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## "We Give Them the Most Important Thing Possible. We Give Their Dreary Lives Excitement": Toward a Theoretical Model of Narrative Parasocial Engagement

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“WE GIVE THEM THE MOST IMPORTANT THING POSSIBLE. WE GIVE THEIR  
DREARY LIVES EXCITEMENT:”

TOWARD A THEORETICAL MODEL OF NARRATIVE PARASOCIAL  
ENGAGEMENT

BY

DOMINIC DELBERT MEYERS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Arts

Communication and Media Studies

South Dakota State University

2023

## THESIS ACCEPTANCE PAGE

Dominic Meyers

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the master's degree and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree.

Acceptance of this does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

Rebecca A. Kuehl

Advisor

Date

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Date

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Director, Graduate School

Date

This thesis is dedicated to the many creators of the video games included in this research. Often citations and references to these creators do not give them the proper credit they deserve. I dedicate this thesis to Killmonday Games, Obsidian Entertainment, Toby Fox, Mojang Studios, 2K Games, and all the creators who have given my life purpose.

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## ABSTRACT

“WE GIVE THEM THE MOST IMPORTANT THING POSSIBLE. WE GIVE THEIR  
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Video game narratives and characters are some of the most enjoyable and persuasive components of the video game industry. While narratives and character relationships within video games have been examined separately, there is no working model and little research attempting to bridge the connection between narratives and character relationships. This research combines Narrative Paradigm Theory and Parasocial Relationships to understand how narratives and character relationships influence each other in video game environments. This was done through rhetorical field methods, utilizing a focus group and narrative rhetorical analysis on the transcript of the focus group. Results provide a working model coined the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement. This model explains how video game players can be rhetorically satisfied and thus persuaded through achieving different levels of video game engagement. The levels of the pyramid include Avatar Identification, Narrative Involvement, Parasocial Relationships, Community Engagement, and Rhetorical Satisfaction. A player must achieve the base level and work their way up the pyramid similar to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Results further indicate that the level a player achieves on the pyramid influences the level of narrative blending between their video

game micro-narrative and their real-life grand narrative, and thus a higher influence to be persuaded in value, belief, or action to the video game's persuasive goal. This research implies that the Uses and Gratifications model of using media to satisfy needs may not be fully realized as the working model argues players use video games to reach a real community to engage with rather than being content with the narrative and parasocial relationships the game provides. Future research should test the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement using other methodologies.

## INTRODUCTION

Video games have always been a unique medium in their ability to tell stories (Murray, 2017), be played (Samyn, 2011), communicate to audiences (Salen & Zimmerman, 2010), and persuade players to alter attitudes, values, and actions (Bogost, 2004). While the production and development of games and game technology has been rapidly evolving, scholarship surrounding video games is still attempting to find its' place and understand the social and communicative influences games have as a media form (Heineman, 2014). This reason alone is significant enough to produce any form of video game research. While there have been many advancements in video game development (Amenabar, 2022), the most notable are an increase in narrative quality (Morash, 2020) and quality of characters (Coulson, 2019) for players to build relationships with (Starloop Studios, 2021). This thesis combines narrative paradigm theory and parasocial relationships to understand how they affect each other in video game environments. These areas are being under-researched due to the particularly high rate of acceleration in video game development; simply put, the research cannot keep up (Ivory, 2020).

As video games become more engrained into mainstream media consumption with the adoption of mobile gaming (McCarthy et al., 2022) and gamification of everyday processes (Pellikka, 2014) it is critical that this thesis examines all integral aspects of play, video games, and game studies scholarship. This introduction chapter first introduces the social world of play and its role as a media facilitator for communication. Second, this chapter discusses the context of video game scholarship and the unique intersection between that scholarship and the disciplines of communication and media studies. Third, this chapter explores the unique communication and media

problems this study aims to address when it comes to the scholarly and practical problems of combining theoretical perspectives from narrative paradigm theory and parasocial relationships. Fourth, this chapter explores the background of the problem by separating out the theoretical assumptions of media interaction and narrative paradigm theory. Fifth, this chapter provides an academic, practical, and technological purpose for the study. Sixth, this chapter explores the rationale for why this study should be conducted in this historical context of 2022-2023, and the unique situation this context provides to the purposes of the study. Finally, this chapter provides critical definitions for play, parasocial relationships, narrative paradigm theory, interactivity, and agency. This chapter's main purpose is to highlight the unique significance and importance of conducting this study.

### **The Social World of Play**

Communication is critical to the human experience. Humans' most innate motivation is the need to belong (Allen et al., 2021). As communication and media scholars, we should examine communication situations and contexts that are motivated from this feeling of belonging. Media scholars have the nuanced task of exploring how media satisfies this need. With every passing day, audience members and media technology alike both find new unique ways to be satisfied and satisfy this need for belonging. It is significantly important that communication and media studies utilize research and theory from both perspectives to keep up with the pace of changing audiences and evolving media technology.

One communication phenomenon that is based within this need to belong is play. "In play there is something 'at play,' which transcends the immediate needs of life and

imparts meaning to the action. All play means something” (Huizinga, 1949, p. 1). The nature of play is to satisfy needs either by satisfying the need directly or allowing the person at play to forget the current needs of their life. Play and games function as a mediator amongst those playing to communicate (Mahood & Hanus, 2017). Games have been shown to significantly improve family bonds through these communication situations (Wang et al., 2018). Thus, it is significant that play be explored as a communication and media phenomenon for its role as a mediator of communication.

### **Context of Conducting Video Games Research and Connecting to Communication and Media Studies**

Due to the unique function of play as a communication phenomenon, academic fields have attempted to tackle research surrounding play. Game studies is the most well-known field for this area of research; however, psychology, communication, rhetorical studies, sociology, religion, philosophy, anthropology, and other fields have previously attempted to research play (Martin, 2018). Even within these fields, the methods of conducting research have ranged from quantitative, qualitative, mixed, critical, and cultural (Lankoski & Bjork, 2015). Researchers have even studied specific forms such as narratological and ludological methods of games (Eskelinen, 2001). Narratology focuses on games as a medium of storytelling, while ludology focuses on games as interactive environments (Murray, 2017). Forms of research and fields of study have attempted to answer questions about play, yet some questions are still left unanswered. This is in part due to two reasons: one, game studies is still a new field, and two, rhetorical analysis as a form of research is sometimes disregarded in play-based research.

Game studies is still a new field. While game studies research was born with Huizinga in 1949, from that point until the turn of the millennia, research in the field was done from the vantage point of other more well-established fields, including psychology (Benedict, 2018), communication (Selnow, 1984), and anthropology (Huizinga, 1949). Thus, game studies as a field has been around a few decades. Game studies as its own separate field has shown that it is able to conduct play-based research much more effectively than other fields due to the multi-disciplinary nature of game studies (Mäyrä, 2012). As its own field, game studies has to work backwards to re-analyze work that has already been conducted in the disciplines of psychology, communication, and anthropology, and must also keep up with new evolving game technology. Like other interdisciplinary fields such as women's and gender studies, the context-specific nature of the discipline warrants further research. Rather than research surrounding video games being conducted in a secondary field, the perspective, and resources of conducting this research through the field of game studies brings more efficient and nuanced results. While this research project is being conducted to further scholarly conversations in communication and media studies, I am approaching the study from a game studies perspective, to bring that perspective into conversation with the disciplines of communication and media studies.

### ***Game Studies and Rhetorical Field Methods***

Rhetorical methods within game-based research are disregarded by some scholars. Rhetorical methods have been criticized by non-rhetorical scholars for their “emotionally charged” nature (Phillips, 2020), as well as for their limitations in researching game design (Sicart, 2011). My choice to blend the contexts of game studies research with

rhetorical field methods is a novel approach. Rhetorical field methods' novelty comes from it focusing on researching rhetoric in the field where rhetoric takes place, focusing on the rhetor, and the combination of text and field. This novelty has been executed in studies of critical identities (Wood, 2018) and cultural politics (Voorhees, 2009), showcasing novel results in both cases. In this study, I propose the use of rhetorical field methods to understand how players communicate with others, including characters, in a video game while developing narratives through parasocial processes in the game play.

To summarize the context of this research, this study used rhetorical field methods to connect with existing video game studies research to explore the communicative characteristics of narrative world building and parasocial processes that help players to shape the story and relationships with characters and other players in a video game. I do so to explore aspects of play that have yet to be fully understood. Past research has focused too much on larger disciplines; this study hopes to avoid that problem by tackling research with a multidisciplinary approach and with a novel method yet to be tested within game studies research.

### **Statement of the Communication Problem**

This research, like much of the communication and media studies disciplines, is taking a pragmatic approach. The pragmatic approach views research as action one can take to solve problems the world is facing (Glasgow, 2013); in the case of communication and media studies, these are communication-based problems. This research is tackling a conceptual gap in communication and media studies research, which is the lack of connection between narrative paradigm theory (Fisher, 1985; Fisher, 1989a; Fisher, 1989b) and parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956) within the

context of video game studies. This lack of connection of these two theories leads to two major symptoms that media users and researchers are experiencing in the world: first, an unbalanced approach to video game design, and second, the unpredictable influences of relationship-rich narratives.

Most forms of video game media since the inception of game studies have focused on one of two mindsets when designing games: a focus on ludology or narratology (Murray, 2017; Kokonis, 2014). Ludology is the focus on games as a system and form of play unique in comparison to any other media form (Järvinen, 2007). For example, a game made with ludology in mind may have a more intricate level design to make the game more enjoyable. Narratology, on the other hand, is the focus on games as a new form of media to tell stories (Arsenault, 2014), communicate with audiences, and persuade value, belief, or action change (Barnabé & Dozo, 2019; Taylor & Williams, 2007). A game focused on narratology, unsurprisingly, might have a better narrative, plot development, and characters to keep the story moving.

The debate regarding video game design and the appropriate forms used for games has existed in academic and practical circles for years, despite the fact that many scholars and designers can agree that a balanced approach between these two forms is more productive and creates better games (Murray, 2017). Despite this fact, many designers and scholars struggle to actually find this balance between the two forms (McManus & Feinstein, 2006). On the designer side, a variety of factors such as genre (Joseph & Baer, 2001), the business side of making video games (Cool Tony, 2017), and player base can all affect the balance of a video game between ludology and narratology (Hanson, 2019). On the academic side, merging ludology and narratology as game forms



can be difficult due to the theoretical assumptions of each form, which are drastically different from one another and have different purposes.

This study attempts to add to the conversation of balance between theoretical forms in video game scholarship and design. This research attempts to bridge these two schools of thought by combining two major theories (e.g., narrative paradigm theory and parasocial relationships) and focusing on addressing that problem for both video game scholars and designers. The results of this research help spur future research in video game studies but will actively change how narrative and characters are designed in video games.

Modern video games and storytelling technology have drastically affected how video game characters are designed, implemented, and discussed in popular circles (Starloop Studios, 2021). The prevalence of parasocial relationships in non-video game media (Jarzyna, 2020) showcases how widespread this process is for audiences, and this prevalence is no different in video games. While game scholars and designers have a good grasp on narrative paradigm theory and parasocial relationships separately, designers are still attempting to merge the two theories in practice without fully understanding the effects of that combination. With modern day video game development usually being a “make or break the bank” situation (Martins, 2018), it is critical that game designers understand the design decisions they are making. How does an alteration in character design affect an interactive narrative? What methods can be employed through narrative to encourage parasocial development processes between players and characters? Does using parasocial development in tandem with narrative paradigm desensitize audiences to future parasocial relationships? This study bridges the gap between narrative

paradigm theory and parasocial relationships to start the conversation, and hopefully interest other designers and scholars to start asking and answering these questions as well. Thus, the study shows significance in its attempt to address the communication and media problem of our lack of understanding of how narrative paradigm theory and parasocial relationships shape one another in parasocial processes of narrative development in video games.

### **Background of the Communication Problem**

To fully grasp the communication and media studies problem of a lack of understanding of the communicative processes of video game players who build parasocial relationships through video game narratives, I first separately describe both theories of parasocial relationships, including media interaction more broadly, and narrative paradigm theory. Understanding each of these theories in turn is important before I turn to how the theories interact in understanding how players engage in parasocial processes to shape narrative world building within video games. While I briefly introduce the theories in this chapter, I explain each theory in much more detail in Chapter Two.

### **Parasocial Relationships and Media Interaction**

The process of parasocial relationship formation began with research that studied the connection between performer and audience. Horton and Wohl (1956) examined audiences' ability to connect with performers on television. They noted that this connection begins once an audience member has moved from spectator and enters into a simulated back and forth between the entity (in their study, the television performer) and the audience (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Perse & Rubin, 1989). They found that the

audience's connection with these performers, predominantly non-fictional television hosts, was entirely one-sided. The viewer believed there was a relationship between themselves and the performer, yet the performer had no knowledge of this relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956). While influential, parasocial relationships only make up one form of media interactionism. There are currently four major categories of media interactionism, which include the following: transportation, worship, identification, and parasocial relationships.

### ***Transportation***

Transportation is the process of becoming so immersed into a media's narrative world that one is cognitively transported into the narrative (Green & Brock, 2000; Green et al., 2004). Transportation acts as the starting point for all other forms of media interaction to take place. Thus, transportation is a relatively common experience among audiences of any media form (Wang, 2005). Since transportation as a form of media interaction is integral to the development of other more advanced forms of media interaction, it is critical that transportation be included in any research study regarding media interaction.

### ***Worship***

Worship is the process of interacting with a media figure so much that the figure reaches "deity-like" status (Brown, 2015). While worship is the rarest form of media interaction (Brown, 2015), it is critical to understand when other forms of media interaction, like identification or parasocial relationships, qualify as worship.

### ***Identification***

Identification has been conceptualized in rhetorical studies as when audience members become one with the speaker or rhetor (Burke, 1969. Cohen (2001) explains, “Identification is a mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside, as if the events were happening to them” (p. 245). While identification is one of the strongest and most unique forms of media interaction, it is also one of the most difficult to achieve (Cohen, 2001). Within video game media specifically, identification is particularly important. Avatars’ unique position in the gaming system allows players to develop a unique connection with their avatar as a representation of themselves or of someone that they wish to be. Thus, at a basic level of using an avatar, some form of identification occurs in all video game formats (Nowak, 2015). Any study analyzing the communicative processes of video game play has the critical task of including identification within the study because it is central to the gaming and avatar representation experience, particularly in relating to the overarching narrative and participation in that narrative-based world.

### ***Parasocial Relationships***

Finally, as briefly noted above, parasocial relationships are similar to identification, but rather than asking the audience to suspend themselves and take on the viewpoint of the media entity or character, the audience maintains a more distant position and sees a relationship with that media entity (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Parasocial relationships develop when the audience believes that the entity knows them and has a working social relationship with them, even if that media entity does not acknowledge the relationship. Given that this study is aiming to integrate parasocial relationships and

narrative paradigm theory, it is critically significant that parasocial relationship scholarship be discussed in more depth in the next chapter.

### **Narrative Paradigm Theory**

Narrative paradigm theory suggests the adoption of a narrative paradigm in communication research, and this theory was first introduced within scholarly conversations in rhetorical studies. This paradigm argues that “humans as rhetorical beings are as much valuing as reasoning animals” (Fisher, 1989a p. 57). For Fisher, symbolic action is the process of sharing one’s rhetorical vision, the way one sees their social reality, and that process is done through sharing events that have a sequence with the ability to be created, interpreted, and recreated again (Fisher, 1989a). Essentially, we engage with symbolic action (and persuasion) through storytelling.

Under this paradigm, Fisher (1989a) argues for a new set of presumptions that include the following tenets: (1) humans are storytellers; (2) humans make decisions through reasoning that can range in form depending on situation, genre, and media; (3) the practice of reasoning is ruled by a range of forces; (4) rationality is determined through narrative probability, or whether a story is coherent, and narrative fidelity, or whether the stories seem true to the interpreter; and (5) the world is a set of stories made for continual recreation. In short, the narrative paradigm argues that narratives are central to human experience and that communication research should value and study this aspect of human meaning-making and communication.

### **Purpose of Study**

This chapter has already identified several rationales for why this study should be conducted and the significance of the work. This section clarifies these purposes into

three cohesive rationales: the academic purpose, practical purpose, and technological purpose. Each, in turn, justifies the significance of this study for different contexts and audiences.

### ***Academic Purpose***

One purpose of the study is based on academics. Video game studies as a discipline is still being questioned in academic spaces (Costandi, 2011). This has called many game studies scholars to argue for the importance of studying games and how that importance affects the future of academic spaces (Cullen et al., 2022). This debate of the value of game studies within academic spaces is analogous to early debates in academic spaces within communication and media studies that sought to justify the study of pop culture, diverse or historically marginalized speakers, or lay or vernacular audiences and their corresponding rhetoric.

One way this study adds to this discussion is through the use of non-game studies-specific theories. Narrative paradigm theory and parasocial relationships are communication and media-based disciplinary theories. By using and combining both theories in a game studies-based application, this research adds to discourse surrounding the importance of video game studies within communication and media studies. Furthermore, this study inspires other scholars in academic spaces to take on future research in narrative and character relationship building. In short, the academic purpose of this study is to participate in the academic discourse surrounding the importance of game studies as a field by showcasing non-game studies theories in a game studies application and inspiring future research.

### ***Practical Purpose***

No academic should solely focus on how their work is going to affect academic spaces. It is equally important that practical spaces be considered, especially in applied research such as studying the communicative processes of players of video games. In game studies, research usually is more focused on the academic space. Yet a central component of research should be to create more efficient and better games with more positive effects on audiences. Academic spaces and on-job trainings continue to find ways to combine game studies and game development for this very purpose (Stoltz, 2020; *Game Studies & Design (B.S.)*, 2022; *Game Design and Development BS / RIT*, 2019). Thus, a central purpose of this study is to use the results to allow designers to produce better games. This study is focused on narratives, character relationships, and how both affect one another in turn. Thus, game development can use this research to build more compelling narratives, more engaging characters for players to build relationships with, and hopefully a better understanding of how to design both forms of video game play to provide a positive experience for players.

### ***Technological Purpose***

Finally, there is a technological purpose to this research. Video game technology is rapidly growing with virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and the effects new technology can have on audiences (Read, 2022). Often, academic research provides the voice of ethics in technology development (Martin et al., 2019). This study aims to follow this pattern by not only examining the role of narrative and character relationships, but also the ethical considerations in how we use this research in future technology development. While virtual reality and artificial intelligence are not the focus of this

study, both utilize narratives and character relationships extensively with virtual reality being praised for its immersive narratives (Dincelli & Yayla, 2022), and artificial intelligence being capable of creating even more realistic fictional characters (Smith, 2020). Furthermore, within the fields of communication and media studies, ethical implications are especially imperative to the disciplines' relationship to technology and computer-mediated communication. In short, ethics within technology should always be considered, and this study aims to further the discussion surrounding ethics as it concerns narratives and character relationships.

### **Rationale for the Historical Context of the Study**

Now that I have explained the various purposes of this study, I turn next to the context in which this study is situated. Context is an incredibly important component of academic research (Tennant, 2016). While any researcher may have personal reasons for conducting research, the context of a study, including the time, place, institution, political situation, and other contextual factors must all be considered in concluding why a certain research study should be conducted in a given historical moment. In this section, I answer the question of why this research should be conducted now, in 2022-2023. There are two major reasons: first, the post-pandemic social life, and second, virtual reality gaming technology.

### **Post-Pandemic Social Life**

Unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 global pandemic has altered the form and function of the way humans communicate with one another. Video game communication was and still is a titular part of those communication alterations. For example, during the pandemic, *Animal Crossing*, which is a “cozy game” that provides a care-free virtual



environment with simple game play and the ability to play with other players across the globe, was praised for its ability to bring social routine to players' lives during the pandemic (Yee & Sng, 2022; Khan, 2022). Even as the pandemic turns to an endemic situation, video games are still having a massive influence on post-pandemic communication (Archie, 2022). Video games are massively changing our social dynamics and any research aimed at understanding those alterations is critical to understanding communicative processes within game play.

### **Video Game Technology**

As previously stated in this chapter, video game technology is rapidly evolving and 2022-2023 is at the forefront of this evolution. As noted above, virtual reality is being praised for its' immersive narratives (Dincelli & Yayla, 2022) and artificial intelligence is capable of creating even more realistic fictional characters (Smith, 2020). A critical purpose of conducting this research in this historical context is to provide direction to the results of this research. The direction for future research and application of these results in game development is based on ethical considerations for technology use, as noted above. Thus, this research is significant in this historical moment because it can provide ethical direction as video game technology is often on the cusp of new technological advancements.

### **Critical Definitions**

The final section of this chapter discusses critical definitions to understand as I propose conducting this study in communication and media studies. I provide definitions for the following terms: play, parasocial relationships, narrative paradigm, and interactivity and agency, which are tandem to one another.

## *Play*

Play is a critical definition because it is central to any gaming situation. All games are a form of play, but not all play is a game. For Huizinga (1949), considered the founder of game studies, play means something and allows the player to forget about their needs outside of the game for a short while to find enjoyment and satisfy other human needs. Furthermore, Huizinga (1949) outlined five components of play: first, play is voluntary. Play cannot be forced upon an individual; play is an agreement between one or more people to participate in the circle of play. Second, play is rule-ordered. In play something is at play; thus, rules must exist for that something to be in the motion of play, otherwise the action is just nonsense. Third, play happens within fixed boundaries. This component has been expanded with the term “magic circle,” meaning while play is occurring, there are those inside the circle of play and those outside of it. The circle determines whether the play is magical, or significant, or nonsense, or insignificant (Salen & Zimmerman, 2010). Fourth, the play is different. All those who participate in the play understand that it is not ordinary life; it is different in the components that govern the action. Fifth, play is not useful or of material interest. While this component has been heavily debated within education (Jong et al., 2008) and persuasive-based games (Bogost, 2010) providing tension to this component, Huizinga (1949) argued that for play to be enjoyable, it should not produce anything of material interest to those involved in the play. If it does, then action is no longer played but is instead governed by ordinary life (Huizinga, 1949).

### ***Parasocial Relationships***

Parasocial relationships are clearly defined in the previously mentioned earlier study by Horton and Wohl (1956). They first examined television hosts. The connection between audience member and performer begins once an audience member has moved from spectator and enters into a simulated back and forth between the media entity/performer and the audience. The audience member's connection with these performers, predominantly non-fictional television hosts, was entirely one-sided. The viewer believed there was a relationship between themselves and the performer, yet the performer had no knowledge of this relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In short, these relationships are one-sided, provide a simulated back and forth between audience and performer, and are individualized, meaning the audience member believes they are the only audience members engaging in this particular relationship with the media entity or performer. The media entity or performer need not be a real person, either; research suggests that viewers, and in this study, video game players, engage in parasocial relationship development with fictional characters as well (Bopp et al., 2019).

### ***Narrative Paradigm Theory***

Narrative paradigm theory can be defined through the metaphor homo-narrans or human storytellers. Fisher (1989b) believed that humans are equal storytellers as they are rational actors. Fisher advocated for five major components to his theory that can be summarized into the idea of humans being persuaded by the stories we tell (Fisher, 1989b). Essentially, humans judge rationality through the stories they are told because humans are storytellers.

### ***Interactivity & Agency***

Interactivity and agency as video game mechanics have been intertwined over the years in professional and academic spaces; thus, it is critical that the terms' definitions be discussed separately but also in tandem with one another, since they work together in considering the mechanics of game play. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) elucidate the difference between these two terms:

Play implies interactivity: to play with a game, a toy, a person, an idea, is to interact with it. More specifically, playing a game means making choices within a game system designed to support actions and outcomes in meaningful ways. Every action results in a change affecting the overall system. This process of action and outcome comes about because players interact with the designed system of the game...it is the explicit interaction of the play that allows the game to advance (and) the player (to have) agency to initiate and perform a whole range of explicit actions (p. 58).

This definition provides integral components to what separates and connects interactivity and agency. Interactivity is a system-based description: "Something is interactive when there is a reciprocal relationship of some kind between two elements in a system" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 58). Agency is a player-based description: "Agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decision and choices" (Murray, 2017, p. 159). Players can interact with a system but players themselves cannot be interactive. When a player makes a choice, they have agency to do so, and if the system acts reciprocally, then that system is interactive.

## **Overview of Chapters**

I now turn to the overview of the remaining chapters is included in this thesis. Chapter Two will provide a review of the current literature surrounding video game studies, as relevant to this study. Chapter Two will first explore media interaction, including theories of transportation, worship, identification, and parasocial relationships, to successfully draw a comparison between these sub-types of media interaction. Chapter Two will also discuss the medium of video games and relevant research regarding avatars and non-playable characters (NPCs), agency and interactivity mechanics, and parasocial phenomenon, specifically as addressed through parasocial relationships. Chapter Two will also discuss literature surrounding narratives, including a summary of narrative paradigm theory, the connection audiences build with narratives, and how interactivity affects narrative paradigm theory and audiences' ability to connect with those narratives. The second chapter will conclude by providing the study's research questions.

Chapter Three will provide an intended methods plan. This chapter will first overview rhetorical methods and the multiple definitions, traditional, media-based, and narrative forms. Second, the chapter will contextualize the difference between rhetorical methods and rhetorical field methods by distinguishing the text and field combination, the rhetor focus, and the everyday discourse as text. Third, I will provide a justification for the intended method by analyzing games as everyday discourse, the justification for focus groups to create the text, and the unique results that are expected. Fourth, the methods chapter will provide a plan to recruit participants, conduct focus groups, and analyze the text of the focus group transcript.

Chapter Four will present the results of this research study, using rhetorical field methods to understand the discourse of players as they navigate parasocial relationships that in turn shape the narrative-building in video games, and vice versa. This chapter will propose a working model called the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement. Finally, Chapter Five will conclude the thesis. This chapter will suggest theoretical and applied implications, offer a discussion of the results as they relate to the literature and scholarly conversations in communication and media studies, as well as note limitations and areas of future research. Overall, this study aims to increase our understanding of the communicative processes of video game players who engage in parasocial relationship formation to shape narrative development and meaning making in video games.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This research study is not alone in its efforts to understand the world of video games and communication of relationships and narrative. Thus, it is imperative that this study connects to the existing scholarly conversations surrounding video game narratives and character relationships. The thesis' overall goal is to bridge the gap between narrative paradigm theory and parasocial relationships to understand how they affect each other in communication within video game environments. This chapter provides an overview of scholarly literature to guide the research and corresponding research questions. First, I review the major types of media interaction, including transportation, worship, identification, and parasocial relationships. Second, this chapter explores video games as interactive media by exploring avatars and NPC's, mechanics of agency and interactivity, and revisits parasocial phenomena with video game characters. Third, the chapter analyzes narrative paradigm theory and how interactivity within narratives affects the narrative structure. Finally, I summarize this scholarship to propose research questions.

### **Media Interaction & Parasocial Phenomenon**

The process of connection between performer and audience was first identified by Horton and Wohl (1956) examining the audiences' ability to connect with performers on television. This connection begins once an audience member has moved from spectator and enters a simulated back and forth between the entity (here, the television performer) and audience. The connection with these performers, predominantly non-fictional television hosts, was entirely one-sided. The viewer believed there was a relationship between themselves and the performer, yet the performer had no knowledge of this relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956). While Horton and Wohl first analyzed audience

members' views of non-fictional television performers, the theory exploded with applications towards other media and fictional characters. Media interaction research has resulted in a plethora of interactive experiences. It is critical to understand the categorization system that exists for this phenomenon.

### ***Transportation***

One form of media interaction is transportation. Transportation is the process of becoming so immersed into a media's narrative world that one is cognitively transported into the narrative (Green & Brock, 2000; Green et al., 2004). Successful transportation often provides increased enjoyment (Green et al., 2004) and increased persuasive ability since the text is experienced from inside the media world (Escalas, 2004). In short, the ability to transport audience members alters the perception of the media text on the part of the player. Since this study is focused on players rather than simply audience members, I will connect the existing research on audience to players throughout this thesis.

Transportation is an incredibly powerful form of media interaction from a rhetorical standpoint. Media interactionist scholars have shown that transportation can lead to higher attitude, behavior, and action changes in the context of quitting smoking (Green & Clark, 2012); advertising to buy products or change attitudes through public address announcements (Wang & Calder, 2006); and social media and computer-mediated communication aimed at altering one's views of others (Seo et al., 2018). The ability to use narrative and entertainment rhetorically make transportation a viable and powerful tool in media interaction.



Video game media transportation is a nuanced form of transportation. The goal of transportation is to cognitively transport the audience member into the narrative world (Green & Brock, 2000; Green et al., 2004). Video games by their very nature transport audience members into the ludological world through gameplay (Brookes et al., 2010). From there, the process of transporting the player from the ludological to the narratological world, or the world of strict gameplay to a fully realized narrative, is possible. In fact, this is much easier than transportation of an audience from the real world to narrative world in traditional media viewing (Ahn, 2012). Even the original founders of media transportation have been examining the effects of interactive narratives compared to traditional media transportation (Green & Jenkins, 2014). Research into this area has explored new negative impacts such as escapism (Mag, 2021), with some authors arguing escapism can be used as a positive experience (Kuo et al., 2016) because of its' ability to aid emotional regulation (Mahood & Hanus, 2017). Research in this area is quickly evolving but this field is clearly showing the unique position video games have in media transportation. Due to the interactivity engrained in video game media, the ability to transport a player and then use that transportation persuasively is easier, because transportation is a natural part of the video game process. This process, while natural, is still not fully understood by video game scholars and research should continue to develop the difference between video game transportation and non-interactive media transportation. Not only does transportation as a media interaction form offer insight and significance into this study, but the concept of worship does as well.

### ***Worship***

Media worship is another form of media interaction. Worship is the process of interacting with a media figure so much that the figure reaches “deity-like” status (Brown, 2015). Some examples of media worship that have been researched by communication and media scholars include Elvis Presley (Fraser & Brown, 2002) and Prince (Till, 2010). This form of media interaction has been shown to produce negative effects. Examples include worship negatively affecting audience’s views of their body, particularly in young females (Maltby et al., 2005). Second, worship has negatively affected audience’s actions in their social media use, encouraging audiences to act in more problematic and aggressive ways (Zsila et. al., 2021). Third, worship has sparked conflict with religious identities in audiences (Maltby et al., 2002). This non-exhaustive list highlights the massive variety of negative effects that worship can have on an audience. While media worship usually occurs with non-fictional media personae, fictional characters are not immune to being worshiped, especially in the context of romantic worship (van Monsjou & Mar, 2019). Worship is critical to understand when identification or parasocial relationships cross over into the worship category.

### ***Identification***

Across all forms of media, identification is similar. Identification was first noted by Burke (1969) and focused on the ability of speakers to develop a relationship with their audience. This relationship is critical to achieve identification even if the relationship is built between an audience and a media system rather than a speaker. Cohen (2001) further defines identification as the mechanism through which an audience may feel that the events of, for example, a video game, are actually happening to them.

Media characters act as a terministic screen. A terministic screen can be an audience or character's view of the rhetorical world, and these terministic screens – through identification – can be adopted or augmented (Burke, 1966). In traditional speaker-audience context, Burke (1966) argued that the audience sees themselves in the speaker. However, modern media scholars argue that identification and the adoption of a terministic screen requires the audience member to forget about themselves while assuming the identity of the media entity (Cohen, 2001). Once the audience, or in this case player, does forget about themselves, however, the media is able to interact at a much higher level. While identification is one of the strongest forms of media interaction, it is also one of the most difficult to achieve.

### ***Parasocial Relationships***

Parasocial relationships are like identification, but rather than asking the audience to suspend themselves and take on the viewpoint of the media entity, the audience maintains a more distant position and sees a personal relationship with the media entity. Parasocial relationships develop when the audience believes that the entity knows them and has a working social or personal relationship with them (Horton & Wohl 1956; Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Perse & Rubin, 1989).

For example, in traditional media like novels a reader may grow a certain fondness for a character. This fondness may grow so much that the reader believes they are a part of the fictional world of the book (transportation) and imagine what it is like to know the character they are fond of like a personal friend (parasocial relationship). The dynamic of this friendship is one-dimensional, totally in the reader's own mind, yet still provides a social need satisfied for the reader. In a video game this process is expedited

by the medium. The player can actually interact with the character physically, through dialogue, intervene in the character's life, etc. The relationship is still one-sided, only known to the player. Yet, it still provides social need satisfaction.

To increase or develop a parasocial relationship, media can utilize several tactics like looking directly at the camera and, by extension, at the audience, or verbally addressing the audience (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Levy, 1979). These techniques make the audience feel like the media entity is directly addressing them and with enough utilization of these tactics, the audience can develop an entire parasocial relationship.

## **Video Games as Interactive Media**

### ***Avatars & Non-Playable Characters***

With this understanding of the forms of media interaction more broadly, I now turn to video games as interactive media. An integral component of any video game is the avatar and NPC's. "Player characters (avatars) are at the heart of the interactive experience of gaming" (Isbister, 2018, p. 203). Avatars are system-generated representations of the player's character in the video game world (Nowak & Rauh, 2005; Schroeder, 2002). While avatars originally were designed by the system and served as a tool for the player to interact in the game world, Kang and Yang (2006) noted that avatars have now become a means of individual expression and follow similar methods of identity management (Trepte & Reinecke, 2010). Avatars can be used to engage in identity management in multiple contexts. First, avatars can be used to manage the complexity of gender, sexual orientation, and gender presentation (Müller & Bonnaire, 2021). Second, avatars can be used to manage a player's personality or performative traits (McDonald & Kim, 2001). Finally, racial, and ethnic identity can be explored

through the physical and metaphysical elements of a video game avatar (Lee, 2014).

While some players aim to manage their real identities in a virtual environment, some use avatars as an opportunity to play as other identity types (Konjin & Bijvank, 2009).

Avatars act as the gateway for players to influence the virtual world and explore themselves and their identities in the process.

Avatars' unique position in the gaming system allows players to develop a unique connection with their chosen representation. Identification, whether you agree with Burke (1969) or Cohen (2001), is utilized with video game avatars. By having a physical representation of the player in the virtual world, the avatar by its' mechanical nature acts as a terministic screen for the player to play through and interpret the game text through. Players' connection to their avatars highlight identification regardless of the level of control a player has over their representation in the video game. *The Sims*, a simulator game that allows you to create and control a single or multiple avatars in normal day-to-day life, provides a simulation space where players have control over the creation of their avatar/s and, at least, interpret the events of the game through their avatar/s (Isbister, 2018). A player could identify with their avatar to a level where their avatar losing their in-game job causes distress, like if that player lost their own actual job outside of the video game in the real world. Avatars act as a powerful source of identification with video game players.

Identification with an avatar affects the rhetorical flow of persuasion. A connection with an avatar acts as a terministic screen or lens. Similar to those identified in traditional rhetoric (Burke, 1966) through which the player sees and interprets the game world (Cohen, 2001). While the player has control of the rhetorical meaning-

making process, the connection with their avatar, the avatar's narrative, and other game elements all influence the meaning-making process for that player (Thabet, 2015). Thus, the identification with an avatar is integral to understanding the function of rhetoric in a virtual environment, particularly in a video game.

In addition to avatars, NPC's are an integral part to player enjoyment and engagement in video games (Fraser, Papaioannou, & Lemon, 2018; Bopp, et al., 2019). Most NPCs' interactions are "short, targeted, functionally-based interactions" (Isbister, 2018, p. 225). For example, NPCs are often included in a video game to prompt the player to take on a particular action or task within the game, typically to advance the overarching story or narrative. These interactions, however short, can blossom due to the social roles NPCs take on in the video game world (Isbister, 2018). For example, a player may be given a simple task by an NPC but within the context of the narrative game world, that task, character, and player involvement all have backstory and consequences based on the players' co-created narrative. Simply put, NPCs play an integral role in all parts of a video game world if they are used as a design tool to advance the story or central narrative of that game.

Furthermore, NPCs allow for a multitude of emotional connections to be made with players (Isbister, 2018; Bopp, et al., 2019). NPCs assist in media transportation into the game world (Isbister, 2018) and can become the object of a player's media worship (Sampat & Fisher, 2017), or can be the subject of a parasocial relationship (Konijn et al., 2008). Not only do players have the ability to develop identification with their player's central character or avatar, but players also build other forms of media identification with

NPCs. In short, these processes of identification with avatars and NPCs are capable of co-occurring.

NPC's and avatars act as tools within the game environment to create a more positive experience for players. Sampat & Fisher (2018) wrote:

When you design a game, you're creating the tools that players will use to create their own narrative, and the narrative the players create will spur the player's emotional response. Without creating the space to allow players the ability to craft a narrative, the people who play your game will be unable to connect to it in an emotional way. (p. 43)

Video game characters such as avatars and NPCs give players even greater ability to control their created narrative. With that narrative comes unknown and known rhetorical consequences for the player as they participate in narrative construction in the video game.

### ***Agency and Interactivity Mechanics in Video Games***

Video games, as a medium of communication, offer a wealth of mechanics that change the game and narrative process (Thabet, 2015). It would be impossible to provide an exhaustive list of all the mechanics video games can employ for players. However, two major mechanics that every video game uses are agency and interactivity. While both mechanics have been intertwined over the years in professional and academic spaces, it is critical that the terms' definitions are distinct (see Chapter One). Interactivity is a system-based description, where there is reciprocity between two elements within a video-game system (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Much like rhetorical agency being focused on a speaker or audience's ability to take action (Cooper, 2011; Geisler, 2004; Grabill & Pigg,

2012; Quinn, 1996; Phillips et al., 1990) agency within video games is a player-based description to take action and see the results of those decisions and choices within the game (Murray, 2017). A player can interact with a system, but players themselves cannot be interactive. When a player makes a choice, they have agency to do so, and if the system acts reciprocally, then the system is interactive.

Agency and interactivity do not only affect the game system but the game and player narrative as well. When players have agency within a story, players “turn the narrative into a personal experience; it is a player’s own story with...a unique meaning-making process” (Thabet, 2015, p. 3). Even the founder of game studies, Huizinga (1949), argued that play acts as a pivotal notion to civilize or express ideas, a process that is easily understood as persuasive. When a person engages in play, they forget the needs of life outside of the game, meaning they are more likely to be persuaded by the game system. A game’s narrative can act rhetorically to persuade players’ thoughts, feelings, and actions (Murray, 2017). Simply put, interactive environments give players agency to develop their own meaning-making process, a process that can be rhetorically influenced and influence others. While literature has heavily explored a narrative rhetorical influence (Fisher, 1985), scholarship needs to continue to study a player’s ability to form their own meaning-making process in video games and how co-created narrative play might influence outcomes.

### ***Parasocial Phenomenon Revisited in Video Games***

With an understanding of the basic mechanics of characters, agency, and interactivity, I suggest a more nuanced approach to the aforementioned parasocial phenomenon. When players have agency and control over the narrative meaning-making



process, parasocial relationships can be more rhetorically powerful. In short, this study aims to combine research within game studies and rhetorical studies. By utilizing literature and methods from both fields, unique results were found regarding how players co-create narrative and parasocial relationships.

Elements of agency and interactivity allow for an embodied experience for the player. This is especially true for games that allow players to control their avatar or NPCs' appearance (Cohen, 2001). When players' game experience is embodied, it increases their self-concept and the relationships they build become more realistic for them (Jin & Park, 2009). While other media forms can offer an embodied experience, video games allow for a unique level of control over the embodiment process.

This self-concept development promotes many positive benefits unique to video game parasocial processes. Video game parasocial relationships have been shown to develop positive models of relationships for children (Jennings & Alper, 2016) and adults (Elvery, 2022). These positive models also continue into adulthood and with romantically based relationships (Song & Fox, 2015). At its core, these video game parasocial relationships, due to video game mechanics, promote a nuanced benefit of well-being for players that engage in these relationships. Scholars have explored the benefits of parasocial relationships within video games and in other media. However, while scholars have explored agency, interactivity, and other ludological elements of games, narrative-based mechanics have yet to be explored within parasocial relationships.

This nuanced form of parasocial phenomenon has been shown to rhetorically influence players regarding beliefs and actions in a variety of contexts. First, this phenomenon has influenced people's beliefs and actions within group communication

situations surrounding ingroup and outgroup racism (Breves, 2018). Second, this phenomenon has had rhetorical influence through video game-based health messaging and prosocial behaviors like befriending others in the game (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Finally, video game contexts have shown players can be pushed to be more willing to be persuaded in future endeavors (Schartel Dunn, 2018). All these contexts show that regardless of the message, players can be persuaded rhetorically through parasocial relationships and narratives. While these processes are understood separately, researchers have yet to include these two theories in conversation with one another, to understand how they might persuade players in tandem. This study aims to analyze how each theory affects the other and ultimately the persuasive messaging within a video game.

### **Fisher's Narrative Paradigm**

From the time of scholars studying and teaching rhetoric in ancient Greece, they theorized humans as primarily rational beings (Burke, 1969), particularly in conceptualizing best practices for speakers and audiences. Humans were deemed logical in their reasoning, argumentation, rhetoric, and communication. This “rational paradigm” argues that: (1) humans are rational, (2) argumentation is key to human communication and discourse, (3) argumentation is decided through the context of the communication situation, (4) rationalism is dictated by the subject-matter knowledge, argumentative skill, and ability to argue within a given field, and (5) the world is a set of logical puzzles for humans to solve (Fisher, 1989a). While these tenets of rationalism were upheld for centuries within the study of rhetoric and argumentation, Walter Fisher and other scholars argued that there is more to human communication than rationalism alone.

Narrative paradigm theory argued for an alteration to the narrative paradigm to include that “humans as rhetorical beings are as much valuing as reasoning animals” (Fisher, 1989a, p. 57). Humans are rational beings but also value human experience and human communication through the stories we tell. For Fisher, symbolic action is the process of sharing one’s rhetorical vision, the way one sees their social reality, and that process is done through sharing events that have a sequence with the ability to be created, interpreted, and recreated again (Fisher, 1989a). We engage with symbolic action through storytelling.

Under this paradigm, Fisher argues for a new set of presumptions about meaning-making through rhetoric: (1) humans are storytellers, (2) humans’ decision-making process is decided through context, (3) reasoning has rules and limitations, (4) rationality is determined through narrative probability - whether a story is coherent, and narrative fidelity - whether the stories seem true to the interpreter, and (5) the world is a set of stories and their recreation (Fisher, 1989a). Fisher’s narrative paradigm is like the rational paradigm but opens the description of rationality to include narrative and narratological experience into the human process of reasoning.

Fisher’s work was not at first widely accepted by rhetorical and communication scholars because of inconsistencies and limitations with the semantics (Rowland, 1987; Warnick, 1987; Rowland, 1989). After incorporating those critiques into the narrative paradigm model (Fisher, 1985; Fisher, 1989b), Fisher’s theory has exploded in popularity both as a method of rhetorical criticism but also as a theory for other subfields within communication and media studies, including health communication (Horstman et al., 2017). The theory has been used in media studies across reality television shows (Eaves

& Savoie, 2005), folklore storytelling (Roberts, 2004), advertising (Stutts & Barker, 1999), social media (Georgakopoulou, 2017), and even competitive speech (Preston, 1989). While this list is not exhaustive, it does illustrate the wide variety of situations where narrative paradigm theory can be used to explore the powerful mechanics of storytelling in communication and media studies.

### *Interactivity and Narrative*

Thus far, the explanation of narrative paradigm theory has been focused on traditional narratives, or narratives with a fixed sequence of events where every time the story is told, A comes before B, and B comes before C. However, many narratives, particularly those in video games, do not follow this format. Video games often allow the player to decide some element of the narrative story. In some cases, this can be deciding what parts or the order of certain stages of the narrative, while in other cases, players can make decisions that completely counteract the narrative structure. Video games allow the player to be interactive in co-constructing the direction of the story. “In traditional psychoanalytic film theory, spectator identification has been defined as primary (spectator identifies with the camera) or secondary (identification with a character). Interactive fiction has led the spectator to a situation where multiple identifications are operating at once” (McMahan, 1999, p. 146). In contrast to sequential storytelling, video game narratives often use multi-form stories. Murray (2017) argued that multiform stories are unique in the creation of multilateral narratives with numerous paths for the audience to progress through in an order that is ultimately decided by the audience member. In short, multi-form stories can include narratives that are told from multiple perspectives, hold events in a non-static order, and can hold multiple narratives within a

cohesive whole. Interactive media, such as video games, allow multi-form stories to flourish as rhetorical media (Murray, 2018). While research has heavily explored narrative paradigm theory within sequential storytelling, fewer scholars have explored how interactivity affects narratives in any form (Murray, 2018).

While narrative paradigm theory and parasocial relationships have been heavily explored by scholars separately, few scholars have explored the two theories in tandem with one another. This chapter discussed the nuance of video game narratives and video game media as they intersect with established theories such as agency, interactivity, and narrative. This study attempts to put these two theories of narrative paradigm and parasocial relationships in conversation with one another in the context of players' communication and storytelling within video games. To do so, I explored how video games create parasocial relationships between players and their characters (both avatars and NPCs). Video games do this through narratives that strongly identify players with those characters and transport them into the narrative world through meaning-making and interactivity within the game.

To review the literature, this study is attempting to combine Narrative Paradigm Theory (Fisher, 1989a & 1989b) and Parasocial Relationships (Horton and Wohl, 1956) through the context of video games they provide the player agency (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). The combination of these major areas of scholarly literature are attempting to answer the central research questions of this study:

RQ1: How does narrative rhetorically influence parasocial relationship processes that are formed between players and characters in video games?

RQ2: How do parasocial relationship processes between players and characters in video games rhetorically influence the narrative world-building in the video game?

## METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to utilize rhetorical field methods to approach the research questions in the previous chapter. I chose rhetorical field methods because they allow me to see how rhetoric is actually being used within gaming spaces, especially in how players communicate about relationships with characters and how those relationships with characters might influence the player's decisions and participation in the video game's narrative.

In this chapter, I first explain the use of rhetorical field methods and the justification for using this type of method. I provide an overview of rhetoric from the traditional, narrative, and media-based approaches. Second, I explore how rhetorical field methods differ from rhetorical textual analysis by expanding on its three major tenets: the combination of text and field, the rhetor-based nature of the method, and the analysis of everyday discourse over traditional discourse. Third, I provide a justification for why rhetorical field methods are more suited for this study than traditional rhetorical analyses by overviewing how games act as everyday discourse, the choice to use focus groups to produce discourse for analysis, and the unique results that rhetorical field methods provided. Finally, I describe my method by explaining the purpose and justification of a focus group, including the participants, focus of games, recruitment strategy, the purpose of conducting the focus groups online, and the rationale for a semi-structured focus group protocol and model. I then examine how the rhetorical field method analysis was conducted through a combined narrative and discourse analysis lens, concluding with potential limitations.

## **Rhetorical Methods**

Rhetoric, whether traditional textual-based analysis or through field methods, has had many attempts to define its goal and purpose over the years. The most used definition of rhetoric in introductory education is the art of persuasion (Gagich, 2018). However, this definition is missing many components of rhetoric, such as the planned nature of rhetoric, the rhetor's purpose behind it, and so forth. Thus, it is critical that this study overview the major fields of rhetoric that are vital to this study and the definitions of rhetorical practices that I intend to use in this study.

### ***Traditional Rhetoric***

Traditional rhetorical methods analyzed rhetoric, often through textual analysis, from a democratic perspective. Ancient Rome and Greece used public speaking extensively in an effort to persuade others of their causes; this is notable in the definitions of rhetoric from Cicero's definition of rhetoric that is speech designed to persuade (Dominik & Hall, 2010) to Aristotle's definition of the available tactics for persuasion (Foss, 2018). Both definitions highlight the simplicity of rhetoric's birth, especially as discourse situated in the art of public speaking. These definitions showcase rhetoric as being audience-focused, tactile in its ability to persuade others, and as being used in grand speeches, with less of a focus on everyday discourse.

Some modern approaches to rhetoric still uphold elements of this traditional rhetoric. Burke (1969) argued from a symbolic interactionist perspective that rhetoric is language as symbolic for inducing Cooperation (Burke, 1969; Hallsby, 2022). Burke (1969) highlighted changes to the view of rhetoric through symbolic interaction; however, this definition is still rooted in the traditional means of persuasion from one



rhetor to a larger audience. Modern day political rhetoricians follow what has been highlighted in Burke's definition. Zarefsky (2016) argued that rhetoric is a pragmatic approach, that when humans are presented with uncertainty, public discourse is used to make judgements. The use of public discourse in this way is rhetorical. To summarize traditional rhetoric, whether ancient or modern, it is based on the art of persuasion, to convince others and make sense of the world around them. This definition, while summative, primarily focuses on textual-based analyses of oral communication, is typically not focused on the unique rhetorical situations that media provides to the rhetor and devotes little attention to moments of everyday or vernacular discourse.

### ***Media-Based Rhetoric***

Media-based definitions of rhetoric can help widen what discourse is considered to be rhetorical. Mateus (2021) argued that a media-based definition agrees with previous traditional definitions, but the focus is concentrated "on the paramount implications of persuasive communication that media use to influence how we collectively think, express ourselves, argue and feel" (p. 1). The focus in this definition is on the unique processes that media has over a collective audience. Even video game-specific rhetoric definitions share this persuasive tool over the mass populous definition (Bogost, 2010). While these definitions cover the media-specific environment this study is addressing, the definitions still lack a contribution from understanding rhetoric or public discourse through narratives, specifically.

### ***Narrative Rhetoric***

This study must include some element of narrative into its working definition of rhetoric, considering the content area of the study, as described in previous chapters.

Fisher (1985; 1989a; 1989b) argued that narratives are rhetorical; that narratives hold power to shape an individual or public's values, beliefs, or actions. Narrative-based definitions follow very closely to media-based definitions of rhetoric.

In this study, I use all three forms of rhetoric laid out above: traditional, media, and narrative. Thus, I see fit to combine all three areas into a single working definition to lead the study in what I consider rhetoric to be. Palczewski et al. (2016) put it best: "Rhetoric is the use of symbolic action by human beings to share ideas, enabling them to work together to make decisions about matters of common concern and to construct social reality" (p. 7). This definition includes the traditional school with thoughts on symbolic action and communication, the media school with the ability to share ideas with one person or a mass audience in a constructive way, and the narrative school with the ability to shape one's social reality. I use this definition throughout the study to understand what is and is not rhetoric.

### **Rhetorical Field Methods**

Now that I have clearly defined rhetoric, I will next explain why traditional, text-based forms of rhetorical analysis do not apply to this study. I describe the central tenets and justification for using rhetorical field methods: the combination of field and text, the rhetor-based focus, and the analysis of everyday discourse as rhetorical.

Along with the variety of definitions of rhetoric that have circulated over the years, there have also been several forms of rhetorical analysis as a methodology to understand the persuasiveness of public discourse. There are two overarching categories of rhetorical analysis: close-textual and conceptual-based methods. Close-textual analysis or Neo-Aristotelian analysis is one of the oldest forms of rhetorical methods. This

analysis focuses on the effects an artifact had on the audience as well as the effectiveness of the rhetors' decisions (Leff, 1992). This method, while helpful, has also been criticized for being unable to adapt to new channels of communication, such as visuals, multimedia platforms, video, and other visual-based public discourse (Bruner et al., 2017). In a digital age, rhetoric occurs so quickly that scholars simply don't have the time to closely analyze every text as a distinct artifact (Wanzer, 2012). Furthermore, many artifacts are not as rhetorically effective as the discourses surrounding them.

Both of these reasons for close-textual analysis having limitations spurred other rhetorical scholars to form conceptual-based methods that focus on specific aspects of the artifact. Conceptual-based methods include Generic Criticism, Feminist Criticism, Queer Criticism, Metaphoric Criticism, Narrative Criticism, Fantasy-Theme Criticism, Pentadic Criticism, Cluster Criticism, and many more (Foss, 2018). These methods may focus more closely on a single aspect of an artifact, either the rhetor, the message, the discourse, or the audience (Palczewski et al., 2016). While these methods are appropriate for non-textual based examples of public discourse, they are still limited in that they are only analyzing a small part of public discourse that is connected to the conceptual method being used.

### ***Text & Field Combination***

Given the limitations of both textual- and conceptual-based methods of rhetorical criticism, some rhetorical scholars have turned to developing what are called rhetorical field methods. One rational and central tenet of rhetorical field methods is the combination of text and field. Where traditional and conceptual-based rhetorical methods are able to analyze a text or in some cases the field or concept separately, neither method

is able to actively analyze both in conjunction with one another. A central tenet of rhetorical field methods is to study discourse in the field in which the discourse occurs (McKinnon et al., 2016). This tenet gives rhetorical field methods the unique advantage of studying a text and field at the same time, thus revealing the possibility to uncover new rhetorical components and further scholars' rhetorical understanding of how these two ideas are interconnected and shape one another in public discourse. This is one reason as to why I intend to use rhetorical field methods; I want to understand how players of video games communicate about the relationships and narratives they build in game to other players of video games. This study explores the rhetoric that is text- or visual-based within players' understandings of how games are persuasive, but it also analyzes the interplay of that rhetoric with how players interact with one another about those experiences.

### ***Rhetor Focus***

Another central tenet to rhetorical field methods is the rhetor-based focus. Traditional methods can easily turn the focus away from the rhetor and even conceptual-based methods like pentadic criticism that focus on the rhetor lose the rhetor and field connection. Rhetorical field methods are able to overcome both of these obstacles, being able to focus on the rhetor without completely ignoring the rhetor's place in the field (Rai & Gottschalk, 2018). This advantage showcases a rationale for utilizing rhetorical field methods. I want to understand how a rhetor, in my study, the person playing the video game, explains the narratives and relationships they build. However, I want to see this rhetoric unfold in the field, in front of other gamers.

### *Everyday Discourse*

The final central tenet to rhetorical field methods is the analysis of everyday discourse. Traditional rhetoric often focuses on artifacts like grand speeches or historic events. Furthermore, some conceptual-based methods also struggle to overcome this pitfall. When the focus of rhetoric is only on grand forms of rhetoric, scholars miss the everyday moments that make up our lives as humans (Hauser, 2010). Rhetorical field methods overcome this pitfall by focusing on the instances of everyday discourse in the field, treating all rhetoric as potentially effective within a larger context. This study intends to capitalize on this advantage. Video games can be an effective form of rhetoric, but their true rhetorical influence cannot be understood until the everyday discourse surrounding these games are analyzed in tandem with the narratives and relationships the video games provide.

### **Justification**

With this understanding of the tenets of rhetorical field methods, I now turn to my justification for why rhetorical field methods are the best methodological choice for the study. First, I examine games as artifacts of everyday discourse from a narrative and character relationship standpoint. Second, I justify using focus groups to gain field rhetoric. Finally, I explain how the study brings unique results to the game studies field.

### *Games as Everyday Discourse*

Video games are growing in popularity to play (Insider Intelligence, 2022) and study everyday (Chess & Consalvo, 2022). Rhetorically, video games, like every other media type, engage and facilitate our everyday human discourse. Yet, video games' place in our everyday discourse has not always been studied as such. This is the major

justification for examining video games using rhetorical field methods, because rhetorical field methods' main goal is to examine every day rhetorical discourse that is situated in the field. This study provides analysis for both narrative and character relationships within video games. Thus, not only does this study begin to understand video games' influence on our everyday discourse in general but also the specific ways narrative and character relationships shape our discourse and thus shape our social realities (Palczewski et al., 2016). This kind of information and understanding is invaluable to scholars, game designers, and players alike.

### ***Focus Group Justification***

I propose the use of a focus group to conduct rhetorical field methods in this study, rather than interviews or other qualitative methods. I do so for two major reasons: 1) discourse about video game experiences is allowed to flow and evolve as a discursive gaming community, and 2) relationships among players are able to form. I propose to conduct a narrative-based analysis on the discourse that is created from the focus group. Discourse is most easily replicated to mimic the "real world" when there are other participants to speak to (Houliez & Gamble, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2014). As the facilitator of the focus group, my goal is simply to start the discussion and guide it when necessary (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Treadwell & Davis, 2019). Other than that, I am aiming to stay out of the discourse as much as possible so what I end up analyzing is as true to the actual conversations and narratives that my participants would make with other gamers in person or online in the field-based community of gamers.

Second, this study aims to research narrative and character relationships in video games. By using a focus group, participants are able to build relationships with each

other. Furthermore, they are able to build those relationships by discussing their virtual relationships with video game characters. By allowing participants to build relationships with each other, I am able to even more closely simulate “true” field discourse. In short, the use of a focus group is justified because, given the content area of the study, replicating “true” field conditions of the rhetoric and discourse I am searching to study is more likely.

### ***Unique Results***

Finally, this study’s methodology is justified because of the unique results it brought. This study is one of the first video game studies to use rhetorical field methods. Thus, the results are unique. This furthers the understanding of scholars, game developers, and players alike. By further understanding how video game narratives and character relationships alter our discourse and social reality, I might uncover a wealth of rhetorical processes that rhetorical, and communication and media scholars have yet to examine.

### **Method Plan**

I next explain the method plan for the study. First, I describe how utilizing a focus group produce public discourse worthy of study. I explain the sampling of participants, recruitment strategies, game focus, conducting the focus group online, and utilizing a semi-structured process. Second, I unveil how the rhetorical field method portion of the study works. I explain how discourse and narrative analysis was used to analyze the transcript of the focus group.

A focus group is the best choice to produce a transcript worth rhetorically analyzing for this study. A focus group allows participants to bounce ideas off of one

another and work collectively as a group of individuals interested in the same games (Krueger & Casey, 2009). I conducted a single focus group with six to eight participants for approximately ninety minutes (See Appendix A). Considering this study aims to understand how parasocial relationships and narratives affect one another, it is critical that participants have other participants to build relationships with and create narratives with. Simply put, this study is justified in using a focus group approach because it is a more conducive environment to let gamers begin crafting narratives, creating relationships, and producing rhetoric in a field that seems normal to them.

### ***Participants***

Before recruiting participants for this study, I sought out and obtained human subjects IRB approval at my university. This study has a few integral requirements for selection of participants. Participants of the focus group had to be individuals who play video games semi-frequently (5-10 hours per week), are, at the time of the focus group, between the ages of 18-40, are reliably able to communicate in English and conduct the focus group on Discord (a popular communication platform for video game players) and have played at least one game on the video games of interest list mentioned below. There are several reasons as to why these requirements were decided on. First, it is critical that participants play video games semi-frequently, while the experiences of “casual” gamers are important, those who semi-frequently or frequently play games are more likely to provide multiple examples and experiences. Age was determined to target the most amount of participants possible. Across the United States 76% of people who play video games are above the age of 18, with the average age being 33, and a large drop off at 40. (Entertainment Software Association, 2022). Thus, the selection between 18-40 years old



gave the focus group the best chance of finding participants and representing the video game player population. Being able to communicate in English was determined by myself as I do not speak a secondary language. Finally, Discord was chosen as the site for the focus group for a variety of reasons. First, Discord is able to automatically transcribe the entire focus group and provide a reliable recording. Second, Discord is an easy-to-use platform for new users. Third, Discord is a natural part of gaming culture, and all participants were already familiar with the site. Finally, I have a personal Discord page that is tied to my personal Tik Tok account; since my Tik Tok was instrumental in finding participants, many of them were already part of my Discord community as well. For all of these reasons it only made sense to use Discord as the site for the Focus Group.

While this study does not implement any quotas for participant demographics since I am only holding one focus group, I attempted to have representation from multiple different backgrounds (e.g., recognizing differences across gender identity, sex, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.). The overarching goal of the study in regard to participants is to find a group of six to eight participants who serve as a somewhat representative sample of people who play narrative-based video games.

### ***Recruitment***

These participants were recruited through convenient sampling. I used traditional snowball sampling and social media outreach to garner interest. I also used social media outreach through my personal Facebook and Tik Tok accounts. My Tik Tok account in particular is dedicated towards teaching game studies to a general audience, with over 25,000 followers. Interested parties will be instructed to fill out a short demographic survey. This survey, in Appendix A, asked questions regarding the person's demographic

background, video game playing experiences, and asks for their email address for future contact. Once participants filled out the demographic survey, participants for the focus group were determined based on availability, their video game experiences, and factors that best lead to a representative sample.

### ***Games Utilized***

This study is not focusing on a single game but instead asked questions and conducted activities related to a multitude of video games and gaming in general. However, to ensure that participants were able to discuss specific examples of parasocial relationships and video game narratives, I asked participants to have played at least one game in the list of games found below. This list was chosen based on previous literature and personal preference of games that showcase parasocial relationships and compelling narrative structures. These games are also some of the most popular narrative-based video games in the last 20 years (Staff, 2021; Moore & Schubak, 2014).

*Fallout New Vegas* is a role-playing game (RPG) that has been renowned for its post-apocalyptic narrative and well-structured NPC companions (Steimer, 2010). *Outer Worlds* is a similar game to *Fallout New Vegas* but set in outer space with a larger focus on player control over the narrative (Stapleton, 2019). *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is a satirical first-person shooter with a prolonged narrative and focus on player involvement in the character's storyline (Dunham, 2004). *Undertale* is an indie-game with a focus on character choices and non-traditional narrative that shakes players to their core (Plagge, 2018). Finally, *Skyrim* is another RPG with a focus on internal decision-making and character building to express oneself through narrative and character relationships (Onyett, 2011). As noted, each game has some form of a compelling

narrative, character-rich environments, and player interactivity within the central components of the game. Furthermore, the popularity of each of these games will ensure the widest reach in terms of recruiting possible focus group participants.

Finally, I conducted the focus group online via Discord with a semi-structured format. I did so for a variety of reasons. First, it increases the convenience and ability to find participants since the focus group is not tied to a single geographic location. Second, people who play video games are extremely familiar with and likely more comfortable with the online world; this led participants to feel more comfortable quickly in the focus group. The focus group was semi-structured for similar reasons. Focus groups aim to understand the discourse of a small group communication situation; thus, using a semi-structured plan allows me to go with the flow of the conversation and unfolding, co-constructed discourse. While I went in with a plan and six overarching questions (see Appendix A), I had plenty of follow up questions prepared to account for this semi-structured format. Discord can record and transcribe the focus group with the permission of all participants, which I obtained through their completion of the informed consent form before beginning and recording the focus group discussion.

### **Rhetorical Analysis Method**

Given this method plan for the focus group itself, I next explain how I conducted the rhetorical analysis of the transcript of the focus group. Rhetorical analysis is a process similar to textual analysis. Essentially the critic will examine the text, in this case the focus group transcript, looking for patterns, themes, shared stories, shared experiences, shared fondness or hatred for certain games, etc. These patterns are assumed to occur because the persuasively influential factor, in this case the video games they all play, has

some shared and common influence on them. The analysis of patterns helps the critic determine what those influences are, how they actually influence players, etc. This type of analysis is typical for all forms of rhetorical analysis, but this study took the additional step to also conduct narrative rhetorical analysis. This specific form of analysis focuses on finding patterns, shared themes, etc. for how participants are influenced by narrative and how they construct their own narratives. Narrative rhetorical analysis consists of analyzing patterns amongst two major parts: narrative probability and narrative fidelity.

### ***Narrative Probability***

Humans tell and experience stories in ways that help them process their social realities. These stories then have influence and give scholars certain cues regarding how they see their social reality through public discourse. For narratives to have an effect on someone's social reality, the story must be narratively probable. Narratives are probable when the story is in a sequential order that makes sense to the listener and storyteller (Fisher, 1985). Narratives can take many different forms but should include some form of plot, characters, and events, all in some order to have a rhetorical effect. For the purpose of this study, the narratives that the focus group created about their video game experiences will only be rhetorical if they include characters and an order of events that signify a probable narrative.

### ***Narrative Fidelity***

Not only do narratives have to be probable to have a rhetorical effect, but they also must have narrative fidelity. Once a narrative reaches narrative probability, a listener will start to question whether the story matches their own lived experience, or their social reality. If a narrative does not feel true or resonant with someone's social reality, it will

likely have no rhetorical impact on the listener. In this study, the players' discourse, and the narratives within will only have a rhetorical impact if the narrative experiences being told ring true to the experiences of other video game players in the focus group. A character having a lasting parasocial influence on a player will only be seen as having narrative fidelity if other players can understand how that is possible from comparing the narrative experience to their own experiences within their social reality.

### **Timeline**

This thesis had a complicated timeline. After a successful proposal in mid-November, I set to work on the IRB approval process. This process had several hiccups that caused the process to not be approved until mid-January. After approval I immediately started recruitment and quickly held the focus group. By the beginning of February, I started writing the rest of the thesis. I finished the draft by the end of March. I successfully defended the thesis in mid-April.

### **Limitations**

No study is perfect in its design, and the choices outlined above do come with some limitations that affected the results. First, methodological limitations will be addressed. Second, I will address limitations regarding the sample, number of participants, and only conducting one focus group.

Naturally, the choice to employ rhetorical field methods comes with a flurry of limitations. Most notably, by choosing a qualitative method for answering my research questions it does not provide broad and easily generalizable results. While this research deeply explored the processes of video game narratives and parasocial relationship

processes it will be limited in explaining how many people engage in those processes or how many people experience the processes influences.

Furthermore, choosing rhetorical field methods over traditional rhetorical analysis also comes with limitations. While rhetorical field methods provide access to everyday discourse it does not provide the benefits of a close-textual analysis. This research was able to explain how video game narratives and parasocial processes influence players, but it is unlikely to explain what elements of video games create these experiences, because the focus is on the player and not the video game.

Second, the sample and number of participants also limits the study. By choosing a convenient sample to increase the probability of finding participants, it does further how limited results can be in generalized, since the sample is not entirely representative of all backgrounds and communities. Furthermore, by limiting the number of participants to six to eight participants and only conducting a single focus group I am further diving deeply into each individual experience but limited how widespread these results cover.

These results do not explain every player's experience with video game narratives and parasocial processes. While this is a limitation this is not the goal of the study. Now that the study produced promising results, quantitative research can be conducted to test how generalized and widespread these experiences are, but for now understanding the deep rich experiences of some players is integral to continuing the scholarly conversation being built in video game studies surrounding narrative and parasocial processes.

This study is one of the first to use rhetorical field methods regarding how players communicate about video game narratives and the parasocial processes they experience therein. This study is justified in that fact alone, but even more so, the lived everyday

experiences of gamers are not fully understood. This methodology explains the best choice for answering the research questions in the previous chapter.

## RESULTS

This study involved several steps. First, I used a demographic survey to garner participant attention. I recruited participants who have played video games on a semi-regular basis (10-15 hours per week) and have experience with games focused on narratives and virtual characters such as *Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks, 2011), *Fallout: New Vegas* (Bethesda Softworks & Obsidian Entertainment, 2010), *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar North, 2004), *The Outer Worlds* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2019), or *Undertale* (Fox, 2015).

Second, ten participants were selected to take part in the focus group based on availability and a variety of demographic characteristics. Out of those ten, four participants started the focus group process. Only three participants continued their participation throughout the entire focus group. The three participants had a demographic background representing a variety of cisgender and gender nonbinary representations, different sexual orientations including heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual. The focus group participants were all white. The focus group lasted ninety minutes and was hosted on Discord. The focus group was recorded and transcribed through Discord, and then I went through the transcript to fix any grammatical or transcription errors. I analyzed the focus group transcript using narrative rhetorical analysis, as described in Chapter Three. This method resulted in several unique findings.

This chapter explores those results through two major sections. First, I explain the results from the focus group based on my research questions advanced in Chapter Two. Using results from my research questions, I propose a theoretical model for understanding how gamers communicate about their experiences regarding relationships



with characters and how those relationships impact their experience with the narratives in video games. I call this working model the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement. This introductory model highlights focus group participants' responses to avatar identification, narrative involvement, parasocial relationships, community engagement, and complete rhetorical satisfaction as well as how each area of gaming interaction affects the following levels.

Finally, this chapter explains the results from conducting a rhetorical analysis of the focus group transcript. This section explores how narrative rhetorical criticism showed participants' blending game narrative and grand narrative. Participants used rhetorical strategies to construct their discourse about characters and narratives in video games. I explain how I found patterns of grand narratives, persuasion, and how participants' everyday experiences as they intersect with video games are part of a search of true belonging to a larger community.

### **Players' Experiences of Narratives and Parasocial Relationships in Games**

This thesis set out to answer two research questions through rhetorical field methods utilizing a focus group to ask gamers about their experiences with character relationships and narratives in video games. The two research questions were:

RQ1: How does narrative rhetorically influence parasocial relationship processes that are formed between players and characters in video games?

RQ2: How do parasocial relationship processes between players and characters in video games rhetorically influence the narrative world-building in the video game?

### *Narratives' Rhetorical Influence on Parasocial Relationships*

This study suggests that the answer to research question one is that narratives rhetorically influence parasocial relationship processes because a narrative that achieves cohesion and fidelity is essential for players to understand the social rules of the game's relationships. Thus, the narrative acts as a requirement for players to put in effort to build parasocial relationships. Essentially, this makes the narrative necessary for players to start building parasocial relationships.

This phenomenon is evident through how participants categorized the games they played and the level of immersion and connection they felt to the game world. Participant Three described the experience of playing *Dead by Daylight* (Behavior Interactive, 2016):

For example, I play Kate, which is like this white, blonde bombshell, who looks like she'd probably be like a Republican in some southern state (said in a negative tone indicating this is not a factor leading to emotional bonding)...I always used to care about my character and other player's characters...and now I'm just like it doesn't really matter to me as long as the game's good, and it fits the world.

The participant is describing how if the game narrative is "good," and the characters in the game (both avatar and NPCs) fit within the game world and narrative, then they tend to enjoy the game more, regardless of which characters they are playing or interact with. Participant One continued this notion by arguing, "I don't care if he's a good guy or a bad guy." In this example, the participant is describing how the morality of a character does not affect the development of emotional bonds if the morality of that character fits into the narrative of the game. As a whole, these participants agreed that when it comes to

parasocial relationships, the connections to the avatar and characters are dictated by the narrative.

Under this logic, it is understandable as to why a reflexive video game narrative is a requirement for parasocial relationships, because the narrative dictates the rules of social interaction for those relationships. Participant One explains:

I've been through the marriage process in *Skyrim*. It generally is with someone that I think is probably going to benefit me the most. So even the ones that I can't marry...I don't feel like I need to force it by downloading like a mod or anything like [that].

This participant is explaining two game processes in *Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks, 2011). First, the game does allow you to marry virtual characters, a deep form of parasocial relationship bonding. However, the game limits who you can and cannot marry. Second, the participant is explaining the process of modifying a game. This is a somewhat common process in video games where a player will alter the code of the game to change it to the player's preferences. In this case, they are altering who the player can and cannot marry. This individual participant argued they don't want to modify the game and are comfortable engaging in marriage only with the characters originally intended for marriage. This is because by changing the game and thus the game narrative, it is changing the parasocial relationship they develop with the character. The narrative world of the game would not make cohesive sense if the player could marry a character that was already married, a ghost, or a skeleton. This shows further that narratives rhetorically influence parasocial relationships because they dictate what is and is not acceptable in those parasocial relationships. This dictation is done through narrative cohesion and

fidelity. Players learn what is acceptable in the narrative and thus what is acceptable for them as avatars creating virtual relationships with other characters. Essentially, narratives affect parasocial relationships in two ways. First, an interactive narrative is a requirement for players to develop parasocial relationships and second, narratives dictate the social rules for developing parasocial relationships.

### **Parasocial Relationships' Lack of Rhetorical Influence on Narratives**

While video game narratives rhetorically influence parasocial relationship processes for players, the study suggests in answering research question two that parasocial relationships have little to no rhetorical influence on the video game narrative. Participant Three explains this experience:

Like *Subnautica* and *Raft*, where you find recordings or notes, it is well done.

Honestly, that is probably the one single thing that turned me off about *Fallout 76* where you have all these NPCs in like a post-apocalyptic game...It makes me feel not good things, unless it's well done like *Raft*. I don't really want to be reminded of like the demise of these people. I want to talk to NPCs, or I don't want them to be present [in a post-apocalyptic narrative].

The participant explains a few post-apocalyptic games and how they handle the inclusion of virtual characters and thus parasocial relationships in a game narrative where every character is supposed to be dead. In games like *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2014) and *Raft* (Redbeet Interactive, 2018), the games have no actual NPCs for the player to talk to, but the game does have notes, PDAs, audio logs, etc. of NPCs. Participant Two agreed that they were able to experience parasocial phenomena in

terms of connecting with the virtual characters in *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2014) and *Raft* (Redbeet Interactive, 2018).

However, in *Fallout 76* (Bethesda Softworks, 2018), the game includes actual NPCs despite the fact that they should all be dead due to the apocalyptic nature of the game narrative. Participant Three showcased above that they did not develop a parasocial relationship in any form with characters in *Fallout 76* (Bethesda Softworks, 2018). In fact, the opposite occurred where the game experience was soured because the narrative was not considered first in the creation of parasocial experiences with characters. The participant experience in *Fallout 76* (Bethesda Softworks, 2018) showcases that the parasocial relationships had no or little rhetorical influence on the narrative of the game because the player did not bother to engage in any form of emotional bonding with those characters. Reflexive narratives are a requirement for players to bond with characters, and when games attempt to work backwards (parasocial relationships to form narrative involvement), players will not bother with either process thus resulting in a negative play experience. Participants described the need to always think narratively about how they interact with a game first.

While this does showcase parasocial relationships having a negative influence on video game narratives, this influence is not a rhetorical one. Players play within the game narrative rhetorically through playing within the boundaries of narrative cohesion and fidelity. In *Fallout 76* (Bethesda Softworks, 2018), narrative cohesion and fidelity were not present. Player Three makes this abundantly clear arguing:

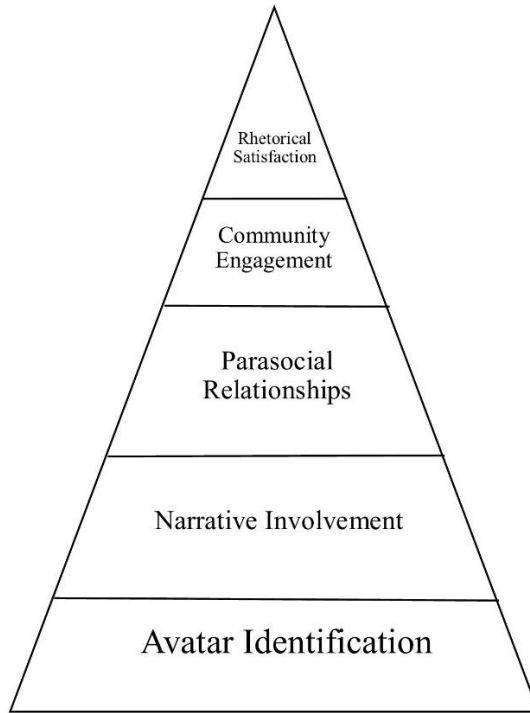
It's really important to have an intriguing story...like it [*Fallout 76*] just has a bleak storyline where the creators just want a fucked up world arguing humans

are the worst, but I don't believe that...I believe in times of trouble and through disasters people do come together and they do protect each other...Hope is realistic to me like that is how people respond to things, and so without that [hope] I don't buy it.

Participant Three is noting that in *Fallout 76* (Bethesda Softworks, 2018) the narrative did not hold cohesion or fidelity to real life or to the rules of the game world. If this research question was concerned about any influence from parasocial relationships on video game narratives this study could speak to several negative influences. However, because the study is concerned with *rhetorical* influences and rhetoric, in this case, how parasocial relationships might rhetorically influence narrative cohesion and fidelity, there is no influence on parasocial relationships. Participants in this focus group always thought about and experienced from a narrative perspective first and then a parasocial one, never the other way around.

### **Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement**

Both answers to the research questions and additional communicative examples provided from the focus group participants indicate the need for a new theoretical model for examining not only the communication of parasocial processes and narratives but also for other game-based experiences and how those connect to building a community for players. I call this working model the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement. This model explains not only how narrative world building is essential to build parasocial relationship processes but also how video game communities and avatar identification fit into these experiences.

**Figure 1*****Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement*****Level of Engagement**

The model has five components in the shape of a pyramid (see Figure 1), where one step is a necessary experience players must have in order to move to the next level higher in the pyramid, similar to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943). With each movement up a level in the pyramid, players are not only more likely to increase engagement, enjoyment, and rhetorical satisfaction of the game but are also more likely to feel a strong bond to the community of game developers and gamers who play the game. The five levels of the pyramid are as follows: 1) avatar identification, 2) narrative involvement, 3) parasocial relationships 4) community engagement, and finally, 5)

rhetorical satisfaction with all elements of the game and identification with the gaming community. I continue by explaining each level of the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement in turn, and how each level acts as a requirement for the next level higher up in the pyramid.

### ***Avatar Identification***

Avatar Identification is an integral part of the video game experience. Participants' discourse indicated that identification with an avatar is necessary to achieve any level of integral engagement with a video game. While video games that do not achieve the most basic level of avatar identification can still be enjoyable, they do not receive the same type of complete satisfaction as other games. Participants discussed examples of games that do not achieve avatar identification, using the example of *SimCity* (Wright, et al., 1989). Participant One said: "It definitely matters whether you have an avatar versus whether you're the omnipotent god...like in *SimCity* I tend not to care...as much and that's just the way it is." This moment showcases that in *SimCity*, a game without an avatar at all let alone one that players feel they can identify with, they simply don't care in the same capacity about the game. Essentially, for players to increase satisfaction with the game they need an avatar through which they can more meaningfully interact with the video game world.

Avatar identification seems to be a necessary condition for players to be able to create parasocial relationships with NPCs in a game. Similar to the *SimCity* example, Participant Three added, "It is just like they're [NPCs] ants." Participant Two agreed, saying, "Having an avatar is much more important to get me to care about what happens [in the game]." If players are not able to identify with their avatar, they are not able to



build meaningful relationships with virtual characters. Avatar identification is the most important and base-line process in the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement. Without an avatar or without an avatar that the player can easily identify with, players feel lost, wandering through a mediated world that can bring them enjoyment but cannot satisfy any deeper social needs with the avatar to make the process meaningful.

Since Avatar Identification is the baseline process in the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement, it is critical to understand what factors lead to avatar identification. Participants were clear about what single factor led to their avatar identification: similar values. Participants discussed two types of game avatars: 1) fixed avatars, where they could not change anything or very little about their avatar; and 2) customized avatars, where they could change characteristics to their physical, mental, and emotional liking.

***Fixed Avatars.*** Participants suggested that both avatar types can help players achieve avatar identification, the most primary of parasocial relationships in a game. Participant One provided the example of *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012), which is a video game with a fixed avatar:

You can tell that he cares about this little girl and wants to do everything in his power to protect her from the zombie apocalypse, and I felt like when I had to make the choices, I would have to do the same...[I was] seeing some kind of shared value [with that avatar].

Even when a participant cannot change the characteristics of an avatar, they can still identify with that avatar's values which then influences their choices in a game.

Participant Two explained in *Detroit Become Human* (Quantic Dream, 2018):

I think a good example of that [connecting to the game's avatar] is *Detroit Become Human*. I think like the avatars in that there's a theme of social justice and we're like fighting for a better world and activism and I think like I cared a lot about those avatars and the game itself.

The participant is noting their experience of avatar identification through the shared values of social justice and activism. What is notable about *Detroit Become Human* is that there are multiple avatars the player plays and identifies with throughout the course of the game. Essentially, this shows that in games with one and multiple fixed avatars, identification is still possible if a sense of shared values with the fixed avatar or avatars is present.

**Customized Avatars.** Similar to identifying with fixed avatars, participants were able to experience avatar identification through shared values with customizable avatars. Participant Two noted: “*Fable* had a really distinct, good and evil kind of thing.... I think in the moment, it's like fun and it's like you know you're like making choices in the moment.” Participant Three continued, speaking of the enjoyment to connect with their avatar because of the customization of morality: “How evil or good you were [in your avatar] changed your physical appearance; like it could become a devil or have a halo – that mechanic, that's a great example of game customization.” These participants are noting two processes of avatar customization: physical and personality. While both of these customizations are chosen from the avatar's morality, participants are still noting that the act of customizing the personality (their values and beliefs) and their physical appearance (devil horns or a halo) helps them feel more connected with their avatar. Ultimately, this process leads to identification with their avatar because the player is

choosing the values of their avatar and those values are being reflected in the physical expression of the avatar. In short, the identification over shared values is shared in the physical appearance of the avatar. When a player feels like there are shared values between themselves and their avatar they experience identification, and this process occurs regardless of whether those shared values are fixed or customized.

### ***Narrative Involvement***

The second stage in the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement is narrative involvement. As previously stated, developing a shared connection, and identifying with the player's avatar is critical to feel involved in the video game narrative world.

Participants argued that once avatar identification has been achieved, the world needs to reflect the choices made by that avatar in the overarching narrative of the game world.

There are two components to this reflexive narrative environment, the avatar itself and the game choices made by the player through the avatar.

***Physical Avatar.*** The first component that participants discussed of narrative involvement is the physical avatar itself. In games where players are given the ability to customize their avatar's physical appearance and personality, gamers wanted to see those choices reflected in the narrative world building that happened in game. Participant One gave the example of *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011). They said: "I will still spend thirty minutes nitpicking the way his eyebrows look...creating the perfect character to be this archer or...create this perfect mage-looking character...it makes me feel...more immersed into the game [narrative]...this guy really is the archer." What's notable about this example is that in *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), not only will you physically see your avatar as you play but other characters will comment on your

appearance. Similarly, Participant Three argued a similar sentiment about *Fable*, as noted above. In this game, the avatar's physical appearance was dictated by how evil or good you played your customized avatar, and those choices impacted the game's narrative. While this example showcased avatar identification with a customizable avatar, it still shows how the act of being able to customize the physical appearance of their avatar makes them feel greater identification with the narrative. By having the narrative of the game world reflect the physical appearance choices of the avatar, it further immerses players into the game narrative and thus moves them further up a level in the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement.

*Avatar's In-Game Decision-Making.* The second component that participants discussed of narrative involvement was narrative-based choices. Participants argued that not only do they want the characters within the narrative world to comment on their choices of physical appearance, but players also want NPCs to comment on their in-world choices as well. Elements like personality, morality, and decision-making process are critical components to identity exploration. By allowing players to customize these features of their avatar and the choices that the avatar makes in the narrative world in-game, it helps the players to more closely identify with their avatar as they encounter and make decisions regarding the narrative in the game world. This is because the narrative game world seems more realistic because it is reflexive to the players' choices as the avatar in the game. Participants discussed the example of *Fable* (Lionhead Studios, et al., 2005). Participant Two noted: "*Fable* [had] a really distinct, good and evil kind of thing...you're like making choices [with] the lasting impact that it would have on people [in the game]." Having reflexive environments that responded to the player's avatar's

personality and choices draws them into the narrative and makes them care more about their avatar and the narrative world that avatar was engulfed in.

The antithesis to this notion is games that don't have a reflexive environment. Participant One described their experiences with their avatar and the lack of narrative involvement in *Grand Theft Auto* and *Skyrim*:

In *Grand Theft Auto*, robbing the bank isn't going to hurt their [NPCs] feelings, cause they're going to give me the same dialogue every single time or like in *Skyrim*, when I go rob the shopkeeper for the fiftieth time, like I don't really feel bad.

In both *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar North, 2004) and *Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks, 2011), the lack of reaction to the player's avatar's actions negatively impacted narrative involvement, because the narrative world didn't seem real or affected by the player's choices through their avatar's choices in the game.

***Narrative Cohesion, Fidelity, and Reflexivity.*** Now that it is clear why narrative involvement is the next step in the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement, I explain how narrative involvement can be achieved. Participants noted the standard notions of narratives that share an unsurprising similarity to Fisher's tenets of Narrative Paradigm Theory (1985; 1989a; 1989b). Narratives must be cohesive by having sequential meaning with characters, events, and setting. Participant Two argued that what makes a narrative cohesive is the presence of reflexivity and unpredictability:

In games, your actions have like you know world shattering consequences. I think there's an unpredictability to it. In the real world, I can kind of. predict what my actions are going to do, and in games I think it was like *L.A. Noire*, you would

pick a dialogue option and then he [the avatar] would like freak out on the person [an NPC]. I definitely think about like the negative consequences to what I'm saying, especially for like my character that I'm controlling but sometimes you can't control the outcomes.

Narrative cohesion is determined by the rules of the game world. The fictional nature of games means games can set their own standards for what is and is not cohesive.

However, players do expect game narrative to be reflexive in some capacity, to have a reaction to the player's actions. In *L.A. Noire*, they expect NPCs to react to dialogue choices of the player's avatar. Players also expect game narratives to be unpredictable in some way. *LA Noire*'s NPCs react in a way that isn't always telegraphed but does still fit cohesively into the game world. Games that showcase these components that make up narrative cohesion and fidelity lead to higher levels of engagement and satisfaction as the player moves up the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement. Essentially, while sequential narrative order is different in video game narratives because players are able to act and thus alter the sequential order of the narrative; so long as the game narrative is reflexive and unpredictable, it provides a unique form of cohesion and fidelity thus still fulfilling the parameters of a rhetorically functional narrative.

Narratives must have fidelity by fitting into the rhetorical worldview and experiences of the player in their actual lives out-of-game. Similar to narrative cohesion, the fictional nature and natural interactivity of video game narratives alter the formation process of narrative fidelity. Participant One argued:

*Subnautica* is a beautiful game. With *Subnautica*, whenever I come across the recordings of people...It's developing the story to what happened to these people

when they were here and how they died. You know, and their exploration throughout this ocean planet...They're [the recordings as a game mechanic and the characters the recordings are representing], helping me develop this mental story of what happened.

Participant One shows that within fictional game narratives, every new character, plot line, or change in setting is altering the narrative fidelity of the player. *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2014) is notable in its narrative exploration as the more recordings (characters) the avatar encounters changes the avatar's chances of survival (plot line), and through uncovering new areas of the planet (setting), the player's fidelity is altered. Since real-world fidelity is altered through new experiences in life, it is unsurprising that game-world fidelity is altered through new game experiences. As players experience the game and narrative fidelity is expanded, players grow to feel greater identification with the narrative because the player's experiences within that game narrative are altering the player's narrative fidelity in the real world.

Finally, the only portion of narrative involvement that is unique to the video game medium is the player desire for reflexive narratives. Participant Two spoke of the game *Fable*, and its reflexivity with good and evil with the avatar "making choices in the moment." Participant Three continued on the customization of morality, noting the importance of how other virtual characters reacted to the avatar's choices, changing the avatar's appearance. These participants are noting two processes of avatar choices: physical and personality. Participants are noting their increased connection to the reflexive environment because the environment is reacting to the choice of personality (their values and beliefs) and their physical appearance (devil horns or a halo in *Fable*).

Even though the process of customizing their avatar does help them feel more connected to their avatar, because the narrative is also reacting to the physical and personality choices of the avatar, they feel more connected to the narrative world as well. Reflexive narratives are ones that respond to the player's choices through both the physical attributes of their avatar and their avatar's emotional personality, narrative choices, and morality.

When a video game utilizes a narrative world that is cohesive, has fidelity, and is reflexive to the player's need to be involved in the narrative world, that player is satisfied with narrative involvement, and they continue to move up the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement to the next level of parasocial relationships.

### ***Parasocial Relationships***

The third stage in the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement is the development of parasocial relationships through relational play. This stage is concerned with the development of emotional bonds and relationships with virtual characters or NPCs in the game. Developing emotional and relational bonds cannot be accomplished without first identifying with one's avatar, and second, being involved in the narrative, as noted earlier.

This level entails participants feeling involved in the narrative world of the video game in order to develop parasocial relationships with the characters or NPCs in the game. Participant Two discussed making morally questionable choices in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar North, 2004). They explained: "It depends how the narrative [is]...like if the NPCs are like clearly bad guys...trying to kill you...I don't feel bad for killing something first that's trying to kill me if...that's part of the narrative." Yet



when discussing *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012), Participant Two stated: “You say like the wrong thing and then the character’s like so and so will remember that, to me like [that] get[s] me right in the feels. It doesn’t matter how shitty that NPC is.” In both examples, the players are referring to how they develop negative affective parasocial relationships with the NPCs that are a crucial part of the story for each game. The mechanic the participant is describing in *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012) is that throughout the game, as the player makes decisions about actions and dialogue options with virtual characters, the game will explicitly tell the player ‘this character will remember that.’ In this case ‘that’ indicates the choice that was just made. The participant noted that the satisfaction of avatar identification and a reflexive narrative environment in *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012) that is not present in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar North, 2004) is what pushes the participant to build relationships with characters in the game.

Participants described that for them to connect with characters, an engaging narrative is essential. Participant Two elucidated: “They [characters] don't always feel fulfilling in terms of like story lines or narratives. It's more about the game itself with the gameplay.” Participant One agreed saying: “I think it [connecting with the characters] definitely depends on the narrative, and definitely the different stories that you come across, like *Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks, 2011). I'm not going to feel for NPCs as much as games with an engaging narrative with characters that you know that will actually connect with me emotionally.” They both want to see characters within the context of the narrative not the context of the gameplay. Ultimately, this shows that an engaging

narrative, one that is cohesive, has fidelity, and is reflexive, is a requirement for players to emotionally engage with NPCs and develop relationships.

Participant Two explained that *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar North, 2004) is an example of a game that does *not* accomplish narrative involvement and thus parasocial relationships are impossible. They lamented: “Maybe it's that emotional attachment part like in a story game where I know what my dialogue might say might affect them or hurt their feelings. Meanwhile, like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar North, 2004), I just kind of see them as an NPC.” *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar North, 2004) fails at having a reflexive environment because of the sandbox nature of the game, thus affecting the narrative, and limiting the development of parasocial relationships.

Participant One provided the example of *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012), arguing that the game does accomplish a reflexive, cohesive narrative that has fidelity and thus they felt naturally pushed to develop parasocial relationships. They said: “So when I do have to make the choice? I almost feel connected in the sense of you know...*The Walking Dead*, you can tell that he cares about this little girl and wants to do everything in his power to protect her from the zombie apocalypse and I felt like when I had to make the choices, I would...protect her too.” The participant felt connected to their avatar, the narrative was reflexive in the choices the participant could make, and thus they felt the natural urge to protect another character in the game. They developed an emotional bond to this “little girl” because the other elements of game and narrative design on The Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement were accomplished.

Clearly, relational play and parasocial relationship development with NPCs is the third level in the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement. As noted above in explaining my answers to the research questions in the first section of this chapter, narrative involvement is necessary in order for players to form relationships with NPCs in a game. Narratives rhetorically influence parasocial relationships because a narrative that has cohesion, fidelity, and reflexivity is necessary for players to even consider engaging in parasocial relationship development. On the other hand, parasocial relationships appear to have no rhetorical impact on the narrative of a video game. This is because for players to develop a parasocial relationship, they must have already been involved in the video game narrative to want to create those relationships. While parasocial relationship building surely increases the strength of the pyramid, parasocial relationships have no direct impact on the narrative involvement process.

With this understanding of why parasocial relationships is the third level in the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement, I suggest how video games can create these parasocial relationship processes. Participants upheld Horton and Wohl's (1956) original tenets for parasocial relationships: that characters must be personal and reciprocal. Participant One elucidated that characters are personal when they have and share human values: "I think I definitely care a lot [about a game's characters] when I...see some kind of shared value." Participant Two provided an example of this process: "[With] *Detroit Beyond Human*, which...has a theme of like social justice and we're like fighting for a better world and activism and I think like I cared a lot about those characters because I saw that value." The players develops parasocial relationships with

these characters because they seem like real people; they care and value the same things as real people.

While participants did not directly explain what makes a character relationship reciprocal, it is fair to assume that the nature of gaming relationships being reciprocal is naturally satisfied. Dialogue in video games naturally attempts to simulate a back-and-forth conversation between character and player. The player has direct control over their avatar and the dialogue that occurs in game, so being reciprocal is accounted for by the nature of the medium. Once a player has established identification with their avatar, involvement in the narrative, and developed parasocial relationships with characters, they are able to move to the next level of the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement: community engagement.

### ***Community Engagement***

Thus far through the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement, players have satisfied a variety of needs. Avatar identification has allowed players to communicate their real-world or imagined identity. Narrative involvement has allowed players to be a part of a larger narrative world beyond their own lived experience. Relational play and the development of parasocial relationships has allowed players to satisfy the need to be a social creature. The final need that players attempt to satisfy through community engagement is the need to belong, which is a strong desire to be communicative creatures. As satisfactory as all other levels of the pyramid can be, participants noted that they still crave real relationships in-game and out-of-game in terms of identifying and engaging with a community of game developers and players. Participant Three said:

I think something that really impacts my relationship with a game and then by proxy the characters in it is the community around the game...I think a lot of people don't play games for the story or the characters – they play it for the people.

Participants indicated that they know and understand the other three levels are only simulated need satisfaction processes; however, these games give players the ability to satisfy “real” need processes by engaging with the communities behind and engaged in a game.

Participants provided examples of experiences where they do achieve community engagement, leading to full need satisfaction through video games. Participant Two gave the example of *Coral Island* (Stairway Games, 2022). They spoke about the thoughtful inclusion of queer characters and narratives aided in the connection to the queer community playing the game. Participant One gave the example of *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011). They argued that by having the narrative so seamlessly built into the game world it made it very easy to fall in love with the game and thus want to discuss the game and connect with others who love the game. Participants Two and Three both spoke about the *Sims* series (Electronic Arts, 2000). All participants agreed with participant Two's comment about feeling like they belong to a gaming community and resonate with a game developer's values that went into the creation of a game and its eventual community of players:

Rather than asking gender, it's like ‘can you get pregnant? Can you get someone else pregnant?’ That's how they do the biological sex, and they ask like pronouns and gender identity...that is a really strong connection [to the game] for me, and it

makes me feel seen and it's not just about that character embodying that, it's a message to me that like the people that wrote and designed this game share some kind of values that I share.

These examples are all games that truly connect players with their avatars, provide an involving narrative, and allow players to develop strong parasocial relationships to virtual characters. Because all of these components are achieved, the players connect with the community behind the product, including the developers, the researchers, and the player base. These video games act as a gateway to real community connection, and players understand the meta-nature of that venture, which I describe in more detail below.

Participants also provided many examples of experiences where they do *not* achieve community engagement. One participant spoke of the game *Stardew Valley* (Barone, 2016). Participant Three said:

If I could erase my memory of everyone talking about that game [*Stardew Valley*] or stop people from posting videos on TikTok of them 'expert moding' [expert moding is trying to make the most money possible, make the perfectly aesthetic farm, or essentially turn a non-competitive game into a competitive one] the game. It would, like really, bring back the joy of playing, cause now when I play it and I have my like shitty little farm, Shane (a virtual character) as my husband...I feel fine with that, but now I know that there's this tier or correct way to play the game.

The participant is describing how the community surrounding the game through their group communication shuns players for the way they play the game, even if that shunning is unintentional. Other participants agreed that *Stardew Valley* is a great game

in avatar identification, narrative involvement, and relational play, yet it fails at providing a community that one can engage with to satisfy their need to belong to a supportive community.

### ***Rhetorical Satisfaction***

The final and fifth level of the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement is rhetorical satisfaction. Once players have identified with their avatar, been involved in a reflexive, cohesive narrative with fidelity, developed parasocial relationships with characters, and connected with the community beyond the game, they are able to feel full rhetorical satisfaction with each game element and thus achieve a sense of true belonging. They achieve rhetorical satisfaction through their ability to identify with and belong to a larger gaming community, including the values, beliefs, and or worldview articulated within a game and its community.

The visual of the pyramid presented earlier in the chapter (Figure 1) showcases this model of need satisfaction in a similar fashion to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943), where self-actualization is the top of the pyramid. Similarly, the player must satisfy the base needs before being able to move up to the next level in the pyramid. The overall goal of the player, according to these participants' experiences, is to connect with the community behind the video game, whether that's game developers or other players who find community with a particular game. To truly trust whether the community is worth engaging with, the game must help players to achieve each level in the pyramid to show the player that not only does the game share the same values as them, but the community that enjoys the game also shares these values as well. These participants argued that the *Sims* series (Electronic Arts, 2000) is a great example of this

alignment of values; however, another batch of participants with a different set of shared values could argue that the *Sims* series (Electronic Arts, 2000) is a terrible example, because the values of the communities behind various video games can be so different. From a game mechanic standpoint, avatar identification, narrative involvement, and parasocial relationships can all be tested methodologically in the game creation process; however, they still may not connect to the values of any one specific player.

### **Rhetorical Analysis: Blended Game Narrative and Personal Experiences**

While the focus group transcript itself revealed results that allowed me to create a theoretical model that combines Narrative Paradigm Theory and Parasocial Relationships as they occur with players of video games, the best results in a rhetorical field methods-based study come from the analysis of the field notes that describe participants' experiences and how they communicate about those experiences with one another. To do this, I initially listened to the audio recording of the focus group. After that, I edited the transcription of the focus group, fixing spelling errors, typos, etc. I then searched for patterns amongst participants' experiences by categorizing them into the following results that focus on narrative paradigm and parasocial relationships. In this section, I explain the major rhetorical findings regarding how participants described their experiences with video game narratives and characters and communicated about those experiences with others in the focus group. I first explore meta-narratives and how players construct their grand narrative of their life and micro-narratives of the games they play. Second, I explain the rhetorically blended experiences that video game players have with the meta-narratives. Finally, I suggest a new meaning of what it means to truly feel like we belong to a community.



### ***Grand Narratives***

Narrative rhetorical analysis attempts to understand how people narratively construct their experiences. Humans are first and foremost storytellers, so it is only natural that we construct experiences in a narrative format. Fisher (1985; 1989a; 1989b) argued that we resonate most with narratives that are cohesive, or have a plotline, conflict, characters, and setting. Second, he suggested that we resonate with narratives that have fidelity or fit in with our rhetorical worldview – our values, beliefs, and attitudes about the world. If narratives achieve cohesion and fidelity, then they have the persuasive ability to change attitudes, values, or behaviors.

Humans are constantly orientating their own life in the form of a narrative, or their own grand narrative. We are all the main characters in our own story, with a setting, side characters, and events that change the course of our lives. When players are engaging with video game narratives, they don't just participate in the micro-narrative of the game world, but their process of engaging with that micro-narrative is done with rhetorical consciousness of their own grand narrative. This is evident in the way participants choose what games to play.

### ***Choice of Video Game Narrative Construction***

Two participants choose to seek out *Coral Island* (Stairway Games, 2022) because of its influences on their own grand narrative. The participants who had played *Coral Island* (Stairway Games, 2022) were queer; thus, they sought out queer media to fit into their queer grand narrative. Participant Two explained “You know, for a long time, I had just given up hope that [finding a game that fit into the participant’s grand narrative] would happen and I kind of let it go.” The participant sought out a game specifically because the

narrative elements of gender identity and sexual orientation fit into that participant's grand narrative. The only player who hadn't played *Coral Island* (Stairway Games, 2022) identified as heterosexual or straight. While this participant applauded the game's efforts, they also said they probably wouldn't play the game. Players seem to choose the games they play because of how they will fit into their grand narrative of their own life.

### ***Blended Experiences and Persuasion***

This notion of grand narrative and micro-narratives of games goes beyond choosing what games to play but also affects the way players are persuaded by games. Narrative persuasion in video games occurs if the elements of cohesion and fidelity are met. To clarify, there are different levels of cohesion and fidelity; in the micro-narrative of a video game, narrative cohesion, fidelity, and reflexivity is determined through the game world as discussed in the earlier section of narrative involvement. On another level, the player's grand narrative also must have narrative fidelity and cohesion; the elements on this level are determined from the player's lived experiences. For a micro-narrative to influence/persuade the grand narrative of their own lives, the micro-narrative must achieve narrative fidelity, cohesion, and reflexivity and then the player may be persuaded by these in game experiences. If this occurs, then that player's grand narrative's fidelity and cohesion may be altered due to this new lived experience (the game's micro narrative) that ultimately persuaded the player's own values, beliefs, and worldview.

Players experience both a grand narrative and a micro-narrative at the same time, as well as millions of micro-narratives throughout their lifetimes.. Participants noted the blending of those experiences of real world and video game world leading to unique rhetorical outcomes. During the discussion of *Coral Island* (Stairway Games, 2022), the

only heterosexual participant noted they haven't played the game. If the heterosexual participant played *Coral Island* (Stairway Games, 2022), they would experience a micro-narrative that achieves narrative cohesion, fidelity, and reflexivity. This would then give the potential for the game to influence or persuade the participant surrounding the game's persuasive goals of increased acceptance of LGBTQ+ people. The influence of that persuasive goal would then alter that player's grand narrative, because the lived experience of the participant would have changed since playing and being persuaded by the game's micro-narrative. Once this has occurred, the player's grand narrative cohesion and fidelity would have been altered due to the new experience. Essentially, the experiences of grand and micro-narratives can be rhetorically blended. Micro-narrative experiences can blend with the grand narrative if the micro-narrative fits into the lived experience that underpins the player's grand narrative.

An elongated example of this process is *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2014). In *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2014), the persuasive goals are clear, to change the players' attitudes about disease (Singh, 2022), the fragility of humanity's relationship with ecology (Abraham, 2018), and the issues with glamorizing space colonization (Melnic & Melnic, 2017). The game's narrative setting is an ocean planet colonized by extra terrestrial beings. The game's characters were killed through a space ship crash, and the game's narrative plot points follow the avatar's struggle with an unknown pathogen, slowly killing the player unless they can complete the game. The setting, characters, and plot points, the items that make up a cohesive story, are all pointing in a persuasive direction. So it shouldn't be surprising when Participant One explained that:

Whenever I come across the recordings of people...It's developing the story to what happened to these people when they were here and how they died. You know, and their exploration throughout this ocean planet...They're [the recordings as a game mechanic and the characters the recordings are representing], helping me develop this mental story of what happened.

The game's narrative is cohesive because the setting, plot points, and characters all make narrative sense within the game world's logic. The game's narrative achieves fidelity because as the narrative progresses, it follows a narrative logical path in the mind of the avatar/player. Finally, the game's narrative is reflexive because it reacts to the actions the player/avatar takes, building bases, killing creatures, curing the game's disease, etc.

These elements of the game's micro-narrative are influential regarding a player's grand narrative.

Given the impending climate crisis, current dreams of space colonization, and battling multiple ongoing disease outbreaks, a random player's grand narrative will have a cohesion and fidelity that can be persuaded about these topics through the game's micro-narrative. Thus, it shouldn't be surprising that Participant Two's grand narrative was altered by *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2014): "The only traces of humanity you have are what's left behind, and so that to me is really emotionally impactful, and that really works for me, it changes me." The participant did not elaborate into how it changed them, yet it is clear from their previous remarks about *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2014) that what moved them about the game was being alone. They connected with other humans, but all those characters were gone, dead, because of what humans did to the planet. After a player's grand narrative has been

altered from the new narrative lived experience of the game, the grand narrative's cohesion and fidelity is naturally changed, leaving players more likely to alter behaviors, attitudes, and values towards that of the new lived experience. For *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2014), it may be taking disease outbreaks seriously, arguing against problems of space colonizing rhetoric, or taking action against climate change.

Another example of this process is the game *Unpacking* (Witch Beam, 2021). The game's website makes the persuasive goal clear, to explore a character's life/story through the act of packing and unpacking their household items. While this is a simple game mechanic, the rhetorical influence of the game is clear. Participant Three stated: *Unpacking* was a rare game in which I cared; the writing and how well they were able to like portray moving into this guy's house and not having room for her stuff and then you find out she's with a woman at the end and I'm like well, I didn't even see this coming. The participant is noting the queer undertones of the narrative as well as the story of domestic abuse the game tells through the act of unpacking. The micro-narrative/game's setting was changing with every new apartment/house, the game's characters were based on normal relationships one would have as you moved from place to place throughout your life, and the game's plot points were based on the normal points of growing up and moving, thus achieving cohesion. The micro-narrative/game achieved fidelity through following similar narrative rules through the story, essentially dictating certain actions based on the life stage of the character. For example, you wouldn't consider the items of other characters when moving until the main character was at a point in life where they had roommates. Essentially the narratives rules were followed, thus achieving fidelity. Finally, the micro-narrative/game was reflexive because it reacted to choices the player

makes. For example, putting an item in one spot over the other alters how the character interacted with the room. Participant Three sought out the game because of the values and persuasive goals of the game. Those values and goals matched the fidelity of their grand narrative. Since the game accomplished narrative fidelity, cohesion, and reflexivity it was able to persuasively influence the grand narrative of that participant. Following suit, the grand narrative's fidelity and cohesion was altered. This is showcased through the participant's strong emotional reaction to the persuasive goals surrounding queer narratives and narratives of domestic abuse.

All of this effort into rhetorically blended narrative construction is to find a community that rhetorically supports their effort and their grand narrative. Participant Three said: "Sometimes games can be made better because people care about them." Participant One agreed, saying:

And those are the good video game communities that will uplift this game because of the story that they love and the characters they love...they're propping it up just because they all have this shared love for the game and those are the communities I love being a part of.

These participants know they are searching for community. They know that this search includes individual games and attaining every level of what I call the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement. Their grand narrative construction is all based in this search for community and how it can further their own real-world narrative. Essentially, players construct their lived experiences narratively. They search for individual narratives in video games that share their values and experiences, which shows the grand nature of their search and how they want it to reflect their real world narrative. With an

understanding of a player's experience being that of a meta-narrative, I next turn to media interaction processes.

### ***True Belonging to a Community***

Players do not blend their rhetorical experiences without a reason. This study suggests that the reason for this blending is to achieve true belonging to a gaming community. With nearly every example that participants discussed in the focus group, they were clear in why they played the game in the first place - not for enjoyment but in searching for that gaming community to which they would belong. Participant Two suggested: "I think something that really impacts my relationship with a game...is the community around that game." Near the end of the focus group, Participant One added: "Absolutely love the [focus group] conversation. I think it definitely made me think more about why I act the way I do when playing video games and I think next time I play like a story game I'm going to be a little bit more in tune like 'Oh, that's why I'm doing that.'" The act of community building and bonding with other focus group participants over the games, and thus the values, they share an affinity for altered the anticipated future behavior of some participants, even if it was all talk. Participant One was prepared to play games differently, to rhetorically blend their grand narrative differently, all to fit in with the new community they just found through the focus group.

With this recontextualization of game narratives and parasocial relationships in mind, it is clear that players don't just play games to only have fun. They do so while they identify with an avatar, are involved in a narrative, build parasocial relationships, and blend their narrative experience into engaging with a gaming community to satisfy their most human need to belong. The next chapter derives implications from this study

to show what comes next for video game, narrative, and parasocial scholars as we continue to explore how players communicate about these experiences with one another.



## DISCUSSION

This study found two major results: 1) the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement, a working model that explains how players of video games go through five different stages to reach full rhetorical satisfaction: avatar identification, narrative involvement, parasocial relationships, community engagement, and finally rhetorical satisfaction; and 2) the micro-narrative influence on player's grand narratives through blending immersive experiences. Through playing video games (micro-narratives), the players may blend their experiences with their own real world grand narrative, and thus their grand narrative is altered. To further explain the significance of this study, I explain implications, limitations, and future research.

### **Academic Implications**

Research often in the academic world leads us to ask more questions than to necessarily find answers. These results have indicated three academic based implications. First, rhetoric deserves a rightful place within the field of game studies as a subject and method. Second, scholars should study media as a gateway to community engagement beyond an approach to traditional media satisfaction. Finally, video games aren't universally persuasive.

### ***The Role of Rhetoric in Game Studies***

The first academic based implication that derives from the results of this research is the interdisciplinary nature of game studies, especially considering the role of rhetoric as a discipline and method within this field. Video game studies as a discipline is still being questioned in academic spaces (Costandi, 2011). While many other scholars have argued for the importance of game studies as a whole (Cullen., et al. 2022), the nature of

game studies as a self-contained discipline is still not established, thus rhetoric's place within game studies is not established, either. While game studies as a field will become more dominant by the very nature of research and advocacy, rhetoric's place within that growing dominance is not guaranteed.

At its' core, scholars of game studies attempt to understand how and why humans play games. Rhetoric as a discipline attempts to understand how and why humans are affected or persuaded by artifacts such as speeches, art, games, and films. Rhetorical field methods pay particular attention to how human communication plays out in the process of persuasion. Game studies and rhetoric attempt to understand the same process, how humans are affected by the games they play.

While this study does support prior work and the continued effort for game studies to grow and be respected as its' own field, this particular study and its results showcase a unique angle to this argument. This study's unique use of a rhetorical method resulted in the discovery of a new model. This model not only explains how narrative paradigm theory (Fisher, 1985; 1985a; 1985b) and parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956) work together but also depicts how larger video game mechanic concepts like avatar identification relate to the rhetorical process of identification identified by Burke (1969). These results would never have been found if game studies would have continued to exist without the use of rhetorical field methods. Thus, this study is the living embodiment that rhetoric and rhetorical field methods must play a role in game studies research.

### *Moving Beyond Uses and Gratification in Media Interactionism*

Traditional approaches to researching media interactionism, transportation (Green and Brock, 2000), worship (Brown, 2015), parasocial relationships (Horton and Wohl 1957), and identification (Cohen, 2001) have almost exclusively adopted the Uses and Gratifications (Blumer & Katz, 1974) perspective: audiences use media to satisfy unmet needs in real life. Transportation assumes media users are satisfying the need to get away from the “real-world” (Green & Brock, 2000). Worship assumes media users are satisfying the need to regard an authority figure with deity-like status (Brown, 2015). Identification assumes media users are satisfying the need to be like others (Cohen, 2001). For theories like parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956), audiences use fictional characters to build relationships with characters because their real-life relationships are not fulfilling the social needs they may have. This perspective has been long established and used in many facets of media scholarship. However, this study reveals that not all research approaches to media need rely on this Uses and Gratifications approach.

This study revealed that with video games, these participants do not exclusively use avatar identification, narrative involvement, or parasocial relationships to satisfy needs typically assumed from a Uses and Gratifications perspective. Rather, participants in this research study said that they use video games as a gateway to find real world communities to satisfy these needs. The real community behind a game gives players a chance to express their identity, and to build relationships, through the people within a community. While this argument could still be seen as using the media to find community and thus still satisfy their needs, that line of logic still reveals new

implications for how we view, use, and study media, especially interactive media such as video games.

The video games we play, and potentially the media we use generally, are for different purposes. Video games act as a gateway to the communities we wish to be a part of. With this understanding, and the need for additional research to understand how deep this media gateway is, it alters our understanding of all media use. This reveals the potential for not only video games to be used as gateways but also for other types of media to be used in this way. Movies, books, television, comics, and music could all be used to find or to engage with communities. From an academic perspective, this revolutionizes how we conduct media research, because the Uses and Gratifications (Blumer & Katz, 1974) perspective is not universal, at least not for the participants in this study.

### ***Video Games Aren't Universally Persuasive***

This study has showcased thus far that video games have an incredible power to connect players to one another, form a community with shared values, alter narrative experiences, and satisfy a player's need to belong. However, in terms of universal persuasion, video game narratives have clear limits. Each participant had played at least twenty games in the last year, each with a different variety of persuasive goals as discussed previously in Chapter Four with *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2014) and *Unpacking* (Witch Beam, 2021). If each game creates a different micro-narrative experience, then the ability for these games to achieve their persuasive goals is highly contextual (and not universal) just by the very nature and amount of play for each player. This drastically alters scholars' perception of how persuasion occurs in video

games, which might lead game studies and communication and media studies scholars to ask: How can video game narratives actually be persuasive to players?

Simply put, games are persuasive by accounting for the grand narrative construction their players are experiencing through playing the game and blending that experience back to the narrative of their own life in the real world outside of the game. Players experience individual micro-narratives in the form of the narrative worlds of the video games they choose to play and engage with. Players then orient these micro-narratives into their own grand narrative outside of the game. Thus, both the in-game and out-of-game narratives are blended constructions, each affecting one other in turn. The higher up a player moves on the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement regarding playing a particular game seems to have a direct association with the amount of time players spend with a game. If players spend more time playing a game, then it seems likely that they experience a greater level of narrative blending and thus a greater chance of achieving that particular game's persuasive goals, such as those in *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2014) and *Unpacking* (Witch Beam, 2021).

For a game to alter the rhetorical worldview of players, game developers must account for how the micro-narrative of the game blends with the narrative construction of the player's grand narrative outside of the game. Part of what made *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2014) a persuasively influential game for these participants in this focus group was the context in which they played and discussed playing this game. A global pandemic, ongoing climate change, an increasingly lonely world, and ongoing discourse about colonization all were occurring in our real world when these players played this game. *Subnautica's* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment,

2014) micro-narrative was about a disease outbreak, on a planet facing climate induced destruction, where the player was the only human alive all because of colonization-based efforts. Even if it was a coincidence that the developers made a game that accounted for the narrative blending of players in-game and out-of-game experiences, this may be part of the reason as to why *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2014) was so influential for these participants. This study showcases that if games want to make a persuasive change in their audience's worldviews, belief systems, or inspire players to take action, they must account for not only the grand narrative of their players but also the blended narrative construction processes that players undergo with every new game they play.

In short, video games do not just let players experience a micro-narrative of the game world, but they actively encourage players to view the game in their grand narrative of their life in the real world, outside of the game. Narrative fidelity and coherence interact with one another in-game and out-of-game. This interaction-based experience with narrative can occur for every level of the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement since narrative is such an integral component to this model. This allows players to experience identity play and other play-based rhetorical processes that affect the narrative orienting process for the player.

### **Practical Implications**

Game studies research cannot be conducted academically without also recognizing the practical purposes of applied research in game design and game play. While most research is done through purely an academic perspective and then transferred to the practical realm, game studies originates through practice and application. Thus, in

this section, I explore the implications of this research study for game design. First, I make recommendations for altering the game design process. Second, I comment on what stories are being told. Third, I suggest the importance of game seasons within a rhetorical context. Finally, I explore the importance of game genre and categorization practices.

### ***Recommendations for Altering Game Design***

A natural part of game studies research is to recommend alterations for game design (Stoltz, 2020). This implication is purely pragmatic with the goal of making future games better by improving the conceptual and physical design processes. These results indicated two recommendations for improving game practice: 1) design games using the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement and 2), design games with content moderation within communities in mind.

One of the most impactful results from this study is the creation of a model that I call the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement. This pyramid, while needing further testing, not only provides a new academic understanding for media use, but also provides a step-by-step guidebook for designing these experiences in games. This study reveals that each step of the pyramid acts as a requirement to reach the next. Thus, from a game design perspective, it would be ill-advised to design a game with exceptional character relationships if the game doesn't consider avatar identification in any form first. From this perspective, each game be designed in the same step-by-step process of the pyramid. The game process would start by considering the avatar and how to best get players to identify with that representation. Second, game designers would craft a narrative that fits with the avatar itself and provides narrative fidelity, cohesion, and reflexivity. Third, game designers would develop secondary characters that seem real and

personal to build relationships with the player through their avatar. Finally, and this seems to be the step most often forgotten about in game design, game designers would consider the type of communities they are connecting to one another.

This study showcases the ever-growing importance of engaging players with specific gaming communities, yet this part of game development is rarely considered, and it shows. The focus group provided so many examples of games with poor examples of gaming communities, including *Call of Duty* (Activision, 2004), *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004), and *Stardew Valley* (Barone, 2016). Game designers must start considering this aspect of developing community in game design. Furthermore, they must not just acknowledge the positive communities, but they must directly engage with the negative aspects of these communities as well.

This notion of implementing community as part of the game design process begs the question: why haven't game designers implemented it already? For communities like *Call of Duty* (Activision, 2004), *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017), and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004), players within these gaming communities are often left alone to their own devices. These communities are well known for their toxic nature and behavior, particularly towards women and other minority groups, ultimately pushing these groups out of gaming spaces (Consalvo, 2012). Yet, within these gaming communities, they have very few content moderators to address these toxic climates. For game designers to actually implement community into their design process means they must address the potential toxicity within gaming communities. This is no easy task, and this study does not reveal how game design teams can actually accomplish this, just that they should. While this study cannot provide a direct step-by-step guide on how to



engage in content and community moderation, it can provide one long-term strategy to rhetorically alter the communities behind games.

### ***Consideration of the Stories Being Told***

Players, through the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement, experience some level of narrative construction with their experience inside the game world.

Unsurprisingly, the games with toxic communities mentioned within the focus group were games with “common” stories or games designed from a hegemonic or mainstream perspective. Players were clear in the type of micro-narratives and thus influences on their grand narratives they were searching for in video games: unique stories. Participant Two argued: “If the main character is a just this generic white dude, I know that that’s the scope that I’m getting, right, like that’s the world that I’m going to be playing in.”

Rhetorically, this tells us that video game narratives continue to be a persuasive force on their own by showcasing different worldviews through avatars and narratives, even if in this case it is a worldview of a white man.

Participants noted several times throughout the focus group that they crave stories that alter their grand narrative to best fit into a community they share values with.

Participant One noted a game that did not share their own values: “Like *Grand Theft Auto*, where the premise of the game is you're going to be committing crime. You're going to be shooting people, you're going to be hurting people.” With Participant Three adding in response: “*Grand Theft Auto* [San Andreas] is good for that, right, like you can just roam around and do what you want and not care about the consequences.” Both participants noted the blatant misogyny and problematic nature of the game, noting a difference in values of the player and values of the game and thus community behind it.

Yet they still enjoyed the game; they still sought it out. This shows that players are still trying to alter their grand narrative, even if it is to show the values that they don't support.

In fact, focus group participants bonded over their dislike for certain games. They bonded not only over their love for *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2014) but also their hatred for *Fallout 76* (Bethesda Softworks, 2018). The community that stands behind the games and values players love were important in communicating about the games and values that resonated with their own personal values and beliefs. Players also communicated about games with values that they didn't resonate with. However, this does provide insight into how toxicity in gaming can be counteracted through the stories designers choose to tell. By utilizing unique stories from non-hegemonic perspectives, game designers can still appease players like those in the focus group and help build positive gaming communities, but directly address long-term gaming toxicity.

### ***Consideration of Game Seasons***

One result from this study altered our understanding of how games can be persuasive. For the micro-narrative of a game to have persuasive authority for a player, it must account for the grand narrative of that player. While I already discussed the implication that games are not universally persuasive, it does denote the importance of game seasons in the game design process.

Micro-narratives and how they fit and alter the grand narrative of the player are important in terms of persuasion. The more often a game targets the player with a similar persuasive message, then it's possible the more likely that persuasive message is to be accepted by that player. For example, if a player plays games like *Subnautica* (Unknown

Worlds Entertainment, 2018), *Raft* (Axolot Games, 2018), and *Prey* (Arkane Studios, 2017) all in succession to one another, that player is more likely to be persuaded about topics of climate change and human colonization, because all of those games share similar persuasive goals regarding those topics.

Even if game designers are not concerned with persuasive authority and only concerned with making a profit, they must understand that if gamers are searching for communities through games they should strive to help with that process. Thus, a company may put out two entirely different games in the same game season to attempt to provide the most types of communities for gamers to connect to. Regardless of why, game designers should consider the game season in the game creation and design process.

### ***Consideration of Game Genre and Categorization***

The game season is an important consideration to be made in the game design process; however, game genre is equally important. While traditional media has a clear classification system of genre, video games struggle with clear classification because the categorization of games requires categorizing not only the traditional narrative, but the game mechanics associated with a particular video game as well.

For example, many participants in this focus group noted their hatred for *Fallout 76* (Bethesda, 2018). This game is categorized as a first-person shooter and role-playing game. The category of role-playing game mechanically indicates that the player will be able to explore different identities, play through storylines where their agency is prioritized, and make a tangible impact on the world and people within the video game (Hitchens & Drachen, 2009). This is mechanically true in some aspects of *Fallout 76*'s (Bethesda, 2018) gameplay, such as the leveling system. A leveling system is a system

where as the player gains more experience, they can unlock special abilities that allow them to showcase the role they are trying to play as. For example, a person who wants to play a character who prefers to run from danger rather than engaging in fighting may choose abilities to make them faster or better at sneaking.

While mechanically *Fallout 76* (Bethesda, 2018) does fit the genre of role-playing game, narratively it does not. The participants noted within the previous chapter that the inclusion of non-playable characters, a central component to fit role-playing games mechanically, does not narratively make sense in a world where everyone is supposed to be dead. The participants' dislike for *Fallout 76* (Bethesda, 2018) is because of the split in genre-based interpretation of the categorization of this game. In short, the game struggles to resonate with players because it matches the genre of role-playing game mechanically, but not narratively.

This conflict among various game genres can become a common struggle for modern video games. The genre and categorization system are always struggling with ludologically or game mechanics, and narratologically, or narrative based (Murray, 2017) differences of game categorization. While this research can make no claims from the results regarding genre, it does reveal the implication that genre is a critical component for game designers to understand. The title of certain genres may hurt or help a game in its ability to satisfy needs or move players up the different levels of the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement.

To summarize, this study has revealed several implications in regard to how game designers, developers, writers, and even management can create better games. First, game creators must analyze the processes they use to create games. Most importantly, they can

methodically craft games to follow the levels of the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement. Second, the stories that are chosen to be told through games must give greater emphasis to untold stories. Finally, game seasons and the genre categorization system must be given greater consideration in the game design process. All four of these elements would result in better, more profitable, and likely more rhetorically powerful games.

### **Technological Implications**

The final implications are results based on the technology that players, game creators, and game scholars all use to perform their roles. Unsurprisingly, technological growth is at a rapid pace, especially with video game technology. There are three major implications that these results reveal regarding a social technological perspective. First, future technologies like artificial intelligence and the metaverse will alter narrative and character construction. Second, I explore the material and social costs of finding communities through media via the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement.

### ***Future Technologies' Impact on Narrative and Characters***

Any new technology, even if it is years away from seeing widespread use, brings with it new discourse surrounding how the technology can be used, how to safeguard proper uses of the technology, and other ethical concerns. This form of ethical discourse is integral to proper technology use (Martin, 2019). While this research could add to the discourse surrounding several new technological advancements, I specifically focus on the two technologies that will be impacting the future of narrative and character construction: artificial intelligence and the metaverse. Artificial intelligence has the ability to start mass creating narratives and characters that will impact audiences in

never-before-seen ways (Riedl & Bulitko, 2013). The metaverse intends to gamify our personal and work lives (Tayal et al., 2022). This alone will have massive impacts on our grand narrative construction but also the ways that micro-narratives and parasocial relationships are used to gamify our day to day lives.

Artificial Intelligence is already rapidly changing the game creation and game play processes (Smith 2020). The largest effect that AI is to have on video games generally is the level of possible immersion (Jones, 2023). AI has the possibility to create games in the exact moments that they are being played. For example, in 2005, the game *Façade* (Procedural Arts, 2005) was already able to utilize artificial intelligence in its game processing. Essentially, the player was invited to a dinner party with their two best friends who also happen to be married. The player was able to move around the apartment and type anything they wanted their avatar to say. The game utilized carefully crafted artificial intelligence to be able to craft code in the moment and create dialogue for the characters to be able to process and respond to anything the player could come up with to say. While the technology was somewhat limited at the time, the use of in-the-moment coding of character relationships and thus the narrative the player experiences was impressive for a game made in 2005.

Since then, gaming has sought to use AI to create procedural game making systems. With the help of AI, a different video game could be procedurally made for each player, giving every player a wildly different experience. Not only could the characters, dialogue, and narrative change for each player but the nature of the setting, gameplay, mechanics, and genre could all be changed on the spot thanks to procedural AI (Sorenson et al., 2011). This gives the player an immersive experience unlike any other.

Hypothetically, a player could insert data into a game about what they would like to play or change about the game they are currently playing, and then the AI processes could complete the changes within seconds. While from a game play perspective this sounds fascinating, the ethical implications of such systems could be terrifying. With no monitoring of such systems, players could live out harmful but immersive experiences. While companies like Steam, a popular gaming platform, are able to monitor and take down harmful games like *Suicide Simulator*, a game that allows the player to commit suicide, and *Kindergarten*, a school shooting simulator where you play as the shooter (Lucero, 2018), there is virtually no discourse surrounding how AI will be able to monitor such systems that allow for procedural game changes in the moment. This is especially problematic when considering how immersive these simulations can become.

Immersive AI-crafted game experiences become particularly harmful when considering narrative and character elements. Games such as *Sexual Harassment Simulator*, where the player plays not as the victim but the perpetrator of sexual assault (Winslow, 2023), are already problematic. With AI, these gaming experiences could be immediately simulated, with a level of immersion closer to reality than we have ever technologically seen. Such AI-generated games would massively affect our character and real-life relationships.

Ultimately, the use of AI in gaming should not necessarily be scary. Without discourse surrounding oversight and the implementation of ethical practices, however, these fears could become reality. These experiences could further affect media generally, causing film, television, and all media experiences to implement this level of AI immersion, completely shifting our communicative processes.

Another example of a technological implication from this particular research study is confronting the ideas of the metaverse and virtual reality. Virtual reality has somewhat become synonymous with the metaverse in public life (Moioli, 2022). Meta as a company has made many technological advancements and has made it no secret that they want metaverse technologies to infiltrate every part of human life. Meta wants to replace the digital world with a virtual reality (Carpentier, 2023). They want activities that typically take place in the digital world to take place virtually on their platform. Meta's advertising shows doctors using glasses to see the inside of patient's bodies, corporate executives hosting business meetings on the platform, and entire classrooms stepping into prehistoric times thanks to the technology. While Meta's advertising is highlighting the positive benefits of virtual reality technology, this technology must also be ethically considered (Dincelli & Yayla, 2022). This technology, regardless of how it is being used, has the common characteristic of immersion. By being able to nearly fully simulate bodily senses, the experiences within the metaverse are closer to "real life" than we as humans have ever created.

With the higher level of immersion made possible by Meta, a concern for narrative construction again comes into question. Similar to AI, if this technology has the capability of drastically immersing audiences into narrative, it will naturally alter our own grand narrative construction. These micro-narrative experiences have the ability to be so immersive that they then become some of the most rhetorically influential forms of media we have ever encountered. While this could be a positive with stories like *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2018), *Raft* (Axolot Games, 2018), and *The Sims* (Electronic Arts, 2000), games like those mentioned while discussing AI could



become more influential than ever. With little in the way of content moderation in the virtual world, this could spell the worst-case scenario for media's influence on society. Even if Meta considerably increases its content moderation (Cochrane, 2023) and other measures to ensure a positive Metaverse experience, there are two issues with the very nature of media consumption that they cannot escape: the material and social costs.

### ***Material and Social Costs to Finding Communities***

The Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement shows that media users are using media to reach communities and engage in socialization. However, the inclusion of media in this process spells two major costs that these consumers must undergo in order to socialize this way: the material cost, and the social.

AI, Meta, and media generally exist, for the most part, in a capitalist system. Within gaming more specifically, most large game companies have hundreds of artists working collectively to create a game (Roth, 2022). This creates a large cost for any game to be created. Even if a single developer creates a game, this is such a time-consuming process it still presents a material cost to the creator. That material cost is then passed down naturally to the consumer where they must pay in order to utilize the media. Traditionally, this capitalist process, while critiqued (Cool Tony, 2017; Rouner, 2022), has been widely accepted.

However, the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement reveals a new problem. If audiences are using media to find communities and thus socialize, and that media has a material cost associated with it, is the advancement of technology only making socialization a more costly process? Is advanced technology like AI and the metaverse only being created to put a higher price tag on reaching the communities

people are searching for? While socialization processes will always have some form of opportunity cost, for the most part, the act of actual socialization has never had a material cost. Yet, within the gaming community, this socialization model continues to increase the material cost of reaching communities.

According to the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement, audiences use media to reach communities. While the capitalist system is already profiting off of this process, researchers will continue to study the socialization principles to further profit from them. Video Game Data mining has been a problematic yet profitable process (Drachen, 2012). Simply put, data mining is the process of tracking users' data, like what they purchase, and use that data towards advertising. In video games, the act of tracking user experiences is not new. In many games like *Detroit: Become Human* (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018), each choice a player makes is tracked and presented to all players across the globe. With that data being tracked, the creators of the game can now reliably assume what the moral compass of each player is. While the social costs of video game communities have not yet been heavily mined for profit, the way other media could be mined is an ethical concern.

### **Limitations**

I now turn to several limitations that hurt the research process. It is critical that these limitations be taken into consideration with the results and implications to truly understand how this research can be used in future. This section explores the two largest limitations to the study.

First and foremost, this rhetorical and qualitative study naturally focused on describing the rich, lived experiences of a few participants. While this focus is an

important part of qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2014), it should be reiterated that these results are not yet generalizable, nor do they attempt to be. Furthermore, these results are not generalizable to non-gamers and casual gamers. This research describes the deep experiences of semi-frequent gamers. This study is limited by the few participants that took part in the research process. Originally, 35 participants completed the initial demographic survey. From there, I selected ten participants based on the variety of their cultural demographics to take part in the focus group. Of those 10, however, only four participants actually attended the focus group. Ten minutes into the focus group, one participant opted to leave. Despite my best efforts to have six to eight participants, I was only able to have three people participate.

While the institutional review board (IRB) approval process can be arduous for any research study, this specific exempt study took over a month to receive acceptance. The institution where IRB approval took place only had one interim staff member who worked part-time, one day a week. This made the process naturally slow because communicating back and forth with the IRB meant we would likely have to wait a full week for a response to any form of communication. While I would have appreciated taking additional time for writing, hosting more than one focus group, and waiting longer to gain more participants, based on how long IRB approval took, this severely limited the time for any of these options. In short, the IRB approval process directly influenced the research process.

### **Future Research**

Finally, I recommend two areas of future research for researchers generally as well as provide a plan for how I individually intend to further this research. The first and

most obvious area of future research is testing the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement. I recommend that future research tests this model in two different ways, qualitatively and quantitatively.

I developed this model through analyzing the comments from the focus group. Given the limited participants and limited amount of focus groups, I recommend that other researchers replicate this qualitative study. A larger sample size will ensure that the deep and rich experience of more than three participants matches the experiences conceptualized in the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement. Individually, I intend to replicate this study with more participants across more focus groups.

Assuming the qualitative replication of this study garners similar results to the model, it should then be tested quantitatively. I recommend that the quantitative study be conducted through survey analysis. This could be done by asking a large number of gamers questions about their experiences with certain games discussed in the qualitative study. For example, if another study's focus groups also discuss *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2018) and *Stardew Valley* (Barone, 2016) as achieving many levels of the model, the survey could ask players about whether they felt connected to their avatar, involved in a narrative, and developed character relationships to see what differences exist. Furthermore, by asking questions regarding the order of the pyramid, the study can conclude whether the model is generalizable. I intend to complete this quantitative study depending on when the replication of the qualitative study takes place. By conducting these two studies in this order, it not only ensures the viability of the Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement but also the model's generalizability.

The second study and area of future research that I recommend is a study regarding narrative construction and its influencing factors. This study established that a game's micro-narratives alter the player's grand narrative in some form. However, this study is unable to make any claims regarding what factors influence a person's grand narrative. This study is able to hypothesize that the type of game, the characters within it, the narrative, or even the genre of the game all likely have some influence on grand narrative construction. Future research should strive to understand what factors directly lead to these influences or even whether or not a causal relationship exists.

Overall, this thesis has contributed many new findings that have the opportunity to revolutionize game research, game design, and game play. By continuing to research the intersection of narrative and character relationships within the context of video games, these gaming circles can gain a full understanding of the communicative processes that video games provide.

### Appendix A: Demographic Survey

1. How many hours per week do you play video games?
  - a. 0-5 hours per week
  - b. 6-10 hours per week
  - c. 11-15 hours per week
  - d. 16-20 hours per week
  - e. 20+ hours per week
  
2. Please mark all of the games that you have played to completion below.
  - a. Fallout New Vegas
  - b. The Outer Worlds
  - c. Skyrim
  - d. Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas
  - e. Undertale
  
3. What best describes your gender identity?
  - a. Female
  - b. Male
  - c. Non-binary
  - d. Prefer not to say.
  - e. Transgender
  - f. Genderqueer
  - g. Prefer to self-describe.
  
4. What best describes your sexual orientation?
  - a. Heterosexual/Straight

- b. Gay or Lesbian
  - c. Bisexual
  - d. Queer
  - e. Asexual
  - f. Prefer not to say.
  - g. Prefer to self-describe.
5. What best describes your racial background?
- a. American Indian or Alaskan Native
  - b. Asian
  - c. Black or African American
  - d. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - e. White
  - f. Prefer not to say.
  - g. Prefer to self-describe.
6. Are you of Hispanic, Latino/a/x, or of Spanish Origin? (One or more categories may be selected)
- a. No, not of Hispanic, Latino/a/x, or Spanish origin.
  - b. Yes, Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano/a/x
  - c. Yes, Puerto Rican
  - d. Yes, Cuban
  - e. Yes, Another Hispanic, Latino/a/s or Spanish origin.
  - f. Prefer to self-describe.
  - g. Prefer not to say.

7. If selected for the focus group, you will be contacted with further information.

Please provide an email address so that you can be properly contacted. This information will remain confidential to all but the primary and co-investigators.



## **Appendix B: Focus Group Protocol**

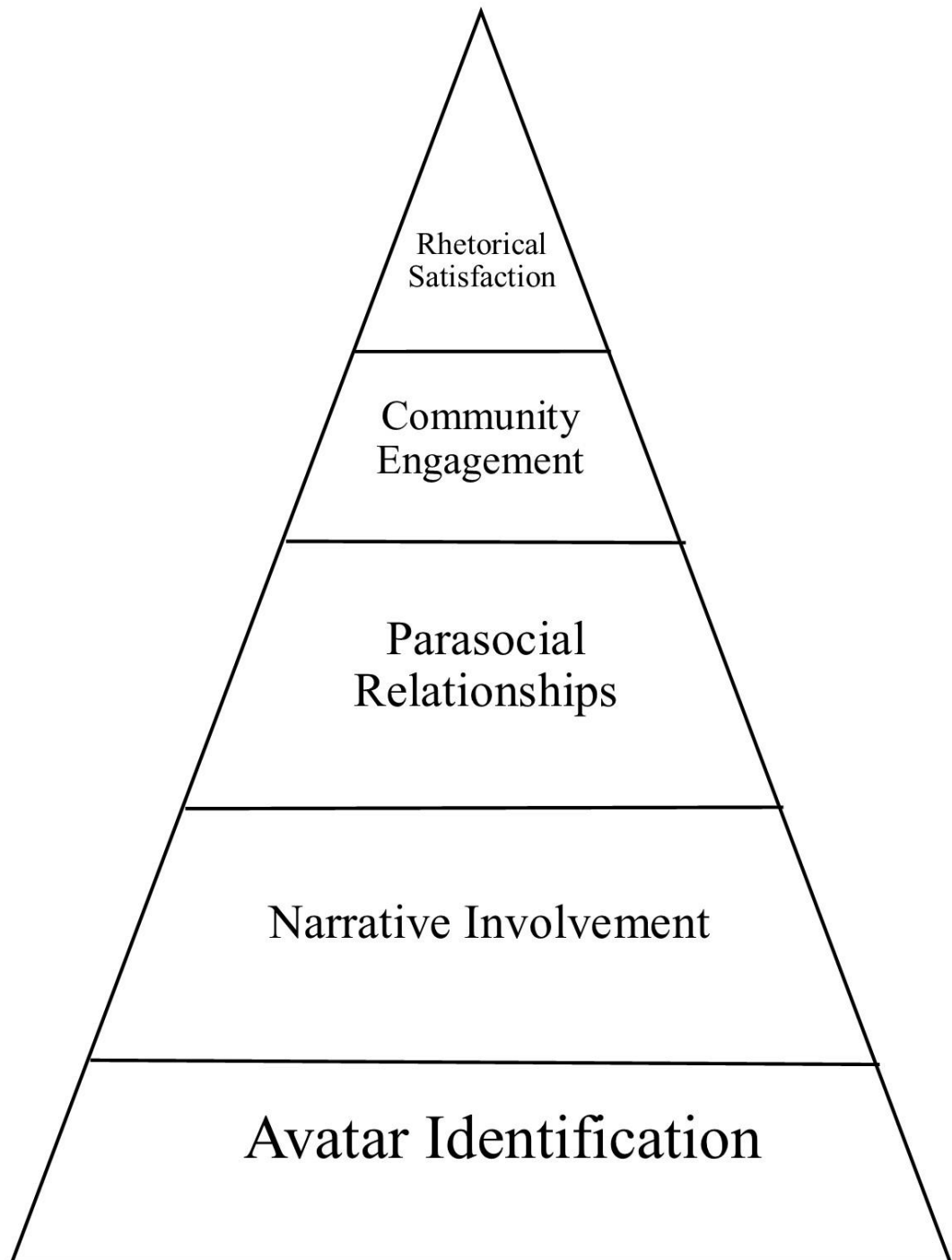
### **Introduction**

1. Names, pronouns, favorite game and why? (10 minutes)
2. Explanation of focus group process, paperwork (notification of confidentiality and completion of informed consent form), recording permission, mandated reporter reminder (5 Minutes)
3. Questions before we begin? (5 minutes))

### **Main Questions**

1. Tell me about your experiences with virtual characters (NPCs) in games: (10 minutes)
  - a. What character-based characteristics make you more likely to develop a relationship with those characters in the game?
  - b. Have you ever romanced a virtual character? What makes you seek friendship versus romantic connection with virtual characters?
  - c. How do these relationships with characters alter your decisions in video games?
  - d. What, if any, characteristics about a game make you more likely to develop relationships with the game's characters (appearance, gender, helpfulness, combat abilities, personality)
2. Tell me about your experiences with video game narratives: (10 minutes)
  - a. How do your actions as the player affect video game narratives?
  - b. How does gameplay alter your experiences with video game narratives?

- c. What, if any, characteristics about a game make you more likely to become deeply involved in the narrative?
  3. Tell me about your experiences where you have felt connected to your virtual avatar: (10 minutes)
    - a. How do your actions as the player affect your connection to your virtual avatar?
    - b. How does gameplay alter your connection with your virtual avatar?
    - c. What, if any, characteristics about a game make you more likely to connect with your virtual avatar?
  4. How does your connection to your virtual avatar affect the relationships you build with other virtual characters? (10 minutes)
  5. How does your connection to your virtual avatar affect your place and decision-making in the video game's narrative(s)? (10 minutes)
  6. How do relationships with virtual characters affect the video game's narrative(s)? (10 minutes)
  7. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us today regarding communication, relationships, and narratives in video games? (5 minutes)
- Conclusion (5 minutes)
1. Lighthouse probe-a term used to describe the process of asking "is there anything else that I should know today?"
  2. Reminder about confidentiality and informed consent
  3. Thank you.

**Appendix C: Visual of Pyramid of Narrative Parasocial Engagement**

## LUDOLOGY PAGE

Activision. (2004). Call of duty: United offensive (All Versions) [Video game] Gray

Matter Studios

Axolot Games. (2018). Raft (All Versions) [Video game]. Redbeet Interactive

Behavior Interactive. (2016). Dead by Daylight (All Versions) [Video game]. Behavior

Interactive

Bethesda Softworks & Obsidian Entertainment. (2010). Fallout: New Vegas (All

Versions) [Video game]. Obsidian Entertainment

Bethesda Softworks. (2011). The Elder Scrolls 5: Skyrim (All Versions) [Video game]

Bethesda Game Studios

Bethesda Softworks. (2017). Prey (All Versions) [Video game]. Arkane Studios

Bethesda Softworks. (2018). Fallout 76 (All Versions) [Video game]. Bethesda Game

Studios

ConcernedApe. (2016). Stardew Valley (All Versions) [Video game]. ConcernedApe

Electronic Arts. (2000). Sims (All Versions) [Video game]. Electronic Arts

Epic Games. (2017) Fortnite (All Versions [Video game]. Epic Games

Fox, T. (2015). Undertale (All Versions) [Video game]. Fox, T.

Humble Bundle. (2021). Unpacking (All Versions) [Video game]. Witch Beam

Humble Bundle. (2022). Coral Island (All Versions) [Video game]. Stairway Games

Mojang Studios. (2011). Minecraft (All Versions) [Video game]. Mojang Studios

Private Division. (2019). The Outer Worlds (All Versions) [Video game]. Obsidian

Entertainment

Rockstar Games. (2004) Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (All Versions) [Video game]

Rockstar North

Rockstar Games. (2011). L.A. Noire (All Versions) [Video game]. Team Bondi

Sony Interactive Entertainment. (2018). Detroit: Become Human (All Versions) [Video game]. Quantic Dream

Telltale Games. (2012). The Walking Dead (All Versions) [Video game]. Telltale Games

Unknown Worlds Entertainment. (2018). Subnautica (All Versions) [Video game].

Unknown Worlds Entertainment

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