

Empowered by the Experience: Playing as Female Characters in Video Games

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Abstract

Research on female video game characters often investigates negative outcomes of playing as stereotyped characters. Yet, video games increasingly offer people opportunities to play as capable, prominent female characters that may be meaningful and promote positive outcomes (e.g., feelings of empowerment). This manuscript shares the results of a mixed methods survey of individuals ($N = 751$) recruited via online forums who recalled their experiences playing as female game characters. We analyzed qualitative response data using a traditional, top-down approach to identify themes. We focus our analysis and discussion on the results of a human-derived analysis, which indicated both positive and negative dimensions of experiences that participants found meaningful. Participants reported that taking on the role of a female character was often very important to them, but the reason for this significance varied across players. Often, these reasons involved their own gender identities and the context in which the gameplay occurred (e.g., online multiplayer). We consider findings as evidence of eudaimonic media effects.

Keywords

avatar; entertainment media; eudaimonia; gender; media psychology; video games

1. Introduction

Scholars commonly investigate female video game characters by examining pejorative content (e.g., sexualization; Downs & Smith, 2010) and its effects (e.g., increased self-objectification; Skowronski et al., 2021). Notably, researchers have observed the effects of female character portrayals in both women and

men (e.g., Hollett et al., 2020). However, it is critical to explore meaning-making from interactions with characters as they can influence players' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in idiosyncratic ways (Banks & Bowman, 2016). We define meaning-making as the process through which people come to understand character portrayals and imbue them with significance. Playable characters are focal points of meaning-making as they translate player agency into digital environments, facilitating players' connections to a game's ongoing events (Lynch et al., 2022). Focusing on meaning-making, rather than adverse effects, provides researchers a nuanced perspective of how users interpret these characters. This is important for two primary reasons. First, players' social identities (e.g., gender) likely serve as touchstones informing meaning-making processes such as gaining insight (Oliver et al., 2016) about how one's social group relates to others. Second, content dimensions (e.g., narrative roles) may contextualize players' interpretations of characters in ways that are difficult to detect when aiming primarily to measure adverse outcomes rather than the processes and factors that contribute to them (e.g., Lynch et al., 2024). Here, we share results of a mixed-methods survey that asked participants about their experiences with female game characters. This approach allowed us to answer two overarching research questions: (a) What kinds of meaning have players derived from interactions with female game characters? And (b) do players' own gender identities differentiate experiences of interacting with female game characters? Several themes emerged from participants' reflections. Some align with existing research and some support new theoretical directions. Accordingly, our work indicates that although some problems still exist with female game characters, people find interacting with them meaningful.

2. Video Game Characters as Sources of Meaning

Characters are among the most salient aspects of video games, often centrally driving forward narratives and events (Williams et al., 2009). Scholars have long considered the relevance of video game characters in shaping player experiences and inspiring changes in their thoughts, attitudes, or behaviors (e.g., Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009). Further, people can find connections with game characters deeply meaningful (Daneels et al., 2021). Meaning-making undergirds people's experiences with narrative entertainment such as video games. Meaningful entertainment experiences, sometimes called eudaimonic experiences, are often characterized by mixed affective states and thoughtful, deliberative periods of reflection (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010); such experiences may have profound and lasting effects on players (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). Although many types of media can elicit such experiences (see Raney et al., 2020), the relevance of the video game character may enhance eudaimonia. We contend that among types of characters, meaning-making would most prominently involve players' interactions with playable characters (i.e., avatars).

Video games uniquely situate players as participants within content, often offering narrative choice, socializing with other players, and presenting compelling characters that encourage identification (Oliver et al., 2016). Such features facilitate meaning-making within and beyond gameplay sessions. For instance, when interacting with an avatar, players may interpret narrative events as personally significant (Daneels et al., 2021). Personal relevance can encourage biographic resonance or "the emotionally loaded experience that a received entertainment content has something important to do with one's self" (Klimmt & Rieger, 2021, p. 384).

Avatars serve as translations of players' agency in video games, resulting in feelings of being spatially and socially present within the digital space (Lynch et al., 2022). Through avatar interactions, players may feel

that they *become* the avatar and take on its characteristics. Such interactions can foster players' psychological merger with avatars (Klimmt et al., 2009) and shifts in self-concept that correspond with avatar depictions (Yee & Bailenson, 2007). These psychological shifts can influence player cognitions and behaviors. For instance, Yee and Bailenson (2007) designed a set of studies using virtual reality in which they hypothesized that characteristics of the avatar would influence participants' behavioral interactions with confederates of the studies. In one of these studies, the authors assigned participants to use an avatar of varied height, as this characteristic positively predicts self-esteem and competence. Specifically, the assigned avatar was taller, shorter, or the same height as a confederate with whom participants interacted in a money-sharing task. The money-sharing task served as a measure of participant confidence. The authors hypothesized that participants with taller avatars would exude more confidence as an artifact of their avatar's design. Consistent with their hypotheses, participants with taller avatars demonstrated greater confidence, making more self-serving money splits and being less willing to accept unfair splits than those assigned shorter avatars. The authors argued that their observations supported the idea that shifts in the participants' self-concepts produced the behavioral outcomes.

Embodying socially distinct avatars can also offer experiential lenses into digital worlds (Banks & Bowman, 2016). For example, Chen et al. (2021) designed an experiment to test their hypothesis that using an avatar representing a social group different than the participants' own (i.e., an outgroup avatar) would produce more positive attitudes and closeness toward the outgroup compared to those who used an avatar representing their own group (i.e., an ingroup avatar). Specifically, they had participants play as avatars portrayed either as an ingroup member (i.e., Singaporean Chinese citizens) or an outgroup member (i.e., People's Republic of China [PRC] Chinese immigrants). The authors explained that the participants in their study existed in a context where PRC Chinese experience significant prejudice from the Singaporean Chinese majority. While interacting with the avatar, the participants using the PRC Chinese experienced an instance of realistic discrimination. Confirming their hypothesis, the authors reported that participants who embodied the outgroup avatar reported more positive attitudes and closeness to PRC Chinese immigrants. The researchers explained that the effect of experiencing discrimination through the avatar offered insight to those participants compared to those who used an ingroup avatar.

Together, the results of these two studies suggest that the nature of people's interactions with avatars is not predicated on the avatar being like them. In fact, it seems that avatars may be particularly influential sources of insight when they are dissimilar to their players. The characteristics of the avatar can temporarily feel as if they are characteristics of the self (Klimmt et al., 2009), influencing behaviors of the player (Yee & Bailenson, 2007), and giving rise to perspective-taking experiences conveyed through the content (Chen et al., 2021). Self-reflective and perspective-taking states encouraged by avatar interactions likely serve as sources of information around which players form meaning.

2.1. Focusing on Female Video Game Characters

Playing as a female character may provide insight to players who do not identify as women (or girls) and potentiate self-reflective experiences for players who do. These make female characters sources for potential meaning-making. Male characters still vastly outnumber female characters in games (see sampling comparisons across Lynch et al., 2016, and Gilbert et al., 2023). Thus, for some, simply having the opportunity to play as a female character might be meaningful. As noted, games featuring female characters

do not always portray them positively (e.g., Downs & Smith, 2010). Scholars have argued that women and girls remain marginalized as game consumers because of frequent pejorative depictions (e.g., sexually objectifying appearances) of their social group in games (e.g., Lynch et al., 2016). The meaning some women make from such depictions seems to be that certain games or even gaming entirely is not intended for them (Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006). However, female game characters often possess inspiring qualities (e.g., powerful leads; Jansz & Martis, 2007) around which players may make meaning. Jansz and Martis (2007) identified the “Lara Phenomenon,” which articulated characteristics of Tomb Raider’s Lara Croft as poised to inspire players, especially those who identified as women. Croft’s depiction in the narrative of the Tomb Raider series presents her as a powerful hero, capable of impressive physical feats and leveraging elements of her environment to augment her abilities. These qualities are prominent in depictions of female game characters (Lynch et al., 2016) and seem likely to encourage understandings of women as powerful and agentic. Yet, some scholars have argued that physically strong depictions of female characters tend to privilege masculinized interpretations of power (Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015). Further, physically strong characters are often depicted in ways that emphasize an idealized physical appearance (Lynch et al., 2016), which may promote dehumanizing understandings of the characters (Heldman & Cahill, 2007). Indeed, Lara Croft—especially in her earliest portrayals—is infamously sexualized despite her dominant characterization (Jansz & Martis, 2007).

Historically, scholars have emphasized female characters’ appearance as pressing portrayal dimensions for study. Recent evidence has emerged, however, identifying other dimensions of female characters that should contextualize the nature of their portrayals. Specifically, in a recent content analysis, Lynch et al. (2024) discovered that games often portray female characters with gender-normative characteristics. For example, they observed that female characters were often depicted as warm in personality. We contend that the current emphasis in the literature on female characters’ physical appearance obscures the relevance of their other characteristics (e.g., personality, occupation, etc.) in shaping the understandings that players develop of these characters and the way that they imbue them with significance. Players may indeed construe a female video game character depicted as a nurturing leader as powerful; this may be especially likely for women who are often socialized to be nurturing.

Given these potentials, our first aim is to understand what meaning people make from their experiences playing as female game characters. Accordingly, we ask what meaning people have made from their experiences playing as female video game characters (RQ1).

2.2. Linking Female Character Depictions to Empowerment

Portrayals of female video game characters have generated much research addressing their harmful effects on players (e.g., Hollett et al., 2020; Skowronski et al., 2021). Less research has investigated the potential that these characters have as sources of positive outcomes, although some researchers acknowledge this possibility. People generally prefer positive media depictions of their ingroups as these messages contribute to positive self-concepts and wellness outcomes (Trepte & Loy, 2017). Yet, understanding preference only partially informs theorizing about meaning-making from character portrayals.

When Jansz and Martis (2007) described the “Lara Phenomenon,” they argued that players might focus on the ostensibly empowering aspects of her portrayal (e.g., her dominance) rather than other, less empowering

dimensions (i.e., her sex appeal). This argument connects to meaning-making processes, such that players would attend to the dimensions of the character that inspired positive affect, feelings of inspiration, or other desired feelings and mindsets. Importantly, however, taking the meaning-making perspective allows us to recognize that players may understand characters as having *both* positive and negative attributes and imbue those attributes with meaning independently or with consideration of the attributes as interconnected or juxtaposed.

Feminist-themed advertising is one area where the juxtaposition of positive and negative portrayals is evident in portrayals of women (Hainneville et al., 2023). Scholars have begun exploring psychological empowerment in audiences as an outcome of viewing ostensibly powerful portrayals of women in media (e.g., Couture Bue & Harrison, 2019). Empowerment is a multidimensional concept that an individual experiences when they can act with situationally specific mastery over tasks and achieve their goals (Zimmerman, 2000). We, thus, see the possibility that psychologically merging with an avatar to achieve inspiring in-game goals may cause players to feel more empowered than they do in typical day-to-day experiences. Here we focus on empowerment's affective dimension, which is positively valenced (e.g., feeling capable) and functions to support wellbeing by eliciting positive feeling states, inspiring confidence, and fostering self-esteem (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005).

Media intended to inspire empowerment are common in contemporary media (Couture Bue & Harrison, 2019). However, experiments indicate that including such themes in messages does not necessarily yield empowerment (Couture Bue & Harrison, 2019). The motivating notion behind this line of work is that content developers are increasingly portraying women as powerful, strong, and capable; these portrayals sometimes do and sometimes do not continue to incorporate images of idealized appearance. We contend that the meaning-making processes audience members engage in would shape the significance of these depictions. That is, do people understand these characters with more emphasis on their power or appearance? Further, whether players ultimately experience empowerment through these interactions seems dependent on the nature of the meaning made through their interactions. Scholars have argued that some female game character depictions could encourage affective empowerment, especially in women (Jansz & Martis, 2007). Thus, we ask whether experiences playing as female video game characters inspired feelings of empowerment and whether women are especially likely to experience this outcome (RQ2).

2.3. Current Study

In the current study, we evaluated how people recalled their experiences having played as female game characters in the past. We used a top-down, inductive analysis to extract qualitative themes surrounding the experiences of playing as a female game character using human coders. We also used a bottom-up approach via the meaning extraction method (Markowitz, 2021), which is provided in an online supplement available at the following URL: <https://osf.io/8z4na>. Many of the points we identified in the qualitative analysis are supported by the computational analysis, but we have shared the results of the computational analyses in a supplemental file to maintain a clear focus on the results of the qualitative analysis.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

We recruited participants from online gaming forums (i.e., subreddits) for a study on people's experiences playing as female video game characters. Of 978 individuals who initiated the study, 751 had played as a female character, provided sufficient data for analysis, and were at least 18 years of age ($M_{\text{age}} = 27.67$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 6.72$). Participants self-identified as male ($n = 637$), female ($n = 88$), other ($n = 11$), or declined responding ($n = 15$). We also invited participants to self-describe their gender identity. Participants generated 132 unique responses to this open-ended question. We reviewed these open-ended self-descriptions and categorized them as unambiguously describing themselves as men (e.g., "cisgender male"; $n = 588$), unambiguously describing themselves as women (e.g., "she/her"; $n = 95$), describing themselves in a way outside of a binary gender (e.g., "agender," "transfemme"; $n = 46$), providing responses that did not elaborate gender identity (e.g., "attack helicopter," "asked my mom"; $n = 19$), and descriptions only elaborating sexual orientation (e.g., "straight"; $n = 3$). Seven participants declined to elaborate on their gender identity. Participants identified as White ($n = 590$), East Asian ($n = 50$), Hispanic/Latine ($n = 34$), other ($n = 30$), South Asian ($n = 21$), Black ($n = 12$), Arab Middle Eastern ($n = 6$), non-Arab Middle Eastern ($n = 6$), or declined to answer ($n = 2$).

3.2. Procedure

Forum users encountered our post inviting them to participate in a research study about their experiences playing as female video game characters. The invitation included a link that directed interested individuals to a Qualtrics form where they encountered a consent statement with details of the study. After providing consent, participants indicated if they had ever played a game as a female character. Individuals who had such experience continued to the next section, which contained open-ended questions. Next, participants completed quantitative and demographic items. Finally, we invited comments and offered participants the opportunity to enter an electronic gift card drawing (\$50 US; odds approximately 1/100).

3.3. Measures

3.3.1. Open-Ended Prompts

We asked participants to identify a specific game and female character to reference throughout the study. We then asked questions that encouraged participants to think about those game experiences (e.g., whether they completed the game). Next, participants responded to five questions. First, we aimed to have participants begin thinking reflectively on their experience playing the game before posing more specific questions related to the character. Accordingly, we first asked participants to describe things they (a) liked and (b) disliked about the game. Next, participants (c) described the character as they remembered her. We intentionally left this question vague to facilitate spontaneous rather than prompted recollections. Finally, participants shared anything that they (d) liked and (e) disliked about the character.

3.3.2. Affective Empowerment

We assessed empowerment feelings using the affective empowerment checklist (Couture Bue & Harrison, 2019). This checklist includes 15 empowerment words (e.g., mighty) and 15 disempowerment words (e.g., defeated). Participants reported how much each word reflected their feelings when playing as the selected character using Likert scales (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *a great deal*). We summed the values for empowerment words and for disempowerment words separately. Each subscale, thus, has a range of 15–60. We then subtracted the average disempowerment value ($M = 26.68$, $SD = 10.05$, McDonald's $\omega = .83$) from the average empowerment value ($M = 82.77$, $SD = 10.05$, McDonald's $\omega = .91$) to produce the affective empowerment index ($M = 56.26$, $SD = 21.18$; Couture Bue & Harrison, 2019). The midpoint of the summed index is zero.

3.4. Qualitative Data Analysis Procedures

The first author and two assistants inductively analyzed responses to the five open-ended prompts by compiling response texts into a spreadsheet and examining them using a constant comparison method (Glaser, 1965). They read through texts arranged in vertical (i.e., within question) and horizontal (i.e., within subject) arrangements. They identified texts that clustered around emergent themes, establishing boundaries of thematic categories based on inclusion and exclusion criteria and documenting illustrative cases. Details for the computational techniques are described in the online supplementary file.

4. Results

4.1. Identifying Themes (RQ1)

RQ1 asked what meaning people have made from their experiences playing as female video game characters. Below, we report and emphasize the findings of the human coding. We consider their resonance and distinctions as relevant to the computational themes in the discussion.

4.1.1. Humanized and Affirmed

This theme centered on the personal affirmation that players shared when embodying a humanized female character. These descriptions emphasized agency, realism, unique personalities, and connections with other characters as important evidence of a fully realized person, not simply a digital object. Many participants noted the scarcity of compelling female characters, even in games that provided the option to create custom characters, and lauded richly designed, lead female characters. As one participant shared:

I've been a fan of the Elder Scrolls series since *Morrowind*. It was the first game I played where there was the option to play as a female character, and as a female gamer, it was awesome to see that representation.

Many remarked on female characters' imperfections as compelling. For instance, participants appreciated that their character was "a disaster of a person" or "flawed/emotional...she acted like a real person, not a superhero." Others emphasized characters' humor, describing them as "snarky and hilarious," having "a dry wit," or as a

“mysterious, intriguing person with a funny side.” Another liked that “[the character] is a partially mute girl, with blue hair tied in a ponytail. Despite only being able to say a few words, she is full of sass.” For many, the opportunity to play as a female character who was not only a central person in the game, but one with humanizing characteristics that made her feel believable and complex, contrasted the limited roles available when they first developed their love for gaming.

Notably, this theme had distinct emphases for cisgender and transgender women. For cisgender women, the experience of embodying a central, capable female character inspired positive, group-relevant feelings. One woman wrote about playing as Samus Aran of the Metroid series saying that she experienced “a sense of pride that [she] could play as a character of [her] own gender who was brave, strong, and competent.” For transgender women, the experience of playing as female characters affirmed a valued part of their personal identity in a safe context. The opportunity to embody a character whose physical appearance offered congruence with their self-concept was deeply affirming. One participant shared that “playing [the female character] was [her] first real experience with gender euphoria.” Another participant shared about her experience in Phantasy Star Online 2:

At the start, life was too dangerous for me to come out as transgender. A place where I could be myself, without fear, was immensely freeing and validating. I made friends, I climbed to the top, I fell in love for the first time in my life. I got to experience a world that felt so much more brilliant than the one outside the screen.

Another participant detailed a similar interaction with an avatar through VR Chat, in which she “could look in a mirror in game and see a more accurate representation of myself than I can in real life.” These reflections underscore how playing as a female character served as an affirmation of their gender identity that they were struggling to share outside the game world.

4.1.2. Powerful Nurturer

A second theme emerged in which participants described female characters as powerful, but simultaneously emphasized character qualities that aligned with traditional conceptions of femininity. In some cases, participants explicitly differentiated characters’ strength from associations with masculinity (e.g., overemphasized self-reliance). For instance, one person shared about Aloy, the lead character of Horizon Zero Dawn, stating, “I liked that [she] was very independent and opinionated but at the same time wasn’t the over top ‘I don’t need help or men’ stereotype that sometimes seems to plague games with female leads.” Many participants described the characters’ motivations to lead, save others, or even engage in violence as evidence of their kindness or care for others. Sometimes these descriptions oscillated between emphasizing traditionally masculine and feminine qualities. For instance, one participant described that the character “supported her friends and helped people overcome their insecurities. She also wasn’t afraid to look foolish, but took charge when duty required her. She was strong, but also compassionate.” In some cases, players remarked on the characters’ narrative trajectories, such as one participant who shared they appreciated the character’s “development over the course of the game from selfless-but-naive do-gooder to inspiring leader.” Players also imposed these tensions on their characters even when they lacked an established persona. For instance, one participant detailed their experience in Fallout 3 saying they “roleplayed [their character] as an altruistic cybernetics specialist, wishing to help the desperate people of the wasteland with her

knowledge of technology and implants to improve their everyday life, and in [sic] the same time making it safer.”

4.1.3. Obviously, She's a Woman

This category emerged as women (primarily) focused on what they saw as more and less preferred ways to represent femininity visually. That is, many descriptions went into detail about the character’s hair, makeup, clothing, armor, and accessories to create idealized versions of themselves. However, this tendency had boundaries. Women critiqued visual gender-marking. That is, they noted designs that emphasized bodies in sexualized ways as bothersome signals of characters’ gender expression. For example, a participant shared that “the female character model has an annoying hip sway and while most outfits are situationally appropriate some of them are weirdly revealing.”

This quote alludes to another element of this theme—that is, many participants reflected on the prevalence of sexually objectifying character portrayals. It was important to many that the characterizations were not pejorative. For instance, one participant shared the following:

[I did not like] some of the female armor designs. Monster Hunter in general is better about it than most games, but there were still too many instances where I was looking forward to seeing cool armor only to be met with panties and butt windows.

4.1.4. Problematizing Men

This theme centered on participants’ reflections on men as players, characters, and men’s involvement with developing female characters. Many participants reflected on well-established patterns of female character designs that appeal to the male gaze and the prevalence of men’s harassment of women in online gaming. For example, one participant shared that she “was frequently harassed by male players, female dwarf characters are rare and I guess that made them feel like they could be rude.” However, other, nuanced reflections emerged. Some men’s comments indicated their awareness that they were “part of a broader problem.” Specifically, some men stated their shame that developers pandered to them as an audience by subordinating female characters through sexual objectification. For instance, one man shared that his character’s “infamously revealing outfit made me feel self-conscious about playing an otherwise masterpiece of a game.” Others seemed to recognize their own problematic tendencies to objectify female characters, labeling themselves unambiguously as sexist. One participant acknowledged that the “misogynist in me liked watching a woman butt over a man butt, seeing as it’s a 3rd person game and that’s a large part of your visual window.” These comments suggested that players were thinking about the implications of their interactions and, as with the last comment, identified when the development of the character seemed to encourage such interactions.

Women participants described frustrations with inauthentically designed female characters. For instance, one woman elaborated the following:

Most games that “write” a female character are still written by men so it can be cringy (see; way too many of the “otome” games that are ostensibly for a female audience to play as women). I like well

written stories that let me play as a woman but even in the best of them there ends up being thorny bits that can ruin entire sections of the game....Monster Hunter doesn't really give you a lot of personality and story and that's a good thing. Didn't have to deal with men trying to write me a woman.

4.1.5. New Gendered Perspectives

This final theme emerged primarily among men in the sample and comments in this theme were reflective of how the opportunity to play as a female character gave them insight into women's experiences. Some men described that embodying a female character provided a lens to lived experiences outside of their own possibilities. One participant wrote about playing *Life is Strange*:

You play as a high school girl and get to experience daily life from that point of view, which, as a man, is not an experience I am very familiar with, and I really appreciate being able to expand my perspective.

Another participant carried the experience with him, recognizing the following:

[Playing as a female character] really let me experience how a woman might feel talking to strangers or even second guessing intentions of friends talking to you. I felt put off by some of the male character's [sic] conversations....It sparked some interesting conversations with women in my life.

Finally, some participants alluded to the possibility that women have distinct perspectives from men, and that shaped their experience. For instance, one participant elaborated that he "liked [the female character] because [he] thought she had the potential to have a better story than the male counterpart you could choose. [He] thought the perspective that she would have would be more genuine."

4.2. Empowerment Outcomes (RQ2)

RQ2 asked whether playing as female video game characters inspired feelings of empowerment and whether women might be especially likely to experience empowerment from those interactions. We analyzed the empowerment data in two ways to answer this question. First, we conducted a one-sample t-test to determine if affective empowerment departed from the midpoint of the empowerment index (i.e., a value of 0). The empowerment index ($M = 56.26$, $SD = 21.18$) was significantly different from the midpoint of zero ($t(716) = 71.11$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 2.66$), with a difference of 56.26 from the midpoint.

The second part of this question asked whether women would be especially likely to experience empowerment from interactions with female characters. To answer this question, we conducted a one-way ANOVA on the empowerment index using participants' self-identified gender as a predictor and comparing only participants who identified as women ($M = 58.4$, $SD = 18.10$), men ($M = 56.4$, $SD = 21.2$), or outside of the binary in some way ($M = 53.2$, $SD = 22.2$). We removed participants who did not elaborate their gender identity from this analysis. The results indicated no significant differences in empowerment existed between these three groups ($F(2, 693) = .90$, $p = .408$).

5. Discussion

Scholars continue to consider female video game characters with an emphasis on the potential harms of their portrayals. Although we share concerns that women and girls' characterizations in games can potentiate negative outcomes, our evidence demonstrates that interacting with female characters can support positive outcomes such as empowerment. The language people use to describe interactions with avatars reveals meanings of these experiences (Banks & Bowman, 2016). We analyzed the rich data produced by our participants to extract themes using complementary approaches (i.e., in the main text, we used a primary approach of human coding techniques; in the supplementary file, we report secondary computational theme extraction). We identified several themes from our primary qualitative analysis that the computational analysis supported. In short, we observed that many participants found playing as female game characters meaningful.

5.1. *Imbuing Female Video Game Character Interactions With Meaning*

The themes we detected from our participants' writings warrant further consideration and point to fruitful new directions for researchers in this area. In the Humanized and Affirmed theme, women detailed feeling inspired by and appreciative of the opportunity to play as realistic female characters with complex personas, compelling stories, and connections to other characters. If an audience member relates to a character's identity, they may be more likely to resonate with the experiences that character has (Klimmt & Rieger, 2021). Using the character's identity and events that may befall her as touchstones, the player may engage in elaborative thinking around the depiction and their own lived experience. The computational themes extracted also demonstrated some resonance here as some participants evoked characters' *voice*. After discovering this theme computationally, we returned to the data and recognized that some participants discussed how the character's voice actor made the character compelling or inspiring. This aligns with our Humanized and Affirmed theme as some descriptions strongly evoked a feminist understanding of voice. Rakow and Wackwitz (2004) define voice as "the means and ability to speak and to have one's speech heard and be taken into account in social and political life." Voice is similar to the humor and the faults participants described in this theme, ascribing complexity, agency, and aliveness to the characters. These humanizing themes presented tensions with Problematizing Men. Specifically, participants shared their dislike of inauthentic or shallow attempts to portray womanhood or women's experiences through narrative. When games portrayed female characters in authentic, deeply explored personas, women found the experience of playing with them meaningful. Notably, one of the themes that emerged from the computational theme extraction identified poor dialogue as a specific area of dislike for participants.

For transgender women, using an avatar whose gender expression is closely aligned with their self-concept could be profound. This finding supports recent evidence that using avatars congruent with one's gender identity is an affirming and gratifying experience, especially for transgender people who may experience stigma or violence because of their identity (McKenna et al., 2024). Games' interactive affordances may have heightened the experience of identity affirmation for transgender women; indeed, playing as a character can encourage a sense that one *is* the character (Klimmt et al., 2009; Lynch et al., 2022). Further, some transgender participants in the sample noted the relative safety of having their gender identity expressed and accepted by others in the game. In turn, through the avatars, they had the opportunity to relax into and fully embrace their identity.

The identification of the Powerful Nurturer theme deepens the conversation around a tension in female game character depictions—that is, the juxtaposition of stereotypically masculine (e.g., savior) and feminine roles (e.g., nurturer). The intersection of strength and sexualized appearance is arguably the best-documented example of this phenomenon (see Lynch et al., 2016). Scholars suggest that incorporating stereotypically feminine cues in otherwise powerful designs subordinates women in a patriarchal hierarchy (Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015). Video games can subtly signal the values of patriarchal societies, ascribing less prominence and value to traditionally feminine identities, roles, and qualities as compared to those that are traditionally masculine (see Lynch et al., 2024). Subjectively positive evaluations of women and their roles tend to involve benevolent characterizations that undermine women’s agency and power. However, participants did not ground their comments under Powerful Nurturer in a benevolent perspective. Nor did they seem to make their statements around this point with lamentations of gender stereotypes. Instead, many participants recast feminine qualities as sources of power. That is, participants saw characters’ strength as partly or primarily due to their feminine attributes (e.g., care for others). Although participants enjoyed strong characterizations, they emphasized the importance and inherent power of their feminine qualities as meaningful.

Although participants seemed to largely ascribe positive meaning to their interactions with female game characters, there were some notably critical meanings that emerged. With respect to both the Obviously, She’s a Woman and Problematizing Men themes, participants seemed quite aware of the gendered nature of gaming content and development. Researchers have found that female characters designed with a more sexualized appearance elicit a sexually objectifying gaze more so than those with a less sexualized appearance or that elicited by male characters (Hollett et al., 2020). These findings suggest that people may have a bias toward physical appearance, especially as it relates to the body, when evaluating women. Although we agree this bias may emerge when directly viewing a woman, our findings here hint at the possibility that people challenge this biased perception over time, which is typical of a eudaimonic media experience. Future research should continue to examine how people manage their own awareness of implicit biases such as the body-biased attentional processes reported by Hollett et al. (2020).

Despite some negative reflections on their interactions with female characters, participants reported being empowered by their interactions with characters. In the New Gendered Perspectives theme, men engaged in self-reflection as they shared their sentiments around experiences using female characters in games as insightful and helpful opportunities. Importantly, we did not observe significant differences in affective empowerment based on participants’ self-identified gender. Players of all identities may, thus, find the experience of interacting with a female character as a video game avatar empowering. Future research might explore this to determine whether these interactions are similar in stimulating feelings of empowerment compared to male characters.

Empowerment is an important factor to assess when it comes to interactions with female characters as feeling empowered can support a person’s wellbeing. For instance, the opportunity to engage in capable narrative action through an avatar can satisfy intrinsic needs for agency (Daneels et al., 2021; Oliver et al., 2016). Determining how the meaning that players make from interactions with specific types of characters and under what circumstances that meaning potentiates empowered states is a charge for future research in the broader area of eudaimonic media experiences.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

We see two primary implications of our findings for existing media psychology theories. First, the relevance of character portrayals is often tied to social identity theory (see Trepte & Loy, 2017). Applied to characters, social identity theory explains that people want to see their ingroups portrayed positively because this facilitates positive group distinctiveness. However, consistently positive portrayals of female characters may reinforce benevolent ideals or limit their roles and qualities (Lynch et al., 2024). Accordingly, rather than desiring that media always portray their group positively, women seem to want their group portrayed as fully realized characters, even if that involves faults. Scholars applying social identity theory may benefit from considering humanizing or authentic portrayals of subordinated groups as positive given the groups' societal position, rather than defining positive portrayals from the position of superordinate groups (see Hatfield et al., 2022, for a recent review on this topic).

A second implication of our findings relates to Sanders' (2010) character impression formation theory. This theory explains how people incorporate or reconcile narrative information depending on its alignment with existing character schema. Given our observations of how participants described strong female characters (i.e., Powerful Nurturer), we suggest character impression formation theory as a fruitful framework for future research. Do people use schema about women or about leaders to guide processing of strong female characters? Whether and how people reconcile or incorporate this information to form gestalt impressions could inform theorizing around characters in meaning-making processes.

5.3. Limitations

We aimed to explore the nature of players' meaning-making related to female game characters through interpreting their descriptions of those experiences. This work is constrained by the fact that we only asked participants about experiences playing as female characters. Thus, we cannot make comparisons to the qualities of interactions and meaning-making that players may engage in with male characters. Future research would certainly clarify our understanding by examining meaning-making processes with female and male characters. We cannot assert causal arguments from these data. Future research, however, could leverage our themes in experimental investigations. We also asked participants to share about playing as characters, and, thus, reflections emerged from prompting. We intentionally used broadly phrased prompts to avoid influencing responses. Still, our positionality as academic researchers extracting meaning from participants approached through online gaming forums is noteworthy.

6. Conclusions

The important and historic focus on stereotypical female video game characters has given rise to new questions about how players make meaning from interactions with these figures. Our findings reveal new and compelling directions for empirical research regarding how individual characteristics of players and characters shape meaning-making processes to inspire and empower. We are encouraged by the findings produced by our methodological approaches, which we hope future research teams can use as motivation to demonstrate how mixed-methods studies add theoretical and empirical depth to meaning-making processes.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online here: <https://osf.io/8z4na>

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