

Players and Villains: Role of Antagonists In Video Games

Mia Savo

School of Science

Thesis submitted for examination for the degree of Master of Science in Technology.

Espoo 29.07.2022

Supervisor and advisor

Asst. Prof. Elisa Mekler

Copyright © 2022 Mia Savo



Author Mia Savo

Title Players and Villains: Role of Antagonists In Video Games

Degree programme Computer, Communication and Information Sciences

Major Human-Computer Interaction

Code of major SCI3097

Supervisor and advisor Asst. Prof. Elisa Mekler

Date 29.07.2022

Number of pages 51

Language English

Abstract

Non-player characters are valuable in creating meaningful and emotional player experiences. While there is an emerging interest and growing body of knowledge in character attachment and emotional experience, villains have remained mainly overlooked. Addressing this gap, however, promises insights into what aspects should be prioritised when designing villains.

To this end, the present thesis investigated player accounts of memorable video game villains. A qualitative online survey with 107 participants was conducted. Via inductive thematic analysis, nine distinct themes were identified, characterising the function, role, and value of villains for the video game experience.

The results expand on existing games research by elucidating how players perceive game villains, and characterise villain roles in a new light (e.g. bolstering the protagonist as a hero).

Villains mentioned in this exploratory online survey study are diverse and affect the player in various ways. For instance, villains made players fear, hindered their progress, offered entertainment value, and forced players to question their morality and sanity. Results are discussed with regards to their implications for player experience research and game design practice.

Keywords player experience, character attachment, non-player character, video game, villain, antagonist, qualitative survey, thematic analysis

Tekijä Mia Savo

Työn nimi Players and Villains: Role of Antagonists In Video Games

Koulutusohjelma Computer, Communication and Information Sciences

Pääaine Human-Computer Interaction

Pääaineen koodi SCI3097

Työn valvoja ja ohjaaja Asst. Prof. Elisa Mekler

Päivämäärä 29.07.2022

Sivumäärä 51

Kieli Englanti

Tiivistelmä

Videopelien NPC-hahmot ovat tärkeitä merkityksellisten ja tunnerikkaitten pelaajakokemusten luomisessa. Vaikka kiinnostus ja tiedon määrä pelaajien kiintymyksestä hahmoja kohtaan kasvaa, videopelien päävihollisten tutkiminen on enimmäkseen jäänyt huomiotta. Tähän tutkimuspuutteeseen vastaaminen lupaa näkemyksiä siitä, mitä ominaisuuksia ja näkökantoja vihollisten suunnittelussa pitäisi priorisoida.

Tämä diplomityö tutki pelaajien omakohtaisia kertomuksia mieleenpainuvista päävihollisista. Työssä suoritettiin laadullinen verkkokysely, johon osallistui 107 henkeä. Tulokset analysoitiin induktiivisen temaattisen analyysin avulla, jolla tunnistettiin yhdeksän erilaista teemaa. Teemat luonnehtivat hahmojen tarkoitusta, roolia ja arvoa videopelikokemukselle.

Nämä tulokset laajentavat nykyisiä näkemyksiä pelitutkimuksen alalla havainnollistaen, miten pelaajat kokevat viholliset ja kuvaavat vihollisten rooleja uudella tavalla (vihollishahmo esimerkiksi vahvistaa päähenkilön roolia sankarina).

Tässä tutkivassa verkkokyselytutkimuksessa mainitut pääviholliset ovat monimuotoisia ja vaikuttavat pelaajiin monin eri tavoin. Viholliset esimerkiksi saivat pelaajat pelkäämään, hidastivat heidän etenemistään, tarjosivat viihdearvoa ja pakottivat pelaajat kyseenalaistamaan moraalinsa ja järkensä. Työn tuloksia käsitellään niiden mahdollisten seuraamusten valossa pelaajakokemusten tutkimukseen ja videopelisuunnitteluun.

Avainsanat player experience, character attachment, non-player character, video game, villain, antagonist, qualitative survey, thematic analysis

Preface

I am delighted to say that this part of my student journey is completed.

I would like to extend my thanks to Asst. Prof. Elisa Mekler for supervising and advising this thesis and making it possible for me to explore such an exciting topic. I appreciate all the discussions, advice, and motivation you have given.

Furthermore, I am ever grateful to my family for always being there for me, cheering me on and always supporting me in proceeding at my own pace.

Dear friends, thank you – you mean a lot and have kept me going. I am thankful for our discussions and all the insight you have given.

Thank you all for motivating me, returning my faith in the process in moments of weakness, and bravely listening to my ramblings.

Lastly, I want to thank all pilot participants for their valuable help. Also, cheers to all who took the time to respond to my survey. Special thanks to those who left lovely notes of encouragement and made me smile!

Otaniemi, 29.07.2022

Mia Savo

Contents

Abstract	3
Abstract (in Finnish)	4
Preface	5
Contents	6
Abbreviations	7
1 Introduction	8
2 Background	10
2.1 Characters' role and function	10
2.2 Character attachment and emotional experience	12
2.3 Villains in game industry and other media	12
3 Methods and material	14
3.1 Questionnaire	14
3.2 Participants	16
3.3 Inductive thematic analysis	17
4 Results	19
4.1 Obstacle	19
4.2 Embodiment of evil	22
4.3 Comic relief	25
4.4 Companion	26
4.5 Love to hate	28
4.6 Rooting for the villain	29
4.7 Moral challenger	31
4.8 Personal nemesis	34
4.9 Total sociopath	36
4.10 Thematically varying characters	37
5 Discussion	41
5.1 Answering the research question	41
5.1.1 Functional value of the villain	41
5.1.2 Emotional experience of video game villains	43
5.2 Limitations of the study	46
6 Conclusion	48
References	49

Abbreviations

DLC downloadable content
PC player character
NPC non-player character

1 Introduction

»you just cant help falling in love with him.. and you feel he is the greatest person ever lived in the universe!« (D2, Emet-Selch, *Final Fantasy XIV*)

One might think of villains stereotypically as the classic, evil, princess-kidnapping types. However, villains are diverse, and so are the character experiences players have with them.

Character attachment and emotionally impacting and engaging experiences are important factors in player experience (e.g. [5, 4, 3, 9, 13]) – the aim of this thesis is to show that the same holds true for villains. Understanding player-villain emotional attachments and experiences provides valuable information for designing character experiences [4].

Studying game villains that emotionally impact the player is also beneficial from a player experience perspective. Character’s design, believability and interactions with the player and their surroundings contribute to the gaming experience (e.g. [16, 29, 27, 23]). Exploring emotional video game villain experiences helps produce knowledge to aid in creating more memorable, emotionally affecting, and impactful player experiences.

Previous work on villain experience is scarce, even though many modern games include antagonistic characters. This study aims to address the gap in research regarding villain characters and the variety of emotional player experiences. The focus of this work is on certain types of non-player characters (NPCs): the major, powerful enemies such as villains and bosses. Generic and weaker NPCs are excluded as they usually have a minor impact on the player experience [16]. The questionnaire conducted for this thesis aims to probe the study participants to talk about villains that have left a strong impression on them – good or bad. Both positive and negative emotional experiences are significant, be it, for instance, due to the degree of challenge, intense changing emotions or the entertainment value. While often overlooked for positive feelings, negatively charged emotions may induce positive experiences and facilitate memorable events [3].

The main question this work explores is: »**What kind of villains in video games are memorable?**«.

The question is supported by analysing how the villains affect the players and what supports the emotional attachment to villains in video games. The villains’ impact on the player experience is explored on a functional and emotional level. The survey conducted for this thesis aims to gain insight into how villains make an impression on players and what contributes to them being memorable.

Player experience research and game industry is interested in character attachment and experience: a scope in which villains fall within. This research question is

fascinating as understanding more profoundly what makes villains memorable or worthy of fascination brings value to their design and utilisation. For instance, game design has expressed interest in creating memorable villains and impactful player-villain connections [14]. Knowing what makes villains memorable serves as potential design inspiration and aids developers in deciding what to prioritise when designing villains. Player descriptions aid in knowing what they value in villains and what makes them unique and memorable in their opinion.

The present work sheds light on phenomenon that has been hidden and extends understanding on mixed experiences that have been receiving a rising interest. This research extends our understanding of character attachment and player experience with villains that have been often overlooked and offers new insights for future research and game design. The results of this work are interesting as they extend our knowledge and understanding of what makes villains memorable and how players experience them.

2 Background

Game characters are a crucial part in the appeal of many games [16]. Convincing behaviour and fulfilling the social expectations of the player can enhance the immersive experience [16, 29]. Non-player characters (NPCs) are part of the environment in which the player experiences the game and help creating a social dimension in the game world [24].

Non-player characters have evolved over the years into intricate actors with their own backstories, behavioural patterns, ideologies, and goals. Much of the existing research on non-player characters concerns their believability [29, 20], classification based on their social roles [16, 24], design patterns and consistent language used between designers [16, 25].

2.1 Characters' role and function

In previous literature, there has been multiple different suggested classifications of non-friendly NPCs, aiming to characterise them from different perspectives and trying to create an unified vocabulary for discussing characters in terms of their gameplay function. Character's role and function in the game are defining factors that differentiate them. A boss character, for example, with its own story arc that limits the player's progression has a different function compared to a villain that acts as a puppeteer from the shadows, sometimes taunting the player but never engaging in combat. This chapter introduces some different suggested taxonomies for non-player characters.

Besides their gameplay function, Isbister [16] argues that non-player characters also have various social roles and objectives in the game and as such, players have expectations on how the NPCs relate to others: these expectations provide possibilities for emotional experiences during gameplay. Players experience characters differently relative to their social role, which is influenced by for instance their goal alignment and respective power dynamics [16].

Isbister [16] further argues that memorable characters have a few traits that break the stereotypes. Her book also introduces some common social roles in games, of which those that are relevant to this work are *obstacles*, *boss monsters*, and *archenemies* – plainly *enemies* are described as general mass produced cannon fodder [16]. Isbister [16] describes boss monsters as physically powerful enemies that lack cleverness and are not supposed to be the target of emotional investment. Over time character design has evolved and while a great basis, this classification is arguably rather dated. Recent blockbuster examples (e.g. Oceiros in *Dark Souls III* [12]) showcase that for some players emotional investment in bosses is not only possible, but also appealing.

In their recent proposal for classification of non-player character social roles, Rato and Prada [24] discuss *opponent* and *challenger/contender* roles. Opponents are characters that by having their own opposing goals directly strive to keep the player from progressing: for example, characters that cause conflict such as arch-enemies, villains and bosses can be considered as opponents [24]. Associated with this role, the characters of the challenger/contender role present challenges and may act as ‘gatekeepers’ by preventing progression. Importantly, Rato and Prada remind that non-player characters may have multiple different social roles at the same time or in different parts of the game. [24] For instance, the bosses in the Souls series (by FromSoftware, 2009) present an obstacle to the player where they have to be defeated in order to progress in the game. Defeating them unlocks game progression and by this taxonomy, they could be classified into both categories: challengers and opponents. However, this classification is heavily based on the goal alignment between characters, which while valuable, offers little insight how players are (emotionally) affected by these roles.

Warpefelt and Verhagen [30] present a typology of non-player characters in which the division is made based on the characters appearance, gameplay affect, function, placement, and behaviour without a mention of their social roles specifically. They describe characters’ functions as, for instance them attacking the player or providing loot [30]. Despite this, the different presented taxonomies of NPCs are quite similar, though in order to convey some of the roles social capability is not a requirement.

Rato and Prada [24] point out that Warpefelt and Verhagen’s [30] typology centers around players’ interpretations in a survey for a certain set of games and therefore does not capture the full extent of social roles. The framing of the two classifications is inherently different as Rato and Prada frame their suggestion around social interactions and behaviours.

Warpefelt and Verhagen [30] group all characters opposed to the player as metatype *adversaries*, which is further divided into *opponent* and *enemy* types. They group all hostile NPCs into enemies that attack and distinguish *boss* as a subtype, which are tougher to beat and present in a special location. Their description of opponents is quite close to Isbister’s [16] *competitor* social role: opponents are contenders that present challenges to the player outside of combat, for instance in sports and races. Only Rato and Prada [24] suggest that hostile and violent characters may also have this role, as they define it by the opposing goals.

While these works provide useful insights into aiming to use consistent language to name them, describing their roles and offering an understanding of how perceptions may affect reactions to characters, they say little about how players actually experience game villains.

2.2 Character attachment and emotional experience

Players form parasocial relationships [28] and emotional attachments to non-player characters [4] and identify with them – even the ones that actively try to work against them [26].

HCI games research has become increasingly interested in emotional player experiences, as well as in understanding how players become attached to game characters (e.g [3, 4, 13, 9]). Still, specifically research on emotional player experience of video game characters is surprisingly scarce [4].

Character attachment has received a growing interest and attention in player experience research and it is regarded as a fundamental part of engaging and emotionally rich experiences [4, 3, 5]. Bopp et al. [4, p. 314] define character attachment as ‘an umbrella term for the sense of liking, connection and closeness a player feels to any in-game character’.

Burgess and Jones [9] explored players’ emotional attachment to characters via surveying. They report on the aspects of developed character attachments such as relatability and players empathising with the character [9]. However, their study focused on a protagonist player character of a single game. Much of the earlier research on character attachment has focused on the relationship between the player and their own avatar (e.g [5, 9]) which leaves non-player characters still an understudied topic.

Focusing specifically on players’ emotional experience, Bopp et al. conducted a survey, where they requested that players think of a character they ‘really like’. One of the multiple distinct categories that define emotional attachment that they identified was ‘Respected Nemesis’. [4] This theme was the sole exception as other themes characterised PCs and benevolent characters. For instance, ‘Cool and Capable’ that consisted mostly of PCs and ‘Trusted Close Friend’. Bopp et al. [4] point out that this theme probably is only one of multiple potential player-villain character attachments. They suggest that the wording of their survey instructions might have affected the responses, though to their advantage as it worked with the research questions of the work [4]. However, the phrasing with its positive connotation might have been one factor as to why only the Respected Nemesis theme was highlighted amongst the villain answers. Though it need be noted that the work did not aim to specifically explore character attachments to villains per se. Pertinent to the present work, Bopp et al. [4] pose an interesting question: »What makes one love or hate one’s nemesis?» and suggest further research on players’ emotional experience on villains.

2.3 Villains in game industry and other media

While there is a dearth of academic work on the appeal of game villains, outside HCI game research, villains are discussed in gaming development communities and

gaming related entertainment outlets.

The game industry community has discussed the fundamentals of AI, boss, and boss battle design to create more affecting player experiences [17, 8]. In his Game Developers Conference (GDC) talk, Keren [17] partly justifies the need for a boss with player engagement, as the boss battle can be used to develop an emotional attachment. Introducing an innovative, adaptive system used in the games *Middle-earth: Shadow of War* and *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor*, Hoge [14] presents how their ‘Nemesis System’ is utilised in creating powerful and lasting relationships between players and villains from a design perspective.

Villains are occasionally also the center of the attention in non-academic publications such as interviews, articles and blog posts. Art director Tomonori Takano [19], responsible for Lady Dimitrescu’s design (*Resident Evil Village*) [10] explains in an interview with IGN that one of the themes for the game was specifically to create impressionable characters. Interestingly, the surrounding area and experience were created after the Lady Dimitrescu’s character [19].

Villain enjoyment and morality in fiction has been explored more regarding other media, such as literature and film (e.g. [2, 18, 11]). The work by Black et al. [2] discovered correlation between enjoying ‘dark fictional characters’ (e.g. villains and morally ambiguous protagonists) and differences in morality such as certain personality traits like Machiavellianism. Similarly, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen et al. [18] found that individuals’ higher levels in dark triad personality traits predicted them relating to villains (e.g. fascination and empathy). Study by Eden et al. [11] suggests that perceived morality of characters was linked to enjoyment, but did not predict appreciation. The point of view of exploring the personality traits of individuals who enjoy video game villains has not been touched on within player experience research.

Taken together, ongoing discourse among player communities and games industry practitioners suggests that game villains are a key factor in memorable gaming experience. To address the aforementioned gaps in HCI games research, this thesis therefore set out to explore game villains with respect to how players experience them functionally, emotionally, and socially.

3 Methods and material

This survey was done to explore player-villain emotional attachments and experiences. Due to the scarcity of research on video game villains, an exploratory online study was decided to be conducted. This online survey study aimed to explore the emotional connection, experience and relationship formed between players and enemy video game characters. All data was collected and analysed anonymously.

The research methods used for this study were online qualitative survey for data collection and inductive thematic analysis for data analysis. The following sections describe the research methodology and introduce the participants involved in this study.

3.1 Questionnaire

The topic of video game villains is relatively understudied, especially from the player's point of view. Beneficial for researching an under-explored area, qualitative surveys have the potential to collect a diversity of perspectives and experiences, which matters for the quality and validity of the data [7].

Online qualitative survey was chosen as the data collection method for its benefits, primarily for its quick distribution and potential for collecting large amounts of data fast [6]. Additionally, collecting lots of data from many individuals fast offers access to a wide range of diverse perspectives and experiences [6].

Participants were asked to think of the most memorable video game villain. The goal was to keep the wording as neutral as possible, avoid stronger words with emotionally charged connotations, such as 'like', 'hate', 'love', 'the best', and avoid biasing participants. The adjective 'memorable' was chosen to emphasise the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the chosen character. The term 'villain' was selected to describe the target character in order not to limit the answers too much: for instance, 'nemesis' and 'archenemy' are quite definite but still included in the term 'villain'. At the same time, the scope was intended to be kept in certain major enemies instead of all non-friendly NPCs.

The questions were based on the survey conducted by Bopp et al. [4] on emotional attachment towards game characters, as this paper aims to examine a subset of characters in a very similar way. See Table 1 for list of survey questions. Piloting is an essential step in the qualitative survey practice due to the fixed nature of the design: for instance, questions cannot be reworded during the study, and responses cannot be clarified afterwards [6, 7]. The survey was piloted in two parts. First, the questions were reviewed together with a pilot participant for layout issues and to see how they understood the meanings and goals of the questions. Some questions

were reworded for clarity and reordered so the questionnaire was easier to follow and would flow better. Second, other researchers peer reviewed and completed the survey as pilot participants to find out an estimated length of the survey and to point out inconsistencies in the questions and observations regarding primarily structural and study design issues. The second part of piloting provided mainly essential changes to the technical features of the online survey tool.

The study conducted within this thesis was an empirical survey study consisting of a series of open-ended questions. LimeSurvey [21] was used as the online platform to implement the survey. All the questions except some demographic and behavioural questions (age, gaming history in years, and average hours played per week) were open-ended. At the beginning of the survey, participants were introduced to the study by informing them who was conducting it and for what purposes. Participants were then asked to provide informed consent, and a data privacy notice was presented to them. They were explained that all data was collected and analysed anonymously. After consenting to participate in the study, some demographic and behavioural information was collected from the respondents: their age, gender, gaming experience and genre preferences. For inclusivity, open field for noting respondent's gender was optional.

After answering the demographic and behavioural questions, the participant was navigated to a page asking them to recall a specific character and given further instructions to understand the survey's wording better:

Please recall a video game villain that you found particularly memorable. Think of memorable in whatever way makes the most sense to you - whether in terms of gameplay, story, or any other reasons or combinations thereof. If several memorable villains come to mind, choose the one that is the most recent and fresh in your memory. Think of game villain in whatever way makes sense to you - it can be a boss you fight, an enemy you encounter or a character that otherwise opposes you in the game. Please answer the following questions with this character in mind.

The questionnaire was presented in parts and so that the participant could not go back to their previous answers. Some participants expressed that they would have wished to see all the questions beforehand to familiarise themselves with the survey and avoid repeating answers. This restriction was mainly done due to technicalities so that if the participant denied consent or noted themselves as underage, they would not be able to go back and change the answers to proceed with the survey. In the case of denied consent or underage respondent, they were directed to a page thanking them for their time but expressing that they could not carry on with answering without meeting the terms.

Survey questions
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the name of the character? 2. What game is the character from? 3. Please describe this character. For instance, write about the appearance and personality of this character. 4. In your opinion, what is the role of this character in this game? How do they appear in the gameplay and/or game narrative? 5. Why did you choose this character in particular? What makes this character unique? 6. What was your first impression of this character? 7. How did the character make you feel and why? If your emotions towards this character changed during gameplay, please describe how. 8. How does the player character interact with this character in the game? You can answer freely: e.g., describe the interactions in general, the resolution of a specific interaction or anything that comes to your mind. 9. If there was a battle between the player character and this character, please describe it. For instance, if there were some special features or mechanics. 10. How would you compare your values and morals with the character's? 11. If you had the opportunity to talk to this character, what would you tell them or ask them? 12. If there is anything else you would like to add, please feel free to do so here.

Table 1: List of survey questions

3.2 Participants

The main platforms for spreading the questionnaire were social media related, such as Facebook, Reddit and Discord. Snowball sampling assisted in distributing the questionnaire on a larger scale, as the participants took an interest in the study topic and began spreading it to their acquaintances and social circles.

A total of 642 participants clicked the survey link, of which 111 participants completed the survey. Four submitted responses were excluded, as the participant either indicated that they did not give informed consent ($n = 3$) or were less than 18 years of age ($n = 1$). The final sample consisted of 107 participants aged from 18 to 50 years (mean = 28.51 years). On average, participants had been playing games for 21 years, ranging from 6 to 39 years. They reported playing 0 to 70 hours per week on average (mean = 16,26 hours). Participants reported quite varying gaming genre preferences. The most popular genres were role-playing games ($n = 35$), first-person shooters ($n = 28$), massively multiplayer online role-playing games ($n = 17$), and strategy games ($n = 17$).

3.3 Inductive thematic analysis

After the data was collected on the LimeSurvey platform, the final sample of 107 responses was exported and modified to a format supported by the data analysis software. The entire dataset was then imported to ATLAS.ti [1], which is a software that facilitates the analysis of qualitative data. To analyse the dataset, inductive thematic analysis was conducted as described by Braun and Clarke [6]. Thematic analysis is a pattern-based analytic method for identifying meaningful themes and patterns in the dataset [6]. An inductive approach was used in this thesis for its data-driven nature: the inductive thematic analysis uses a ‘bottom-up’ way without being shaped by preconceptions or existing theories, and the themes stem from the data [6]. This data analysis method was chosen due to the nature of the data and this research; the goal was to find common patterns and similarities across the data.

The aim was to explore respondents’ emotional connections, experiences, and perceptions toward villains of their choice. In order to find deeper meanings, connections, and patterns, the entire data set was analysed and coded instead of focusing on individual survey questions. The thematic analysis consisted of reviewing the data, data coding and theme development.

Braun and Clarke outline thematic analysis with seven stages, of which the first one is transcribing the data: an unnecessary step in this case as the data was already in textual format [6]. The next paragraphs will introduce the six stages utilised for the thematic analysis in this thesis.

The first step in conducting the thematic analysis was to review and become familiar with the survey results while taking notes of potentially interesting points. Before starting to code the data, the first introductory round included going through all results by reading all responses to an individual question at a time. After this observational round of reading, the data coding could be started.

In the second step of thematic analysis, ATLAS.ti’s [1] built-in functions were used for the data coding. This step was more systematic, and the data was analysed by going through the results one participant at a time (document by document). Complete coding, as outlined by Braun and Clarke, was used as the approach to code the data: everything potentially relevant and interesting was coded meticulously and systematically [6]. After the first round of coding the qualitative data, the codebook created included a total of 340 codes, excluding survey questions that the software had automatically notated as codes. Some examples of the codes include ‘*disdain of the living / nihilism*’, ‘*villain motive*’, and ‘*(unusual) gameplay mechanics*’. At this stage, all the codes and quotations they were attached to were reviewed one by one. After merging similar codes, there were 252 codes. For instance, codes ‘*any means necessary*’ and ‘*does not hesitate to hurt others*’ were merged together. Especially codes with minor, indifferent nuance differences were combined. Some codes were left in the codebook, even though they ended up being a bit irrelevant, e.g. ‘*antagonist*’,

'*main / final villain*', and '*boss character(s)*', which were the participant's words of choice that did not provide additional insight to the research question.

The third stage in data analysis was searching for themes: actively aiming to create potential patterns and identifying similarities in the data [6]. The data was again reviewed meticulously, and the codes were iteratively compared. Preliminary themes were drafted with mind maps and lists and created as code groups. As suggested by Braun and Clarke, relevant data extracts were then collated together, and the fourth stage of reviewing and revising themes could be started [6].

The fourth step included revising the themes by reviewing the coded and collated data as well as the entire dataset. At this reviewing stage, subthemes were identified, and some themes were combined, discarded, and differentiated. This stage is fundamental to ensure that the themes cover the data and represent the essence of the dataset relative to the research question [6].

Fifthly, the themes were defined and named. This step included writing preliminary theme descriptions (which were also roughly drafted before) and analysing what was unique for each theme: what distinguished them from other themes.

Lastly, the sixth step was finalising the analysis: selecting quotations to illustrate different analytic points made of the themes and writing about the content and meaning of the data [6].

4 Results

The number of unique video game villains mentioned in the survey responses added to seventy (70). Interestingly, fifty-seven (57) of these villains were mentioned only once, so there is much diversity in the responses. Only a few characters were mentioned multiple times; please see Table 2 which introduces the three most commonly mentioned villains.

This chapter introduces the themes identified with inductive thematic analysis. These themes aim to illustrate the villain character’s function, role and value in the game for the player. They seek to answer the question: how do the characters affect the player by narrative or gameplay?

The themes are not clear-cut or mutually exclusive. The respondent’s perception and subjective experience with the villain affect how the responses place on different themes: some characters fit specific categories more clearly and literally than others. Some villains are perceived and mentioned differently among participants, and quotations regarding them can be seen in multiple themes. Some characters may simultaneously fit multiple categories. Few villains might start within one theme and go through others as the game progresses or be dependent on the player’s perception (notably, Abigail »Abby» Anderson, *Last of Us -series*; Arthas Menethil: later the Lich King, *Warcraft 3 and World of Warcraft*), which are discussed separately at the end of this chapter.

The participants were labelled in the order in which their responses were imported into the qualitative data analysis software. For instance, D1 stands for Document 1: one document corresponds to one survey respondent. The original spelling is retained when reporting participants’ quotations, except for changing quotation mark characters as they would be output incorrectly or escaping special characters.

Name of the villain	Amount of responses
Arthas Menethil / the Lich King	8
Bowser	7
Sephiroth	5

Table 2: Statistic of most mentioned villains

4.1 Obstacle

The first theme is called ‘Obstacle’ for its literal purpose in the game: to be a hindrance to be overcome. Compared to other themes, most participants exhibited a more superficial emotional experience and connection with the character and instead were more impressed by a particular encounter with the villain. Obstacles usually

prevent the player's advancement to more considerable challenges and rewards: their function is to slow the players' progress as just something they need to defeat to proceed with the game. The character offers a confrontation with varying degrees of challenge. The villain stands in the players' way and tries to hinder their progress: »Her purpose is pretty much to extend your playing by being first boss that you deal with.» (D71, Mistral, *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*). Or put simply, the villain is »just there to kill or be killed» (D78, Cacodemon, *DOOM*).

When describing the character, the participants mainly focused on their external features and behaviour, such as their appearance and abilities in gameplay: »Big muscles, hits hard» (D62, Illidan Stormrage, *World of Warcraft*) and »Short dark hair, the helmet had some darth vader vibes with modern twist, a 'bitch' personality, great confidence, strong fighter and strong with the force» (D33, Second Sister, *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*).

Even though their functional value might be smaller in the grand scheme of the whole game, the Obstacle villains can still rise to exceed the player's expectations and stand out to their advantage. Although the character only affects the narrative of the game for a short period of time by hindering the player's progress, the confrontation itself left the participant impressed:

»The character doesn't play a big role throughout the story of the game, but is a mandatory boss for progressing through the end-game. Upon death, the character drops the Death Rune he was guarding, which is later used to end the reign of Queen Marika, and impose a new order of existence within the game's world. The boss fight in question is my favorite in the game. The character design from both a visual and gameplay sense is superb, and the fight feels very grand and exciting.» (D83, Maliketh, the Black Blade, *Elden Ring*)

In the extreme example responses, participants' description of the villain was relatively short and to the point, without any emotional response. However, the villains in this theme can be more deep characters, even though they are placed here because of their gameplay function. While most participants describe and focus primarily on the great, memorable fights with the boss characters, some show understanding of the villain and appreciation of the lore. Participants' emotional attachment to Obstacles was generally weaker than that to characters in other themes. Their descriptions of their emotional experience with the villain were more superficial than other responses. Participants used fewer words expressing emotions and often regarding the confrontation and challenge, instead, for example, the character itself, its backstory or relationship with the player character. Emotionally, most participants either described feeling scared and anxious before the confrontation or being impressed and feeling a sense of grandeur. Perhaps one of the villains' most significant values emotionally is the climax after defeating them:

»I was terrified that I had to fight them at the same time. Their huge weapons and tall physique makes them seem superhuman when the player character is a mere human. Since the boss fight is so hard, the characters made me feel frustrated, anxious and angry. Beating them made me feel great since it was after many tries and for a moment I felt invincible.» (D8, Ornstein and Smough, *Dark Souls*)

Within this theme exist the Insurmountable obstacle subtheme. They are similar but seemingly offer an increased challenge and give the player the impression that ‘this is impossible’.

Insurmountable obstacle

This subtheme is named ‘Insurmountable obstacle’ for the reaction the character evokes in the player. The most notable specific element separating these characters in the subtheme is that the villain seems like it will present an insurmountable challenge for the player, which is often the first impression. The participants describe doubting whether it is even possible to beat the challenge that the villain presents. For instance, participant D79 described their first impression of the character as follows:

»Really cool, incomprehensible and completely indifferent towards all sentient life (us). At the first reveal, I truly doubted if this was a threat that the characters can defeat. And that was so cool. (Note: To establish this, there needed to be more immediate and ‘mortal’ threats to establish the contrast of how inevitable and seemingly undefeatable this threat was.)» (D79, Sovereign (Reapers), *Mass Effect*)

Participants reported varying reasons for their chosen character appearing as unbeatable. For some, the challenge ahead seemed tough and time-consuming: »As the lich king boss in wow i think ‘holy sh*t he looks badass’ and ‘oh f*ck im gonna wipe on this for weeks’ about covers it.» (D91, Arthas Menethil, also known as the Lich King, *The Warcraft franchise; Warcraft 3 and World of Warcraft*). Making a difference in the narrative, participant D84 reported that the player character »has to also figure out how to kill a guy who can not be killed» (D84, Baldur, *God of War*). In this example, the game design of the fight made the villain seem unbeatable: »Defeating him involves unusual gameplay - having to physically switch controllers, which was very innovative.» (D11, Psycho Mantis, *Metal Gear Solid*)

Alternatively, instead of focusing on the encounter with the villain, participant D79 gave a detailed description of the character’s impact on the game’s pace and how intimidated they were by the character.

»Sovereign raises the stakes of the game by revealing that the threat we are dealing with is much greater than what we expected. Initially the threat is only a the schemes of a rogue officer that then suddenly expand into a galaxy-wide threat. The twist also serves to add tension and urgency to the climax of the game to make the final arc feel more impactful. [...] The main reason for my decision was the memorability of the villain and how they establish a seemingly insurmountable threat. The reveal of Sovereign and the threat of the Reapers is what has stuck with me. [...] The uncaring and unerring tone of the reaper greatly sets the cosmic inevitability of these creatures. When Sovereign tells the player that all sentient life will be wiped as an inevitability, you believe it. Sovereign and the reapers are a great depiction of the cosmic fear that we sentient beings are at the end of the day inconsequential in the eyes of the universe.» (D79, Sovereign (Reapers), *Mass Effect*)

As an extreme example, the same participant's expression of their feelings reflects how most others described:

»Excited. The game took a quick turn with the reveal of the Reapers, and it added a boost of excitement to the climax of the game. The threat of this creature felt real and with, and made you wonder if it was even defeatable. I think that is something that you don't often feel in games since bosses are designed to be beaten. But due to the RPG nature of having the player's decisions impact the story it was not clear whether the heroes would win (or at what cost).»

As a unique case, participant D106 presented a character that literally cannot be fought or beaten:

»Dahaka plays the role of an inevitable danger that chases the protagonist and we are desperately trying to find a way to stop him. Dahaka apperas occasionally in the game and the only thing we can do is to try to escape him and buy ourselves some time. He may be interpreted as consequences chasing us for the actions we did in the past. [...] The idea of not being able to fight it but only to run from it was a very cool game concept and made Dahaka feel very powerful (to be exact, we can fight Dahaka if we unlock the alternative finale). The hard rock/heavy metal soundtrack that was playing in those parts of the game also helped to imprint it in my mind.» (D106, Dahaka, *Prince of Persia: Warrior Within*)

4.2 Embodiment of evil

»This character felt truly evil and bad. I felt uneasiness and other negative emotions as I started getting closer to, and as I was facing it

in combat. This kind of immersion is unique and captivating» (D105, Orochi, *Ōkami*).

This theme was named ‘Embodiment of evil’ because participants often based their depiction of the villain on how malicious and evil they are. Specifically, the focus on villains’ evilness distinguishes this theme from others, whether the character is, for instance, »old school pure evil for evilness sake» (D63, Ganon(dorf), *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*) or more corrupted evil: »the solid baddie, however it was not one-dimensional, in a sense he had a great story. Perhaps because you could see how he developed into being a monster, even though he wasn’t at first. Rather than straight away being the root of all evil.» (D87, Gul’dan, *World of Warcraft*)

The Embodiment of evil characters cause emotional distress and make the player feel terrified, anxious, scared, and uneasy, especially as a first impression: D21 described feeling »Threatened because there’s absolutely no compromise - to them, we’re basically lawn that’s mowed every month.» (D21, Reapers, *Mass Effect series*). These villains try to achieve their goals, for instance, world domination and destruction, usually by any means necessary. Importantly, the character’s value is to bolster the player character as a hero that stops the villain and saves the world.

»They are the personification of pure evil and the source of darkness itself. He is destined to eternally reincarnate over and over again, pursuing his goals much like his counterpart and the games main character Link, whose destiny it is to always stop Ganon.» (D36, Ganon, *The Legend of Zelda*)

As this participant described, the villains in this theme often give the protagonist their *raison d’être*: justification for their existence. Otherwise, these protagonists tend to remain blank slates:

»I think i chose Joker, bcs of that symbiotic relationship with main protagonist of this game. He filled the blank spots in Batman’s character. Usually when someone thinks of Batman, he thinks it is a dull boring rich guy who dresses as a bat and beat up bad guys. That can’t be further from the truth...

Hero is only as good as his villain.» (D75, The Joker, *Batman: Arkham Knight*)

Few participant responses conveyed signs of understanding the villain, which suggests a lack of sympathy towards them. However, D21 described seeing a connection with the reaction to the villain in the game in contrast with the current world situation: »the games offer a realistic view into how modern politics would react to an overwhelming destructive force, which I can relate to now with stuff like global warming, corona, etc.» (D21, Reapers, *Mass Effect Series*)

Interestingly, participants mentioned mainly the Embodiment of evil characters when they referred to having important childhood memories of their chosen character (subtheme Iconic evil included). Participant D102 even described a strong desire to avoid the villain:

»As a child, when I was at my most impressionable, I feared video game villains. Bowser has a scary appearance, a size advantage over the player character, and is often accompanied by appropriately intimidating music. Needless to say, my first impression of the character was wanting to hide behind the sofa.» (D102, Bowser, *The Super Mario series*)

Please see Table 3 for how the characters mentioned were divided amongst the themes. The code ‘childhood nostalgia’ refers to participants describing how they felt nostalgic due to childhood memories. On the other hand, the code ‘child perspective’ denotes participants describing their experiences from when they were children.

	childhood nostalgia	child perspective
embodiment of evil	5	4
obstacle	2	1
personal nemesis	2	1
total sociopath	2	0

Table 3: Distribution of codes ‘childhood nostalgia’ and ‘child perspective’ between themes

Iconic evil

As a subtheme of Embodiment of evil, the ‘Iconic evil’ villains are the classic characters almost everyone knows. These characters are characterised as epic, iconic and legendary villains. This status is usually given to the villain by the player or the gaming community: »Onyxia is such a classic villain. [...] If you ask anyone who has ever played WoW, they will most likely know Onyxia.» (D93, Onyxia, *World of Warcraft*)

Participants often underlined how their chosen Iconic evil villains stand out compared to other characters, for example, due to sentimentality towards childhood or the character’s longevity within a game series.

»When I thought of video game villains the two that first came to my mind were both childhood nostalgia villains in Bowser and Ganondorf (Zelda). I do have some more recent ones in mind as well. However, none of them seem like THE villain in comparison to the classic ones.

Bowser is unique in the sense that it has paved the path for all of the more current villains. It is a textbook video game villain. Bowser also works for all ages. It is evil and scary - for a 10 year old at least - but not too much. [...] They take your princess away and leave you in the dark with the echo of an evil laugh. Big, bad, evil, scary!» (D51, Bowser, *Super Mario (64)*)

In this example, D52 compared their chosen villain to a very well-known character from another form of media:

»Arthas / Lich King is one of the most iconic character of the Warcraft unversum. Lich King has a lot of similarities to Anakin Skywalker in Star Wars franchise after becoming Darth Vader.» (D52, Lich King, *World of Warcraft (Wrath of the Lich King expansion)*)

Besides being well-known, Iconic evil villains were characterised as impressive and cool. Even their very first impression of Sephiroth immediately convinced some: »Demonical, opposing, majestic. First glimpses are offered to the character when he is walking through fire and the theme for the character is very majestic and opera-like.» (D50, Sephiroth, *Final Fantasy VII*). Participant D49 described their experience with the same character from their youth:

»I played FFVII in my childhood a lot and multiple times and Sephiroth always struck me as a cool and edgy bad guy. As a child I didn't fully understand the story which was in English so I had to rely a lot on the looks and the feel of the character. He carries almost a comically long sword which of course makes him look cool [...] The scene where he jumps down and kills Aeris is iconic» (D49, Sephiroth, *Final Fantasy VII*).

4.3 Comic relief

This theme refers to the pleasant relief from the game's tension that the characters offer, which manifests, for instance, in their behaviour and interactions with others. Comic relief villains are enjoyable characters that, compared to other themes, have a unique humorous side. The participants often describe them as funny, friendly-looking and entertaining: »His look is not too scary, bright color, it's a turtle I mean a turtle is not scary. He is also a bit goofy.» (D57, Bowser, *Mario*)

These characters might be evil in their own way, but they do not generally scare the players much. »He is evil, but his underlings are pretty incompetent, he has his funny moments and there something 'comfy' about his brand of evilness. It's something you can enjoy, instead hating him as a character.» (D39, Captain LeChuck, *Monkey*)

Island). Some participants even perceive the villain as possibly misunderstood: »maybe he just wants a friend but dont know how to articulate hes feelings and end up just looking mean« (D101, Bowser, *Mario*).

In radical contrast to the Embodiment of evil villains, the Comic relief characters provide funny, humorous moments for the player that uplift the mood and amuse the player. Their function is to bring a welcomed break and give pauses to the games' pacing in otherwise often more humourless settings. The participants described interactions with the villain as entertaining with jokes, banter, bickering and sometimes even the villain taunting the player. For example, D80 mentioned an innovative way of interaction used in the game and described how their feelings changed: »Annoyed to highly amused, changed with small tidbits like a statue of him that you can talk to that tells you jokes about him.« (D80, Joko, *Guild Wars 2*)

These characters will not necessarily present much of a challenge in combat: »I like this type of vilain as they are not really that vilain, friendly looking somehow and not too hard to beat. It makes the games experience nice and not too challenging while also having a fun aspect to it« (D57, Bowser, *Mario*). Instead, D65 found the character's attempts adorable: »he embodies the role of 'harmless comic relief villain' so perfectly; so endearingly. He putatively antagonizes you with traps and puzzles but his heart isn't really in it. He just wants to be your (boy)friend.« (D65, Papyrus, *Undertale*)

Not all of the characters in this theme are as harmless; however, they amuse the players nonetheless. Despite the villain being unpredictable and violent at times, D86 described that the character made them laugh and lightened the mood:

»He is also a comic relief character. He's often a part of slapstick moments, he makes fun of the students, and his voice and character combined with a goofy theme song makes him feel like the funny man in a sort of two-man comedy routine with the other characters.« (D86, Monokuma/Junko Enoshima, *Danganronpa*)

4.4 Companion

This theme is named 'Companion' for the villain's participation in the player character's journey: uniquely for this theme, the game forces them to cooperate.

Companion villains are characters that work together with the player character: the character might be a party member or a quest giver at some point in the game. Crucially, rather than solely conveyed via the game's narrative, this unique artificial bond between the villain and the player character is created via gameplay. For instance, D107 noted their chosen character's involvement in the story:

»In the second game they are a party member and mission giver. They are also very present in the narrative, cutscenes and casual interactions. You don't actually fight them in this game, more work against them.» (D107, Dutch van der Linde, *Red Read Redemption/Red Dead Redemption 2*)

In contrast to other themes, villains of the Companion type affect the player by being their allies and aiding them instead of, for instance, standing in their way. In this way, the characters take on a non-antagonistic role. These villains either start as companions to the player character and later turn out to be villains or vice versa. Forcing the player to cooperate with the villains shows an alternative perspective that the following paragraphs exemplify.

Participant D59 noted how the game uses cooperation with the villain to illustrate the villain's strength before revealing the character as an opponent. In this example, the contrast between the protagonist and the villain is also demonstrated; what are the PC's odds against the character? Firstly, the villain is allied with the player character: »you get him as an incredibly powerful party member, and after that there are repeated boss fights against him throughout the game.» (D59, Seymour Guado, *Final Fantasy X*). The same participant describes the battle in which the villain cooperates with them: »I feel like I should mention that the first time you fight with him, not against him. In that fight, he is so strong that nobody else in your party can compare to him. It's a really cool experience to give to the player I think.»

The change in the villain's role from cooperative to malicious (or vice versa) is gradual: a participant described their first impression of the villain as being convinced that the character was willing to help them and trying to get them to safety. Participant D69 reported feeling kind of betrayed – angry and surprised but not seeking vengeance after learning the truth.

»What makes this character unique is the way he is introduced into the game and the way his motives shape the story. Slowly you are introduced to bits of evidence you have to find yourself that slowly hint that he is working against you rather than trying to help you. This leads to the conclusion of the game where it shows how your actions were affected by the villain.» (D69, Frank Fontaine, *BioShock*)

Alternatively, in this example, the Companion villain turned out to be the one to require assistance from the player after attempting to eliminate the player character: »as she is removed from the control of the facility, she accompanies the player as a potato when the player tries to escape the part of the facility she and the player were thrown into.» (D10, GLaDOS, *Portal and Portal 2*)

4.5 Love to hate

»I think Glados is one of the very few video game villains that I love to hate but hate to love.« (D82, GLaDOS, *Portal*)

In comparison to other themes, fundamental for this theme is that the players describe their personal positive emotional attachment to the character by these very charged words: love and hate.

Typical of this theme, the participants report conflicting feelings regarding the characters. For instance, D38 described how their emotions evolved after the dramatic betrayal of a previously Companion character was revealed:

»Solas is unique as a villain because of the dramatic reversal of his relationship to the player character in the post-game DLC, so my emotions towards him certainly did change! That being said, I still love him as a character, I think he's extremely complex and interesting and well-written, and I'm so excited to learn more about him if and when the next Dragon Age game ever comes out. I just have slightly more mixed feelings about his actions and motivations than I did at the beginning :)« (D38, Solas, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*).

Interestingly, some of the Love to hate villains function as anti-villains:

»He fights for his own ideals, enforcing his will on to the world, and aims to make the world a better place, a stronger America, believing that his ideals are right and would make the world a better place. He fights for his people in a sense. Knowing that the weak will die, accepting it, and still thinking that it is the right way to go with things, he's a person of integrity.« (D4, Senator Steven Armstrong, *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*)

At the same time, some characters are thought of as »both the villain and the victim of the game.« (D10, GLaDOS, *Portal and Portal 2*) However, in comparison to the Moral challengers, the characters in this theme merely pique the player's interest to find out more about them instead of starting to question themselves as the protagonist.

»His role is to get the player interested in the villain's side and maybe even to piss of the player. [...] He doesn't believe he is the villain of the story, which interested me. [...] He is also not physically intimidating, which is rare for a video game villain.« (D48, Handsome Jack, *Borderlands 2*)

These conflicting feelings regarding often multidimensional characters might toy with the players' emotions. The player is not sure how they are supposed to feel: are they allowed to have such affection for an evil character? »I hate his morals but I love how terrible his personality is» (D48, Handsome Jack, *Borderlands 2*).

Even through the character's nihilism and attempts to kill, participants in this theme typically displayed compassion for the villain.

»She is a fascinating character to me, because while she is a murderous sadistic robot, she also is somewhat sympathetic and a lovable character. Her backstory as a woman whose consciousness was forced into a computer is tragic, and the more you learn about her history, the more she makes sense. Her sense of humor is dry and sarcastic, and it makes the games memorable. One of the most iconic parts of her character is the two songs she sings to the player during the end credits of the game, 'Still Alive' and 'Want you gone', there is something memorable, hilarious and touching about the villain of the game singing a break up song to the player character. After ten years from when I first played the games, GLaDOS is a character I still love, and still stays as one of the most memorable video game characters to me.» (D10, GLaDOS, *Portal and Portal 2*)

A common factor for this theme is that the villains are sympathetic in their own ways and the players indicate understanding and respect for them:

»During the mission he talks about his plans and slowly you, understand them more and more and you might even see the point in them, he wasn't a pushover corrupted politician, but a respectable man of virtue. In the end I loved him, his speeches were batshit insane, but he held his belief and pride to the end, even after his heart was exploded to pieces, dying with a smile in his face.» (D4, Senator Steven Armstrong, *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*)

4.6 Rooting for the villain

This theme refers to participants expressing their support for the villain: »you are absolutely rooting for him for most of the game, until you start questioning some of his decisions while hoping that they are just momentary relapses in judgement.» (D26, Dutch van der Linde, *Red Dead Redemption/Red Dead Redemption 2*) Even though the player understands that the fate of the villain is usually inevitable and scripted, some characters they just hope they could save: »You see her transformation so I was kinda hoping that it would be possible to change her fate in the game, but it is not.» (D30, Vicar Amelia, *Bloodborne*)

Separating these characters from the others, the player is rooting for the villain and wishes that the villain would survive or somehow be redeemed: returned to the good side. Motives of the characters in this theme are understandable, even if not justifiable. The participants describe desire to find a way to change the villain and their fate.

»When he became more of a villain, I felt frustrated. You just want to scream, ‘why can’t you admit that you’re wrong?’ It’s a relatable experience in communicating with people. In the end I did feel pity for him, because he really just wanted to help everyone, but went about it the wrong way.» (D41, Chairman Rose, *Pokémon Sword/Pokémon Shield*)

Compared to villains that only quickly make their appearance, the participants describe that the villain characters in this theme have been present quite long:

»I chose him because he really isn’t the villain for most of the game. He only becomes the main ‘boss fight’ in the last mission. But you’re there for his whole descent. So, when you’re in the end fight, it’s like you’re fighting someone you almost agree with. Someone who fought alongside you. Someone you want to redeem, not kill.» (D47, Larry ‘Pixy’ Foulke, *Ace Combat Zero: The Belkan War*)

Similarly to the Love to hate characters, the participants describe the attachment formed between them and the villain. For instance, also participant D107 mentions the longevity of the character and writes about how their own connection with the villain affected them as a player:

»Their involvement with the story all the way through, and their complex connection to the protagonist make this villain stand out. It’s rare that the protagonist struggles not with how to kill the villain, but whether; and even more rare that I as a player feel conflicted about carrying out the story as written.» (D107, Dutch van der Linde, *Red Dead Redemption/Red Dead Redemption 2*)

Whether it is keeping the character around long enough to get to know them or offering the player other alternative tools to understand the villain, the characters in this theme feel sympathetic and worthy of forgiveness. A noteworthy feature that the players describe contributing to their intense emotional investment is how the villain character is also a playable character at some point in the game (series). Participant D73 expressed hating the villain at the beginning but changed their opinion after gaining an alternative perspective: »we play at the same time with her and with a main character of TLOS 2 so we see both sides of story and it awakes in

us compassion for villain and also makes us ready to forgive and understand other side.» (D73, Abigail ‘Abby’ Anderson, *The Last of Us Part II*)

Responses suggested that the participants started to care about the villain by gaining experience or information concerning the character of their choice. The participants expressed a broad range of emotions towards the villain, from respect and awe to sadness and disappointment. Participants described the characters with compassion and sympathy. For instance, if given a chance to talk to the villain, participant D30 would »try to dissuade her from her fate somehow, or try to assure them that it is not her fault, there was nothing they could do.» (D30, Vicar Amelia, *Bloodborne*). In this example, another participant expressed feeling a powerful sense of empathy:

»He made me feel conflicted, just like he did. You spend the whole game fighting in one direction, and then you question the whole thing. He makes you feel a little empty, like your foundation isn’t there and you have to hold yourself in the air. [...] This character really worked because it wasn’t like he was the villain all along and there’s a big reveal that he was behind the whole thing. You literally are there for the whole ride and experience the inner conflict he has.» (D47, Larry “Pixy” Foulke, *Ace Combat Zero: The Belkan War*)

4.7 Moral challenger

The theme ‘Moral challenger’ stands for the villains that make players question their perception of right and wrong in the game. The value of the Moral challenger characters is to get the player to stop and reconsider their actions: to make them think. Who is in the right? Are we actually the bad guys?

»He made me think about my character’s actions. He made me realise that not everything is black and white as it seemed so in the grand scheme of things and that I might be actually a villain to his story as much as he is to mine.» (D74, Emet-Selch / Hades, *Final Fantasy XIV*)

These morally grey villains affect the player by making them re-evaluate their own judgements, positions and roles in the game. The following examples show different perspectives for the participants’ introspection.

Notably, with the characters of this theme, the players have opportunities to understand the villain’s perspective and motives. Participant D12 described how the character’s objectives were explained and rationalised by justifying the villain’s actions from their perspective: the protagonist and the villain had different perceptions of the world and the living in it.

»It can be said that Emet works largely for the same motivations, but different purpose as the hero of the story. Emet wants to bring back his own ruined world from the past and considers the current inhabitants unworthy of living in the legacy of his race. The game's protagonists of course want to preserve the current world and eventually manage to convince even Emet of their worthiness and gain his approval. Nothing about Emet, apart from maybe his hair, is black and white. His involvement in the story creates many confrontations where you start to question whose cause really is the righteous one as you gain a relatable understanding of his goals as well.» (D12, Emet-Selch, *Final Fantasy XIV*)

Like in the previous theme, Rooting for the villain, participants often indicate strong sympathy, understanding, and in some cases, respect for the characters in this theme. While some participants only doubted themselves, some were more impacted by the character: »You can find streamers bursting out crying only because he is just appearing suddenly into scene.. and so did I too.. :')» (D2, Emet-Selch, *Final Fantasy XIV*). Uniquely for this theme, the characters often actually have their awaited redemption arc: compared to the previous theme, where the players could only hope for the villains to gain their redemption. For instance, participant D37 explains how the villain of their choice has a change of heart and regrets his past:

»As the story progresses the player begins to learn more about his motivations and it becomes hard not to respect the transition in character that happens within him - that when he assassinated the Empress his regret overwhelmed him and eventually he desired retirement from killing. Something broke inside him and he felt incredible grief with not only his actions but the slow falling of the city around him.» (D37, Daud, *Dishonored*)

For this participant, the villain reflecting the protagonist was the reason for their self-examination: »I found his character arc fascinating and brilliantly done, like he is the villain in D1 but also a mirror to the game's protagonist and makes the player reconsider their actions throughout the game depending on how they played» (D37, Daud, *Dishonored*).

Emet-Selch especially became a prominent example of a Moral challenger in every response (n = 3) mentioning him. Participants describe him fondly and as relatable, though acknowledging how radically his views differ from the protagonist's. Overall, the character was described as having immense depth and multidimensionality:

»Emet-Selch is twisted person who has his goals and tries to achieve those by any means. Still he does understand that he is the villain by opposing heroes but he believes that sacrifices are needed to be made. He does not hurt people for fun but does not hesitate to do so if needed.

Emet feels like mentally broken ghost from past, who has lost his beliefs about good and evil. During the story he is comparing acts of main characters for his own doings and makes very good points why things has become as they are. There is something very human in his choices of his story.» (D2, Emet-Selch, *Final Fantasy XIV*)

Participants describe the characters having heroic personality traits and virtues: as anti-villains, their choices are made with respectable objectives, even when their ways and the outcome have disastrous consequences.

»I chose Emet because of the way he is portrayed in the game. At first, he appears to be villainous and evil, throughout the game you learn of his true motives and come to realise that perhaps you are the one who might be in the wrong. While his actions and motives led to genocidal events of gargantuan proportions one could argue that they have been made for the greater good. Nothing is black/white with Emet. Throughout the game you learn of his true motives and learn what drives him. You sympathize with him even though he must be stopped. Later on in Endwalker he becomes a major supporting character as well as the narrator of the whole story. While theoretically he is not a villain at that point any more, at some point in the game you learn more about him which makes you understand and appreciate him even more. He reminds me Batman's Joker, if Joker wasn't pure evil and had redeeming qualities to his motives. He is a perfectly crafted antagonist and one that I will never forget. I truly believe he is one of, if not the best video game villains ever written.» (D74, Emet-Selch / Hades, *Final Fantasy XIV*)

Illustrating different ways to create personal conflict, in this example, the contemplation is described to stem from the mental states of the player character and the villain. The participant described this character as relatable, and the doubt they caused is there: »Made me feel scared of his insanity and unpredictability, later on made me question my own actions as being insane (which was intended), killing him gave conflicted feelings» (D14, Vaas Montenegro, *Far Cry 3*).

In this special case, the participant noted that the character got them to think about the conflict of the villain's downfall into madness instead of their own actions and morality.

»The feeling that he looks badass and his theme song is epic never changed, but the story does highlight how one can go from good to bad in certain conditions. During the story, you see how and why the character goes mad, so you understand why he goes mad but also that he goes way too far. That's why it's a certain nice kind of conflict which makes you ponder.» (D96, Sephiroth, *Final Fantasy VII*)

4.8 Personal nemesis

This theme is named ‘Personal nemesis’ for the level the antagonist reaches: under the player’s skin. As a polar opposite of the Rooting for the villain theme, the Personal nemesis villains motivate the player to try and seek them out to challenge them, with the villain’s destruction in mind. In contrast to themes with positive emotional attachments, these characters create a negative emotional bond with the player by, for instance, doing something shocking and horrifying.

Participant D85 described that something felt off from the start but did take losing their player character with grace: »In the last second to last battle you have with Micah, he kills the main character you’ve been playing as so far. Which I think is a brilliant twist in the plot. Later on you get to avenge yourself as another character.» (D85, Micah Bell, *Red Dead Redemption 2*). The villains in this theme were often characterised as sadistic, arrogant and scheming: »Later on he ruthlessly killed one of the playable characters (Aerith). From that point onwards I thought ‘This ***** has to die’» (D104, Sephiroth, *Final Fantasy VII*).

Characteristic of this theme, participants express anticipating the oncoming conflict with eagerness and demonstrate readiness to confront the villain:

»The Assassin is a great villain because she can become such a personal goal for the player. The other Chosen are like this too but the Assassin, while relentless and brutal, holds respect for the player. With every encounter different and the player’s unique soldier’s (which can be customized and named by the player), the war stories that naturally come from each encounter are much more powerful than any pre-scripted story. The combination of rising stakes, constant taunts, great voice acting and narratives generated through gameplay, the Assassin is a great villain because she makes things personal. The war in XCOM2 isn’t anymore just about saving the Earth. It’s about shoving a plasma rifle up the Assassin’s and the rest of the Chosen’s space breechers.» (D15, The Assassin, *XCOM 2: War Of The Chosen*)

While the banter with the Comic relief characters was enjoyable for players, these villains take their insults to a whole other – personal – level. Though, often the player is unable to answer back.

»As Glados is emotionally attacking the player character, it almost felt like a personal attack against me, the player. She made me want to solve the puzzle at hand just to get back at her, kind of motivational anger so to speak. [...] It adds to the tense and annoyed atmosphere that she can speak to you but most of the time you can’t reply in any way.» (D82, GLaDOS, *Portal*)

The characters in this theme are mainly experienced as unsympathetic. Participants commonly describe hatred and anger towards the character, some wishing they would get to avenge something the villain did. In this example, participant D55 recounted how the character did everything possible to grow the player's hatred:

»He took the role of a villain into a whole new personal level, he was constantly talking you down through the communication channel and it all reaches its peak when around the middle of the game you are forced to witness in a cut scene as he murders your beloved mentor character that has been with you from all the way from the previous game. All the while the player is actually unable to do anything and is forced to watch as he disappears from the scene. All in all, he went all out in becoming a target for you to hate.» (D55, Handsome Jack, *Borderlands 2*)

Exceptionally for characters in this theme, the participants emphasise being motivated personally as a player, strengthening how they live through the protagonist: »At first I was very indifferent, besides finding the character cool. However as the story progressed, Jack's evil deeds became more blatant and as the player I felt more desire to fight him.» (D68, Jack of Blades, *Fable/Fable: The Lost Chapters*). In this example, as the game progressed, the participant's perception of the villain and their motivation to defeat it developed:

»At first, he seemed just a normal bad guy you will face at the end, but his tenacity and strong will to defy death earned my recognition. So you could say my view of him changed a lot as the story went on and in the end, it was no more need to beat this guy because he is bad but more like getting a closure for their story» (D92, Liquid Snake, *Metal Gear Solid Series*).

Supplementing their response, participant D15 added a comment aside their chosen villain that compliments how games utilise systems to create personal relationships between players and villains, contributing to a shifting, more complex, and ultimately more compelling experience:

»More games need systems that create narratives through gameplay. While making choices in RPGs are great, the usually ultimately result in the same outcome, with different paths along the way. The Nemesis System in *Shadow of Mordor* (and *Shadow Of War*) is a fantastic innovation. While the plot of the game is basic, the personal vendettas created by the system are absolute gold. *XCOM2: The War Of The Chosen* utilizes a similar system. Although not quite as robust but even still it makes for great personalized war stories that are born organically without a rigid preset script.» (D15, The Assassin, *XCOM 2: War Of The Chosen*)

4.9 Total sociopath

This theme was named literally ‘Total sociopath’ after a rather descriptive response: »Very unsettling, makes weird comments and jokes. Has a distinct laugh. Total sociopath willing to do anything to accomplish his goals. Insane. Nihilistic and destructive for its own sake.» (D90, Kefka, *Final Fantasy VI*)

The characters seem to differ in that participants use a wide variety of adjectives that do not overlap much when describing the characters’ personalities, such as condescending, ruthless, selfish, and cold. Interestingly, participants characterised these villains with terms that are used to describe mental health issues, such as »kinda psychotic» (D46, Sephiroth, *Final Fantasy VII*). For instance, participant D44 compared their values and morals with the character’s as follows: »Completely opposite, as he is a narcissistic, murderous psychopath who wants revenge on a genocidal scale.» (D44, Handsome Jack, *Borderlands 2*). Standing out, most participants did see their values and morals as very different from those of the villain.

»Volgin is evil and lacks almost all redeeming quantities. He is a pastiche of an evil Soviet officer, hating both the geopolitical enemies of the Soviets as well as most of his own countrymen who don’t share his jingoism. I find no points of commonality in my values with him.» (D23, Colonel Volgin, *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*)

There is little to no mention of participants’ being able to relate to these characters, which suggests a lack of sympathy. »Another role of Volgin is to be a hate sink, as the other antagonists in the game are sympathetic to varying degrees.» (D23, Colonel Volgin, *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*). Compared to villains in other themes, participants seemed to dislike Total sociopaths. Like the Personal nemesis villains, participants described wishing ill upon the characters:

»Micah is well written character who just makes you feel sick. He is ruthless, greedy, selfish, has no morale and only thinks of himself. [...] You start to hope that something bad happens to him.» (D56 Micah Bell, *Red Dead Redemption 2*)

Unifying the characters in this theme, participants noted how the villains seem to show no regard for others and use any means necessary to reach their selfish goals: »Muscular, demonic son of a bitch who wants nothing but to kill everyone. Slaughters humans as a hobby and has very bad relationship with life in general.» (D35, Diablo, *Diablo*)

»Volgin wants to rule over the Soviet Union, but is not particularly patriotic, as he is seen for instance launching a nuclear attack on his own

countrymen to further international tensions. He is sadistic and enjoys torturing people including through the usage of his innate electric powers. His sadism extends to his sexual relations and he is seen harassing his female underlings.» (D23, Colonel Volgin, *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*)

4.10 Thematically varying characters

This section discusses characters that fit into multiple themes simultaneously or in different parts of the gameplay. Two characters are used to exemplify how and why the villains seem to shift from theme to theme or exist in different themes simultaneously. Importantly, participants' interpretation and perception of the villain is in the core of this research. Abby is an interesting example, because of how radically the part of the game in which the player is influences their opinion of the character. Participants' perception of the villain shifts during gameplay, and thus, Abby shifts into another theme. Arthas is noteworthy because of how varying the participants' descriptions and perceptions of the character are. In general, particularly Companions change in either direction: becoming the villain after starting as the protagonist's ally or the other way around, which causes them to evolve into other themes.

Abigail »Abby» Anderson

Abigail »Abby» Anderson is an excellent example of a character that suits multiple themes described in this thesis. The character is perceived and described differently between participants and at different points of gameplay. The players' experience and perception of the character evolve during the gameplay, and they start to see the villain in a different light: »The game managed to turn a hated character into a beloved one, despite the actions she took.» (D40, Abby, *The Last of Us Part II*). Abby's role in the game changes from the villain to the player character. Participant D73 described that at the start of the game, they hated Abby for their heinous act of killing the main character of the previous game in the series. Abby becomes the player character along with Ellie, the surrogate daughter of the PC in the first game. D73 emphasised experiencing both sides of the story, which evoked their understanding and readiness to forgive Abby. That is how the villain shifted from being a Personal nemesis to the Rooting for the villain theme.

»Whole story of game makes her so unique, it just different, its first time that made me felt sorry for villian and wanted to both villan and main character survive, and the ending was so hard while they were fighting i just wanted for both of the them to survive and stop fighting and just leave eachother alone. I guess that bonding with villian in game and seeing

her side of story makes her unique.» (D73, Abigail ‘Abby’ Anderson, *The Last Of Us 2*)

Another participant described their desire to seek revenge against Abby, which later evolved into understanding after »She forces the player to re-evaluate their biases» (D40, Abby, *The Last of Us Part II*). In that response, the participant seemed to perceive the character as their Personal nemesis, which later turned into a Moral challenger (with understanding). In contrast, D73 expressed wishing the character would survive; despite D40 describing Abby as a beloved character, they did not single out feelings of wishing that the villain survives. In the case of Abby, the players’ experience of the character seemed to influence the character to leave an imprint on them.

Arthas Menethil, later known as the Lich King

The most mentioned character (n = 8), Arthas Menethil, warrants its own mention. Not for the character’s popularity, but for the distinct differences amongst the responses. The perception of the character varies quite a lot between different participants. Some players describe the character and their experience with it quite flatly, whereas others have a deeper emotional connection and affection for the character. The following two quotations to the question ‘Why did you choose this character in particular? What makes this character unique?’ contrast the different emotional connections participants seem to have. D13 had a simple justification: »His awesomeness» (D13, Lich King, *World of Warcraft - Wrath of the Lich King*). However, participant D91 explained their reasoning more in-depth:

»As a character Arthas is built extremely well. First you become fond of him through the warcraft 3 storyline, then you watch him slowly lose himself while you are the one playing as him. This creates immense emotional investment to the character in a storyline that lasted 6 years (2002-2008). When you end up killing him after great challenges (defeating one of the most difficult and notorious raids in wow) in world of warcraft its like mercy killing an old friend you grew up with, who tried to do the right thing but lost himself. I also think most of Arthas’s decisions that lead him down the path to becoming ‘evil’ were relatable.» (D91, Arthas Menethil / the Lich King, *The Warcraft franchise; Warcraft 3 and World of Warcraft.*)

In most cases, participants using the name Arthas and noting the character is present in Warcraft III and World of Warcraft described the character as much more multidimensional. They also describe the villain with more fondness and use more emotionally charged words:

»Be it as a hero or villain he was always one of the center figures of the game. I loved the character of Arthas the whole way through his story. Playing as him was good but fighting him at the end was the epic climax only video games as a medium can achieve. As emotions; exhilarating, awe, sadness and melancholy. That's basically the recipe for epicness.» (D91, Arthas Menethil / the Lich King, *The Warcraft franchise; Warcraft 3 and World of Warcraft.*)

One explaining factor can be that in responses where the attachment to the character seems more profound, the participants might have played Warcraft III in addition to World of Warcraft, where Arthas Menethil is featured as a playable character. Therefore they have a broader personal experience of the character's story arc.

The participants whose description and experience of Arthas/Lich King is more one-dimensional are describing him specifically from World of Warcraft, from the Wrath of the Lich King -expansion. They place much more value on the fact that the character is *iconic*: »A villain who plots to control the world. Mighty armor and one of the greatest swords in games ever.» (D13, Lich King, *World of Warcraft - wrath of the Lich King*). In addition to being a »Bad ass and cool» character, D77 pointed out the history with the Lich King raid boss battle: »it was one the 1st race of the world first boss» (D77, The Lich King, *World of Warcraft*), a competition between groups of players still going on with released content where players attempt to defeat the boss before others. In general, most participants highlighted the raid fight against Arthas in detail, specifically mentioning a scripted mechanic in which the whole player group is momentarily killed and later resurrected by another NPC.

These addressed examples are not unique cases but quintessential descriptions of characters evolving and players' perceptions changing. It is important to note that different players might perceive the same characters differently; therefore, the villains may map to multiple themes simultaneously in separate responses. For example, participants described quite differently how they were affected by Handsome Jack's (*Borderlands 2*) taunts, which were directly subjected to the player character. The themes are not static: villains might shift from one theme to another for multiple reasons. For instance, due to their role changing during gameplay or the player's perception and interpretation evolving.

Furthermore, players' perceptions of characters may evolve during gameplay for different reasons, often after gaining additional information and an alternative perspective. More importantly, the villain itself does not necessarily evolve, but the player sees them in a different light. In this example, the villain seems to evolve, which actually stems from the character's backstory being introduced: »Much of his own backstory gets explained little by little throughout the expansions as he develops from a generic, one dimensional bad guy to a relatable villain that you can

love, hate, or both at the same time.» (D12, Emet-Selch, *Final Fantasy XIV*)

Participant D71 recognised that due to familiarising themselves with the storytelling via the villain's soundtrack, their view of the character evolved:

»After learning her story, i could somewhat identify with the character. Character is based on some interpretation of existentialism, which also supports the fact that she is French in the game. As mentioned above, they have not changed in the game itself, rather upon closer reflection upon things happening in game, it changed.» (D71, Mistral, *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*)

5 Discussion

5.1 Answering the research question

Villains and their role in video games have remained largely ignored in existing player experience research. The aim of this research was to address this gap and provide new insights into players' thoughts on villains. The research question this thesis set out to explore was: »**What kind of villains in video games are memorable?**«.

An online qualitative survey was conducted to gather data on the topic: to find deeper connections and patterns in the parasocial relationships between video game players and their chosen villain characters. The results were analysed using thematic analysis, which yielded nine distinctive themes, characterising the role and function of villains, as well as their emotional impact.

The results of this work show that many kinds of villains are memorable, and many offer a variety of intense and complex emotional experiences. The themes show the various ways the villains affect the players, whether directly through narrative or emotions. The results further indicate that players have strong emotional connotations for the villains, and respondents, for instance, show affection and sympathy for them. Participants describe epic fight moments and value gaining access to the characters' perspectives and learning about their backstories. These results are interesting to player experience research and game development fields. The following paragraphs discuss the implications of the findings. Firstly, villains' functions are explored, and secondly, the emotional experience of villains is discussed.

5.1.1 Functional value of the villain

Some of the themes presented in this thesis described the functional value of the villain. Their functional effect and players' emotions also overlapped: the characters of the theme 'Comic relief' functionally offered a brief respite to the game's pace by entertaining and making the participant laugh. Villains from themes 'Obstacle' and 'Companion' affected the player character more directly by offering resistance and support, respectively. These functionalities also served to indicate the PC's power, for example, making them feel weak or empowered in some cases where the Companion required their aid. While characters of the theme 'Embodiment of evil' might have been seemingly emotional distress-inducing, they also functioned to bolster the protagonist and justify their existence within the game world. Characters of other themes offered more of an emotional affect and value, such as 'Personal nemesis' villains, which motivated the players to seek them out for confrontation.

In comparison to previous literature on non-player character types, the findings from this research show that there is much more to villains than being an evil entity that

opposes the main character and offers a challenge for the player. While some themes presented in this thesis have similarities to previous research, the themes characterise villains in a new light. Previous work has namely focused on the NPCs' social roles and functionality (e.g. goal and purpose) but has failed to take into account their narrative value, and emotional impact [16, 30, 24]. The themes introduced in this research showcase multiple additional character roles that players perceive villains to have.

Companions and Obstacles are in correspondence with the similar 'counterpart' roles introduced in previous literature. Their functional value can be simplified to them either opposing or supporting the PC's goals. Companions are similar to allies and teammates described in previous work, while features of Obstacles resemble opponents, boss (monsters), and challengers/contenders [16, 30, 24]. In their functional sense of hindering the players' progress and offering a challenge, Obstacles resemble the role previous work has mostly assigned to antagonists. However, not much knowledge existed on villain experience beyond that. The results of this research shed light on this gap. Some encounters with Obstacle villains were quite mundane, only prolonging the playing or existing to kill or be killed like Cacodemon from *DOOM*. Still, some players had profound emotional experiences and investments with them. For instance, as the subtheme 'Insurmountable obstacle' showcases, certain villains heighten the intensity of the experience by providing players with a sense of urgency beyond merely serving as an obstacle.

The results offer reassurance that players do appreciate and remember villains that have been argued not to really offer or require emotional investment aside from their momentary challenge (e.g. Isbister on boss monsters [16]). From the perspective of character and game design, responses about Obstacles give insights into what players value about them. Instead of just seeing the characters as hindrances, participants described impressive encounters, superb visual design, appreciation of lore and even unusual game concepts: having to run away from the character instead of confronting it. These valued things also applied to villains of other themes: respondents showed appreciation for a wide range of different qualities and features.

Character types comparable to Companions are generally considered friendly and mutually willing to cooperate with the player character, with whom their goals align. The Companion villains presented in this study were often either in that situation as a necessity or as means to further their own plans. Using antagonists as party members, quest givers, and mentors offers interesting avenues to show alternative perspectives but could also facilitate for creation of strong emotional attachments and a false sense of security towards the character.

While the functional value of Companions and Obstacles seems most tangible and clear-cut of the themes, other villains showed their utility through impacting the players' emotions and perceptions.

5.1.2 Emotional experience of video game villains

While there exists previous research on emotional experience of video game characters, other than the character attachment type ‘Respected Nemesis’ in the study by Bopp et al. [4], villains have been almost entirely overlooked. The present study contributes to the previously limited knowledge on how players emotionally experience villains and how their perceptions might shift during gameplay.

Warpefelt and Verhagen [30] argue that NPCs should fit into the players’ expectations to support immersion. These findings show that this notion is inadequate: while understandably ‘glitching’ or ‘bugged’ villains are out of place, subverting expectations were often a key part in the player experience. The results of this work suggest that subverting players’ expectations precisely facilitate for enjoyable, impressive, and memorable experiences. The resulting experience was positive in the overwhelming majority of instances where participants’ expectations did not hold. For instance, participants described how the game turned a hated character into a beloved one when the villain evolved from Personal nemesis into a Moral challenger, and being surprised by the revelation of the villain’s actual power. Players indicated feeling impacted and impressed when the villain was revealed to be much more powerful than initially expected, for example with Insurmountable obstacles. On the other hand, if the villains’ perceived power fell below players’ expectations after the buildup, it seemed to result in disappointment.

As Bopp et al. [4] proposed, this research suggests that characters developing during gameplay do offer rich emotional character experiences. Especially games subverting player’s expectations and using surprising moments, such as betrayal, facilitated for strong emotional responses such as anger in the event of being betrayed. Events and feelings of betrayal were especially prominent with Personal nemesis villains. Indeed, the memorable impact of shifting player perceptions is supported by the study conducted by Whitby et al. [31] on perspective challenging moments in games.

The usage of developing villains and shifting player perceptions proved to be a significant element that contributed to the villains’ memorability. Not only did the villains evolve across presented themes, but also from a narrative perspective while staying within a theme. In addition to, for example, witnessing atrocities first-hand committed by the character, the actual development of the villain was often facilitated by solely granting players access to additional knowledge that altered their perception. Notably, characters of the theme ‘Moral challenger’ made the player question their actions and where they actually stand on the line of moral behaviour. Whitby et al. [31] found that the game (by mechanics or interface), made a participant doubt themselves and even sometimes question their sanity, like Vaas Montenegro (*Far Cry 3*) was described to do in the present study.

Seeing matters from the villains’ viewpoint made an impression on many participants, and the experiences were seemingly impactful. The value that players placed on

getting to know the villain, learning more about them, and seeing their side of the story could provide avenues for future research. The feature of gaining access to the character's perspective specifically promoted understanding and sympathy.

While previous work acknowledges that NPCs' roles may vary and overlap, research on evolving villains and their impact on player experience is nonexistent. Present results suggest a potentially intriguing idea to explore further: how do friendly, allied characters evolving into villains and vice versa affect the player experience? Such instances within this research mainly consisted of feelings of betrayal or surprise respectively. Notably, there was a bit of an overlap between Companion and Personal nemesis characters, suggesting that the emotional attachment formed when the villain fulfilled the role of a Companion was strong enough to facilitate an impactful revelation.

Mostly regardless of the theme the villain was mapped to, some antagonists were more sympathetic than others. Often players' sympathy and understanding towards the villain grew during gameplay, for instance when they learned of the characters' motives. Participants described being able to relate to the antagonist, especially after gaining access to their perspective. In general, respondents complimented being able to see, experience or otherwise learn about how and why the villain came to be.

Sympathy and understanding towards villains were especially mentioned when participants were asked to compare their values and morals with the villains'. Generally values and morals were perceived as mostly opposite: some aspects participants described understanding, but mentioned that it was not enough to justify the villains' means. Interestingly, characters perceived as nihilistic in varying degrees were separated by whether the player had sympathy and understanding for them. Pradantyo et al. [23] describe that relating to the protagonist's goals and motivations is helped by villains being on the opposite end of moral behaviour. However, the present findings show that even though the villains wreak havoc and exhibit extreme immoral tendencies, some players were still able to relate to them. A potential future avenue to explore could be to what degree does the game give the necessary opportunities and knowledge for the player to understand nihilistic characters and how does it affect their emotional experience.

Interestingly, a common factor between the two characters used as examples in section 4.10 Thematically varying characters, Abby and Arthas both have their moment as the player character. Abby ended up as the PC, and Arthas started as one. Being able to control the villain character provides possibilities to a variety of different player experiences. For instance, such mechanic can be used to offer access to the villain's perspective, give a feel of how powerful the villain is, and allow players to commit villainous acts. Iacovides and Mekler [15, p. 6] give an example in their study on gaming during difficult life experiences how their survey's participants used gaming as a method to de-stress: »The open world and lack of permanent in-game consequences, even when committing serious violence, made for a very easy way to channel stress.»

There has been a growing interest in emotionally complex player experiences (e.g. [22, 3, 13, 31]). This thesis shows that villains hold great potential to stir a variety of emotions in players. The range of emotions described by the respondents was extensive, and the antagonists were described with various adjectives. Participants justified their choice of villain in various ways in addition to nostalgia and ‘being fresh in memory’ or ‘coming to mind first’. Very few participants noted that their chosen villain was *not* unique when inquired what made them stand out. Rather, respondents made comparisons to other games and characters and showed appreciation for memorable boss fights and features they perceived as unique. Many complimented character design and writing: especially villains’ story arcs and how they perceived the characters to be portrayed. For some, the character’s voice (and voice acting) or the music associated with the villain made the experience greater. Some participants mentioned virtuous traits exhibited by the villain: even though they were antagonised, the character showed respect for them or others. Similar villains to ‘Respected Nemesis’ characters described in the emotional attachment study by Bopp et al. [4] were also present in this survey: for instance, D4 described Senator Steven Armstrong as ‘a respectable man of virtue’.

While the emotional investment in the character was not always tremendous and intimate, some villains certainly made their mark on the players. Participants described strong emotions during their gameplay due to the intensity of their emotional investment in the villain and even bursting out crying when the character appeared (Emet-Selch). Villains, even boss monsters that appear momentarily, can have an extensive backstory behind them and prove to cause impressive emotional experiences. As previously mentioned as an example in the Background section, Oceiros (*Dark Souls III* [12]) is a blind dragon boss which crushes its baby that he talks to during the fight. The baby’s cries can be heard, and the fight was toned down in the final game by removing the malformed character model of the baby.

Participants gave surprisingly little value to the looks and appearance of the villains in regards to their memorability and uniqueness. The visual design of the villains and the boss fights helped make some of them iconic and impressive, but was not necessarily that crucial factor in why they were chosen. However, although respondents did not declare to have chosen a villain for its visual design, they often described them vividly and in detail. Some epic looking video game antagonists are not necessarily memorable due to their visual design. Only few respondents mentioned the character’s looks as at least one of the primary reasons for choosing the character. For instance, participant D48 mentioned their character standing out compared to other villains by not being physically intimidating. Features that make a villain someone’s favourite or most memorable are very subjective: for example, Bowser for some was ‘not too hard to beat’ but for others, especially from the perspective of their own childhood, the character showed as an unbeatable, insurmountable obstacle they wanted to hide from.

Surprisingly few respondents chose a villain that is seen as traditionally evil. Inter-

estingly, but perhaps not unexpectedly, less than half of the participants described their chosen antagonists by means of literal evilness even though they felt the villain was not evil. Participants were discerning on how they described the villains. They used, for example, dark triad traits and clinical terms. An intriguing avenue could be to further examine the different ways and euphemisms that players use to convey their perception of the villains' immorality and wickedness. In general, future work might benefit from linguistic keyword analysis in how players describe villains, but also what are the actual traits associated with video game villains.

For future game design, these results might give inspiration for innovative means for player engagement. The theme 'Rooting for the villain' could produce inspiration for future game and character design. Participants' attachment to the character is unique and they wished to be able to make the choice of sparing the villain. What if it would be possible actually to decide to aid the villain: e.g. by forming a companionship with the character or by controlling them into redemption – to have an unscripted impact on changing their fate? Whitby et al. [31] argue for the potential to give players opportunities to have more agency over their choices and actions.

Some systems already exist that adapt to player's actions: participant D15 praised the Nemesis System [14] and a similar system used in XCOM 2: War of the Chosen in creation of great personalised war stories. They pointed out that although the game's storyline was simple, the system facilitated the creation of 'personal vendettas'. Such systems have potential – perhaps these results inspire novel ideas for what annoys or gratifies players and what features to take advantage of for future adaptive systems.

5.2 Limitations of the study

Due to the scarcity of previous work, this research tried to take a 'wide-angle lens' on the topic and explore what kinds of emotional experiences regarding villains even exist instead of focusing on specific narrowly scoped experiences. Due to the exploratory nature of this work and results, this thesis does not aim to prove causal relations on what aspects of villains cause players to find them more memorable than others.

Using a survey as a data collection method introduced some limitations. Due to the voluntary nature of the survey and its spreading through social media connections, there was a selection bias: people who were interested in the subject and wished to share their own opinion came to answer.

As a self-reporting study based on the respondents' memory, how well they remember and the amount of effort the participant has put in the response affected the observation and interpretation of their answers. Interpreting the answers also depended on the respondents' abilities to put their experiences and feelings into words. The phrasing of the introduction and individual questions undoubtedly affected participants'

villain choices and responses.

Other data collection methods such as live interviewing or observational research would have allowed for the conveyance of subtleties such as the tone of voice, facial expressions and body language. These methods would have also permitted follow-up questions and possibilities to clarify and request clarification. Future studies applying these methods could produce differing and interesting results.

As the participants themselves also distributed the survey, it spread amongst certain types of player communities and social groups. For instance, World of Warcraft (WoW) might have gained many responses as the survey was posted to at least a couple of guild groups consisting of WoW players. However, admittedly World of Warcraft is a hugely popular game. The responses were anonymous, and the participants' nationality or area of residence was not collected. However, due to the channels and social circles the survey spread, there is a chance that the sample is regionally somewhat simple: even if not the majority, a large percentage of the participants were likely geographically from the same place, mainly Finland. Future research on the topic with a more diverse sample could be beneficial.

Given the research question, inductive thematic analysis seemed to have the most potential to provide new insights for villain experience research and game design. If a deductive approach (where prior research and existing theories guide the analysis) had been used instead of inductive thematic analysis, it would have yielded different results. As prior research around the topic is scarce, few frameworks exist to be applied for deductive analysis.

6 Conclusion

Character experience is an integral part of player experience and game enjoyment. However, while past player experience research has explored character attachment and emotional experiences while playing games, experiences with villains have been largely overlooked. The findings of this research expand the understanding of what villain experience is.

This work set out to find what makes villains memorable. The results show that these unforgettable villains have made an impression on the player in a variety of ways. Presented results showcase different ways villain characters affect the player and create long-lasting emotional experiences.

The various emotional experiences players described ranged from being entertained by the villain's antics to even feeling desperate before having to confront a seemingly insurmountable obstacle complicating their journey. While some characters were hated and despised, others were deeply loved and adored. Players emphasised different features across the themes: from epic boss fights and challenges to how relatable and sympathetic the characters are. Some players expressed a desire to achieve redemption for the villain, while some were eager to confront the antagonist.

The results shed light on a previously unexplored phenomenon and expand the knowledge of how villains affect the players' journey functionally, emotionally and socially. Results may inform future research, for instance, with regards to the different ways how evilness is perceived. More work is recommended on how villains subvert player expectations, which proved to be an effective way to create memorable experiences.

References

- [1] ATLAS.ti. ATLAS.ti (Version 22.0.11), 2022. <https://atlasti.com/>.
- [2] Jessica E. Black, Yomna Helmy, Olivia Robson, and Jennifer L. Barnes. Who can resist a villain? Morality, Machiavellianism, imaginative resistance and liking for dark fictional characters. *Poetics*, 74:101344, 2019.
- [3] Julia Ayumi Bopp, Elisa D. Mekler, and Klaus Opwis. Negative Emotion, Positive Experience? Emotionally Moving Moments in Digital Games. In *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, CHI '16, page 2996–3006, New York, NY, USA, 2016. Association for Computing Machinery.
- [4] Julia Ayumi Bopp, Livia J. Müller, Lena Fanya Aeschbach, Klaus Opwis, and Elisa D. Mekler. Exploring Emotional Attachment to Game Characters. In *Proceedings of the Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play*, CHI PLAY '19, pages 313–324, New York, NY, USA, 2019. Association for Computing Machinery.
- [5] Nicholas David Bowman, Mary Beth Oliver, Ryan Rogers, Brett Sherrick, Julia Woolley, and Mun-Young Chung. In control or in their shoes? How character attachment differentially influences video game enjoyment and appreciation. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, 8(1):83–99, 2016.
- [6] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. SAGE, 2013.
- [7] Virginia Braun, Victoria Clarke, Elicia Boulton, Louise Davey, and Charlotte McEvoy. The online survey as a qualitative research tool. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 24(6):641–654, 2021.
- [8] Daniel Brewer. Crafting AI for Epic Boss Battles in 'Warframe'. In *Game Developers Conference*, 2016. <https://www.gdevault.com/play/1023408/Crafting-AI-for-Epic-Boss>.
- [9] Jacqueline Burgess and Christian Jones. The Female Video Game Player-character Persona and Emotional Attachment. *Persona Studies*, 6(2):7–21, 2021.
- [10] Capcom. Resident Evil Village, 2021.
- [11] Allison Eden, Serena Daalmans, and Benjamin K. Johnson. Morality Predicts Enjoyment But Not Appreciation of Morally Ambiguous Characters. *Media Psychology*, 20(3):349–373, 2017.
- [12] FromSoftware. Dark Souls III. Bandai Namco Entertainment, 2016.

- [13] Chad Phoenix Rose Gowler and Ioanna Iacovides. “Horror, Guilt and Shame” – Uncomfortable Experiences in Digital Games. In *Proceedings of the Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play*, CHI PLAY ’19, page 325–337, New York, NY, USA, 2019. Association for Computing Machinery.
- [14] Chris Hoge. Helping Players Hate (or Love) Their Nemesis. In *Game Developers Conference*. Monolith Productions, 2018. [https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1025150/Helping-Players-Hate-\(or-Love\)](https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1025150/Helping-Players-Hate-(or-Love)).
- [15] Ioanna Iacovides and Elisa D. Mekler. The Role of Gaming During Difficult Life Experiences. In *Proceedings of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, CHI ’19, page 1–12, New York, NY, USA, 2019. Association for Computing Machinery.
- [16] Katherine Isbister. *Better game characters by design: A psychological approach*. Elsevier, San Francisco, CA, 2006.
- [17] Itay Keren. Boss Up: Boss Battle Design Fundamentals and Retrospective. In *Game Developers Conference*, 2018. <https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1024921/Boss-Up-Boss-Battle-Design>.
- [18] Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, Anne Fiskaali, Henrik Høgh-Olesen, John A. Johnson, Murray Smith, and Mathias Clasen. Do dark personalities prefer dark characters? A personality psychological approach to positive engagement with fictional villainy. *Poetics*, 85:101511, 2021.
- [19] Esra Krabbe. Resident Evil Village: The Evolution of Lady Dimitrescu and Her Daughters – IGN First, 2022. <https://www.ign.com/articles/resident-evil-village-the-evolution-of-lady-dimitrescu-and-her-daughters-ign-first>.
- [20] Michael Sangyeob Lee and Carrie Heeter. What do you mean by believable characters?: The effect of character rating and hostility on the perception of character believability. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, 4(1):81–97, 2012.
- [21] LimeSurvey. LimeSurvey, 2022. <https://www.limesurvey.org/>.
- [22] Elisa D. Mekler, Stefan Rank, Sharon T. Steinemann, Max V. Birk, and Ioanna Iacovides. Designing for Emotional Complexity in Games: The Interplay of Positive and Negative Affect. In *Proceedings of the 2016 Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play Companion Extended Abstracts*, CHI PLAY Companion ’16, page 367–371, New York, NY, USA, 2016. Association for Computing Machinery.
- [23] Reyhan Pradantyo, Max V. Birk, and Scott Bateman. How the Visual Design of Video Game Antagonists Affects Perception of Morality. *Frontiers in Computer Science*, 3, 2021.

- [24] Diogo Rato and Rui Prada. A Taxonomy of Social Roles for Agents in Games. In *International Conference on Entertainment Computing*, pages 75–87. Springer, 2021.
- [25] Gabriel Rivera, Kenneth Hullett, and Jim Whitehead. Enemy NPC Design Patterns in Shooter Games. In *Proceedings of the First Workshop on Design Patterns in Games*, DPG '12, New York, NY, USA, 2012. Association for Computing Machinery.
- [26] Katja Rogers, Maria Aufheimer, Michael Weber, and Lennart E. Nacke. Exploring the Role of Non-Player Characters and Gender in Player Identification. In *Proceedings of the 2018 Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play Companion Extended Abstracts*, CHI PLAY '18 Extended Abstracts, page 271–283, New York, NY, USA, 2018. Association for Computing Machinery.
- [27] Katja Rogers, Maria Aufheimer, Michael Weber, and Lennart E. Nacke. Towards the Visual Design of Non-Player Characters for Narrative Roles. In *Graphics Interface*, pages 154–161, 2018.
- [28] April Tyack and Peta Wyeth. Exploring Relatedness in Single-Player Video Game Play. In *Proceedings of the 29th Australian Conference on Computer-Human Interaction*, OZCHI '17, page 422–427, New York, NY, USA, 2017. Association for Computing Machinery.
- [29] Henrik Warpefelt. *The Non-Player Character: Exploring the believability of NPC presentation and behavior*. PhD thesis, Department of Computer and Systems Sciences, Stockholm University, 2016.
- [30] Henrik Warpefelt and Harko Verhagen. A Typology of Non-Player Characters. In *Proceedings of The Social believability in Games Workshop at the First Joint International Conference of DiGRA and FDG*, pages 1–14. DiGRA, 2016.
- [31] Matthew Alexander Whitby, Sebastian Deterding, and Ioanna Iacovides. “One of the Baddies All along”: Moments That Challenge a Player’s Perspective. In *Proceedings of the Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play*, CHI PLAY '19, page 339–350, New York, NY, USA, 2019. Association for Computing Machinery.