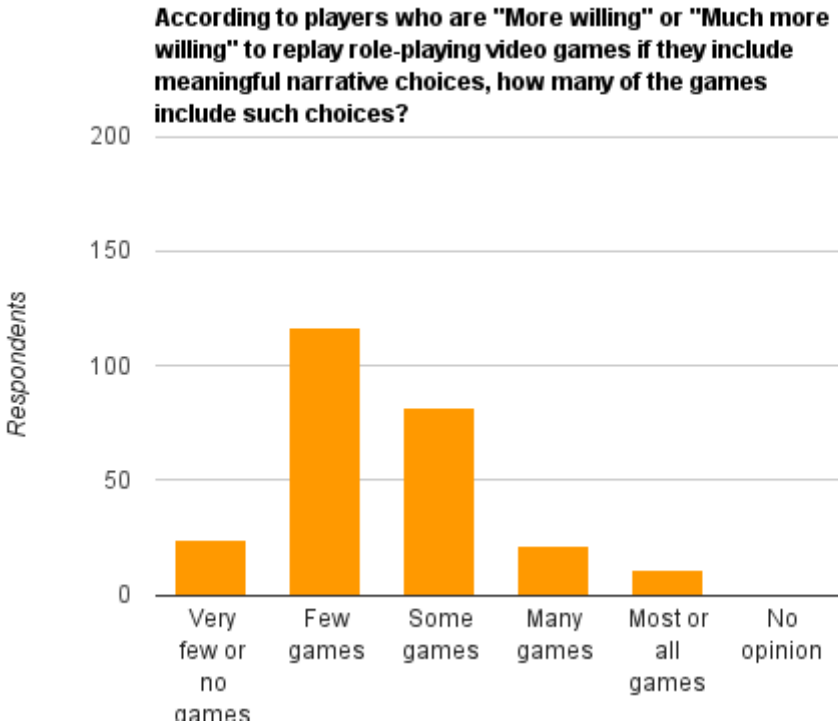


Figure 4-3: Perceived supply of meaningful narrative choices among players with an increased tendency of replay due to such choices

4.2.10 Suggestions for implementing narrative choices

The question regarding a feature that would save the game before each narrative choice was answered very evenly between the options, where none of them had a majority. It also had the largest amount of respondents that chose “no opinion” compared to all other questions.

According to their comments, choice without obvious results was one of the reasons respondents chose to say that they wanted this feature to be implemented into role-playing games. They wanted to be able to make a decision and later on go back, if needed, to explore another path. Others were positive to the feature but noted that the choices you make would have less of an impact as it would be easy to go back and change them. One respondent also stated that the replay value could be lowered, because it would be possible to just reload one of the saves and choose another option instead of replaying the whole game. A design suggestion was given by a respondent where the player would be allowed to turn this feature on or off. This would allow the players that appreciate it to use the automatic save feature while at the same time not alienating those who want to play without it.

The second implementation-specific question asked if the respondent would appreciate if the game saved after each narrative choice. Here a majority, 67.6%, answered “No”.

One of the reasons for the respondents choosing the negative option was the chance of wanting to choose one option but accidentally choosing another with the mouse or gamepad. If the choice would be permanent it would make it impossible for the player to go back and correct his or her mistake without replaying the game. One respondent also pointed out that games could be viewed as a form of escapism and that players should have the freedom to go back and change their decisions. The freedom to change earlier decisions is also supported by Crawford.

The last question asked if the respondent would appreciate a time limit being set to each narrative choice. The majority, 55.8%, answered “No”.

In their comments the respondents noted several different aspects that affected their view on time limits for narrative choices. Some appreciated it, though they thought that the time limit in games that have used it was too short and that they did not have time to read through the answers before the time was up. There were also several respondents that said that outside factors could interrupt their decision-making and spoil the choice. In contrast others said that the decision-making in games more realistic with a time limit, which in turn would make the game more exiting.

A possible change to the implementation of a time limit could be to increase the amount of time that the player has to make his or her choice. This would give the player enough time to read through the available options, though we cannot say if this would be enough for players that do not appreciate a time limit to change their mind.

4.3 Conclusions

In writing this thesis we set out to answer the following research question:

What are the opinions among players about implementations of narrative choice in role-playing video games?

As we have said before our selection cannot be generalized to all gamers without further studies, so we instead aimed at constructing hypotheses based on our results that could constitute the base of these studies and an answer to our research question.

After discussing our results we have, by reviewing the most prominent conclusions, managed to construct four such hypotheses:

- *There is a demand among players for a larger supply of meaningful narrative choices in role-playing video games.*

A large majority stated that they often or always appreciated meaningful narrative choices. Of these 265 respondents, 54.4%, corresponding to 46.2% of all 312 respondents, perceived that such choices were available in few, very few or no role-playing video games.

- *There is a demand among players for a larger supply of narrative choices in general in role-playing video games.*

67.9% of the respondents said that they thought that there were less than enough or far too few narrative choices in role-playing video games.

- *There is a demand among players for a larger supply of ethically complex narrative choices in role-playing video games.*

Most of the respondents stated that they often or always appreciate narrative choices that are ethically complex. Among these 260 respondents 55%, constituting 45.8% of the total amount of respondents, felt that the options given during narrative choices in role-playing video games rarely or never were ethically complex.

- *Players would be more willing to replay role-playing video games with a larger supply of meaningful narrative choices.*

255 respondents, or 81.7% of the total amount of respondents, claimed to be more or much more willing to replay role-playing video games if they contained meaningful narrative choices. Of these 255 respondents 55.3%, or 45.2% of the total 312, perceived that such choices were available in few, very few or no role-playing video games.

5 Concluding remarks

5.1 Future research

The following are suggestions of areas of interest for future studies, identified throughout our work with this thesis:

- We had trouble making a generalizable selection from our desired population: people who play role-playing video games. What is needed is a larger demographical mapping of these players to facilitate for more quantitative studies reaching conclusions that are generalizable over a larger population.
- We formulated our questions to ask what the respondents thought about certain aspects of narrative choices and how they are implemented today. What we did not find out with our study, and were not actively looking for, was how players experienced specific narrative choices. Some respondents noted that games gave the illusion of choice but others did not. It could be worthwhile to use a specific game, or create a prototype, with narrative choices with long-lasting impact, foldback schemes and other implementation strategies to see if players can identify them. Can they identify them in the first playthrough or does it require more than one?
- We did not give a specific question about the illusion of freedom, but respondents chose to comment on it on several different questions, which show that the illusion of choice could affect the player's experience. Is the implementation of these illusions something that weakens the game for the majority of players and should developers strive to instead implement true choices?
- When reviewing our analyzed results a question arises: if the players often replay the games they buy does that mean that there is a stronger chance that they keep the games without selling them on the second hand market? One respondent commented in our survey that he was more eager to buy games that he knew contained complex narrative choices. It would be something worth studying to see how the replay value affects both the willingness to buy a game and to keep it.
- The motivation for playing games came up as a point from the comments given by the respondents. It strengthens the importance, together with our findings in the pilot study, of looking at the motivations of players and how these affect the way players confront narrative choices. The type of game also affected the opinion of narrative choices among players, according to our pilot study. Therefore, it could be of importance to investigate how players of other game genres view narrative choice, how the choices are implemented in these genres and how suited the genres are for narrative choices.
- The respondents saw the predictability of the effect of chosen options as something negative in our pilot study and it also came up in the comments from this survey. Is this something a larger group of gamers see as a problem with today's implementation of narrative choices?

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Appendices

A - Survey

The survey is presented here as presented to the respondents. For reading convenience, the actual questions are written in **bold** followed by any explanatory text in *italic* as well as a description of the options available to the respondent. Section headers are indicated before the first question of each section. Questions 6 to 18 also had an optional free form text field for additional comments.

Narrative choices in role-playing video games

The survey consists of 5 general questions and 13 topic specific questions.

You will be anonymous and your answers will be used in a bachelor's thesis about choices in video games.

We hope to let you express your feelings about the choices you make in role-playing video games. We define two concepts below that are used in this survey.

Definitions

Role-playing video games - By role-playing video games we mean those for gaming consoles and computers.

Narrative Choice - We define narrative choice as a choice posed by the story to the character you control. This could be either through dialogue or actions. E.g. to protect or plunder a village, or bribe or threaten another character.

General questions

1. Age?

Options:

Free form text field.

2. Gender?

Options:

Female - Male - Prefer not to say

3. Country?

Options:

Free form text field.

4. Give some examples of role-playing video games that you have played:

Options:

Free form text field.

5. Where did you find this survey?

Options:

GameInformer - GameSpot - FZ - Loading - The Escapist - Bethesda official forum - Bioware official forum - Eidos official forum - Other: Free form text field

Consequences

6. How many of the role-playing video games that you have played do you feel contain narrative choices that have long-lasting impact on the story?

By long-lasting impact we mean that the narrative choices changes the story in a meaningful way as opposed to e.g. gaining a new weapon with no influence on the story.

Options:

Very few or no games - Few games - Some games - Many games - Most or all games - No opinion

7. In general, do you appreciate role-playing video games with narrative choices that have long-lasting impact on the story?

Options:

Never - Rarely - Sometimes - Often - Always - No opinion

8. Do you appreciate so called "moral meters" (in any variation)?

"Moral meters" are visual or numeric indicators that show you how "evil/chaotic" or "good/lawful" your character is. Actions you take award you points that fill up the meter (e.g shooting an innocent character might give you 10 "evil" points).

Options:

Never - Rarely - Sometimes - Often - Always - No opinion

9. Do you appreciate the feature that your character's appearance changes as an effect of your narrative choices?

E.g "good" actions could give your character a more angelic appearance.

Options:

Never - Rarely - Sometimes - Often - Always - No opinion

Options

10. In general, do you feel that you are faced with enough narrative choices in role-playing video games?

Options:

Far too few - Less than enough - Enough - More than enough - Way too many - No opinion

11. Are you satisfied with the amount of realistic options given during narrative choices?

By realistic options we mean options that are realistic from the character's point of view in the situation. E.g the character is surrounded by a gang of thieves that threaten his/her life. It would perhaps be an unrealistic option for the character to go fishing, but it would be a realistic option to bribe the thieves.

Options:

No, very unsatisfied - No, quite unsatisfied - Neither yes nor no - Yes, quite satisfied - Yes, very satisfied - No opinion

12. In general, do you feel that the options during narrative choices in role-playing video games are ethically complex?

E.g. the options given are hard to ethically define as opposed to clear "good" and "evil" options.

Options:

No, never - No, rarely - Sometimes - Yes, often - Yes, always - No opinion

13. Do you appreciate when the options given during narrative choices are ethically complex?

Options:

Never - Rarely - Sometimes - Often - Always - No opinion

Replay value

14. How many of the role-playing video games that you have completed have you replayed?

By completing a game we mean that you've reached the end of the main storyline.

Options:

Almost none or none - Few - Some - Many - Almost all or all - Do not know

15. How do narrative choices that have long-lasting impact on the story influence your willingness to replay a role-playing video games?

Options:

Much less willing - Less willing - No influence - More willing - Much more willing - Do not know

Possible implementations

These last questions are about specific choice features that are not frequently used in today's role-playing video games.

- 16. Would you appreciate if a game saved automatically BEFORE each narrative choice, so that you could easily go back and change your decision?**

Options:

Yes - No - No opinion

- 17. Would you appreciate if a game saved automatically AFTER each narrative choice, removing your previously saved game and preventing you from going back and changing your decision?**

Options:

Yes - No - No opinion

- 18. Would you appreciate if you only had a certain amount of time to pick your option during a narrative choice?**

I.e. if a choice isn't made a default action would be chosen, possibly represented as the character doing nothing during the situation.

Options:

Yes - No - No opinion

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