

Understanding Player Choice in Digital Games: Qualitative Study Using Thematic Analysis

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Abstract—Player choice is a fundamental aspect of digital games, shaping how players interact with virtual worlds and narratives. In many games, player choices are reflected through mechanics such as morality systems, which record decisions as virtuous or harmful and shape how characters and the game world react. For game designers, player choice is vital, granting players freedom to shape their experiences and fostering deeper engagement. When players are presented with significant choices, they are more likely to remain invested and prolong their gameplay. Despite its importance, research on player choice remains limited, with existing research often focusing on challenge, immersion, or motivation within specific genres while overlooking broader implications. We conducted interviews to explore the factors that influence player choice in digital games. The data were examined using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and key themes. Results from the interviews revealed six main dimensions of player choice: Goals, Character Personalization, Gameplay, Social Interaction, Rewards, and Completion, each with relevant sub-themes.

Keywords—Player choice; thematic analysis; player engagement

I. INTRODUCTION

The popularity of digital games cannot be overstated. With an estimated 3 billion players worldwide and industry revenues expected to surpass \$473 billion by 2027, digital games have become a dominant force in global entertainment [1]. Unlike other forms of entertainment, digital games are interactive, requiring players to make decisions and actively shape their experiences. This interactivity distinguishes games from passive media such as film or television, as players are not merely observers but participants in the unfolding narrative and gameplay.

Researchers have long examined how this interactivity shapes the overall player experience, exploring concepts such as immersion, flow, motivation, and engagement [2], [3], [4]. These studies emphasize that games provide not only entertainment but also psychological and emotional satisfaction, influencing how players connect with game worlds and characters.

Within this broader context, player choice has emerged as a critical dimension of gameplay. Choice allows players to exercise autonomy, shape outcomes, and express themselves within digital environments. Whether through character customization, narrative branching, or the pursuit of personal goals, choice provides players with a sense of control and agency that distinguishes games from more linear media [5], [6], [7], [8].

Despite its importance, research on player choice remains fragmented. Many studies address choice indirectly, often framed as part of autonomy, decision-making, or agency, but rarely as a distinct phenomenon in its own right. As a result, how players themselves experience and interpret choices remains underexplored, particularly from a qualitative perspective. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

- How do players experience and interpret choice in digital games?
- What themes emerge from players' perspectives on choice in digital games?

To address these questions, the present study employed thematic analysis, a qualitative method well-suited for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within participant narratives. Thematic analysis was chosen because it allows for flexibility in exploring complex experiences, such as how players perceive and articulate their sense of choice, while remaining grounded in the data itself rather than imposing a predefined theoretical framework.

II. RELATED WORKS

Research on digital games has increasingly drawn on qualitative approaches to better understand the experiences of players. Such studies provide rich insights into how individuals interpret their engagement with games, though they often focus on different dimensions of gaming experience. For example, Denisova et al. [9] examined how players perceive challenges in games through semi-structured interviews, applying open coding to identify components of challenge and iteratively clustering codes into themes. Their process emphasized depth, beginning with transcription, careful reading, and the gradual construction of themes that reflected relationships among codes. This rigorous approach demonstrated how qualitative coding can uncover the subtle ways players experience and describe game-related phenomena.

Building on this methodological foundation, this study applied thematic analysis to examine not challenge aspect, but player choice, positioning choice as a distinct and underexplored dimension of gameplay that shapes identity, agency, and personal meaning. While Denisova et al. [9] focused on challenge, the present study adapts a similar thematic approach to examine player choice, positioning choice as a distinct and underexplored element of gameplay.

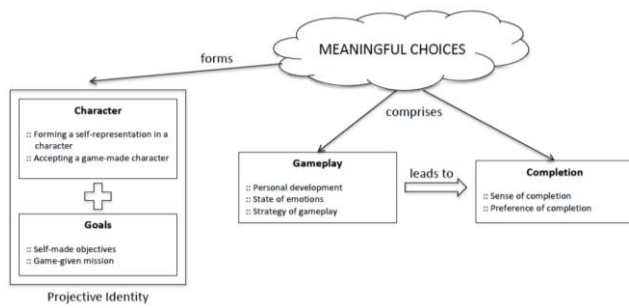


Fig. 1. Meaningful choices, being the central theme of the grounded theory, a key to players' identity in digital games [10].

Similarly, Jupit [10] employed grounded theory to investigate players' projective identity in digital games, with a particular focus on the role of meaningful choices. Jupit emphasized that the central theme of projective identity lies in the decisions players make throughout their gameplay experiences. These meaningful choices allow players to project aspects of their identity into the game world, whether through customizing characters, pursuing specific goals, or selecting pathways that align with their values and preferences. In this way, choices become more than mechanical options; they are extensions of the self, shaping how players interpret, navigate, and ultimately complete their gameplay. As illustrated in Fig. 1, the meaningful choices players make contribute to forming both the character and the goals they pursue during their gaming experience, which together form their projective identity. These choices influence how players decide to navigate and finish the game in a way that aligns with their personal preferences. The gameplay aspect of meaningful choices leads to the completion of the game in a way that resonates with the players' individual experiences. By gathering qualitative data through interviews, Jupit demonstrated how thematic analysis can capture the deep personal ways in which players' identities and aspirations become intertwined with the choices they make.

This focus on meaningful choices as central to projective identity resonates closely with the present study, which similarly examines choice as a fundamental dimension of player experience. However, while Jupit [10] emphasized identity projection and self-expression through choices, the current research took a broader perspective by exploring how players interpret and articulate the experience of player choice itself, regardless of whether it is tied to identity formation. In doing so, this study extends Jupit's work by shifting attention from what choices represent to players to how they are subjectively experienced when playing digital games.

Player choice has also been examined through the concept of meaningful choice. Iten et al. [11] investigated the characteristics that make choices meaningful in digital games and found that meaningful choices could involve moral, strategic, emotional, and social aspects. The study also found that knowing that a choice would have consequences contributed to players experiencing the choice as meaningful [11]. Similarly, Tancred et al. [12] examined player choices in relation to game endings and moral dilemmas, demonstrating how choices can be incorporated into game design to influence gameplay outcomes.

Player choice is closely related to concepts such as player agency and autonomy, but these concepts describe different aspects of the gaming experience [13], [14]. Player agency refers to the ability of players to influence the game through their actions and choices [13]. In contrast, autonomy refers to the feeling of having freedom and control over one's actions during gameplay [15]. Agency and autonomy are related concepts, but they represent different aspects of the player experience [14]. Therefore, player choice in the present study focuses specifically on the choices available to and experienced by players, rather than treating choice as synonymous with agency or autonomy.

Player choice is also related to decision-making, particularly in games where players are presented with multiple options during gameplay. Yin and Xiao [16] examined choices in narrative-rich games and found that different types of choices can influence player experience at multiple levels, including the game itself and the relationship between players and the game. Their study also identified factors that influence how players make decisions when presented with choices [16]. However, decision-making mainly refers to the process of selecting an option, while the present study focuses more broadly on how players experience and interpret the choices available to them during gameplay.

Player choice is also distinct from related aspects of player experience, including motivation, engagement, personalization, and control. Motivation refers to the reasons that encourage players to participate or continue playing [15] while engagement describes the extent of players' involvement in the gaming experience [4]. Personalization involves modifying or selecting game elements according to individual preferences, such as avatar appearance and characteristics [17]. Although personalization can involve player choice, the two concepts are not synonymous, as personalization specifically concerns the adaptation of game elements to individual preferences. Control, similarly, concerns the ability to influence or manipulate elements within the game, whereas player choice focuses on selecting among available alternatives [13], [14]. These distinctions suggest that motivation, engagement, personalization, and control are related to player choice but represent different dimensions of the broader player experience.

Taken together, these studies show that player choice is related to, but distinct from, other aspects of player experience such as agency, autonomy, decision-making, motivation, engagement, personalization, and control.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Data Collection

Ten participants were recruited through purposive sampling and interviewed. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who had relevant knowledge and experience with digital games, allowing the study to obtain information and data that aligned with the research objectives [18]. The purpose of these interviews was to explore and identify the themes and sub-themes associated with player choices in video games. These interviews provided a deeper understanding of how players make decisions in their favourite games and the factors that influence those choices. The demographic of the participants is presented in TABLE I.

TABLE I. DEMOGRAPHIC OF PARTICIPANTS

Participant	Age	Gender	Favourite Games Genre	Playing experience
1	23	Male	Sandbox, Survival	10 Years
2	23	Male	Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA)	10 Years
3	24	Male	Auto Battler, Simulation	10 Years
4	22	Male	Action RPG, Soulslike	17 Years
5	24	Male	Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA)	8 Years
6	23	Male	Racing, Open World	17 Years
7	27	Female	Party, Co-op, Simulation	More than 10 Years
8	24	Male	First-Person Shooter, Multiplayer	More than 10 Years
9	24	Female	Action RPG, Sandbox	9 Years
10	29	Female	Tower Defense	More than 10 Years

Before each interview session, participants were provided with a consent form outlining the purpose of the study and their rights as participants. They were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any time. Additionally, they were asked for their consent to record the interview audio for transcription and analysis purposes. Only after obtaining their informed consent did the interview proceed. The interview questions were structured carefully to make sure participants reflected on their decision-making process while playing games. The duration of each interview varied based on the depth of the participants' responses, typically lasting between 10 and 20 minutes.

B. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen for this study due to its flexibility and suitability in analysing qualitative data. It allows for the identification and interpretation of patterns and themes within the data, providing a clear understanding of the participants' experiences, views and behaviours. Thematic analysis offers a systematic method for organizing and interpreting the data, ensuring that key themes are identified and explored, leading to meaningful insights that can inform the research objectives.

Thematic analysis is a qualitative method used to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns or themes within data [19]. It provides accessible and systematic procedures for generating codes and themes, where codes represent the smallest units of analysis capturing relevant features of the data, and themes are larger patterns of meaning underpinned by a central organizing concept. This approach can be applied to uncover patterns within and across data, focusing on participants' lived experiences, perspectives, behaviour, and practices. For this research, thematic analysis was used instead of open coding due to its 1) Simplicity and Flexibility, its 2) Focus on Participant Perspective, and its 3) Efficiency in Time and Resources.

- **Simplicity and Flexibility:** Thematic analysis is straightforward and can be adapted to a wide range of research questions and data. Unlike open coding, which is more detailed and iterative, thematic analysis allows you to identify and group themes based on existing

knowledge or study goals. This is particularly helpful when analysing complex, nuanced topics like meaningful choices in games because it allows for a quick organization of data into broad themes [20].

- **Focus on Participant Perspective:** Thematic analysis emphasizes understanding the experiences and perceptions of participants, making it suitable for exploring how players perceive "meaningful choices" in games. It captures patterns across responses, helping to see how players commonly understand, justify, and value their in-game decisions. This is crucial for qualitative studies aiming to explore subjective concepts like meaningful choices [21], [22].
- **Efficiency in Time and Resources:** Thematic analysis is generally less time-consuming than methods like open coding in grounded theory. Because it does not require line-by-line coding initially, it is often a faster approach, making it ideal for projects with limited time. This means recurring themes and insights can be quickly identified, which is especially useful when pre-existing categories or concepts, such as moral decisions and player agency in meaningful choices, are in place [23].

Braun and Clarke [20] outlined six phases of thematic analysis:

- Become familiarised with the data
- Generate initial codes
- Search for themes
- Review themes
- Define and name themes
- Produce the report

During the initial phase of thematic analysis, the interview recordings were transcribed to ensure accurate representation of the data. This process involved a combination of digital tools and manual listening to the audio recordings to capture the subtleties of the conversation. The digital tools facilitated efficient transcription, while the manual process ensured careful attention to detail, capturing every aspect of the interview, including tone, emphasis, and subtle meaning in the text.

After becoming familiar with the data, initial codes were generated through systematic review of the transcribed interview data to identify meaningful segments that could be categorized. Key phrases, words, and ideas reflecting the participants' experiences, thoughts, and feelings related to the topic were highlighted during transcript review. These initial codes were kept broad and descriptive, without yet grouping them into larger themes. This phase was crucial for breaking the data into manageable units, enabling a more focused analysis in the later stages of the thematic process.

Searching for themes involved systematically organizing and reviewing the initial codes to reveal patterns and relationships within the data, with Excel spreadsheets facilitating efficient categorization and visualization. Every initial code was entered into the spreadsheet, along with its

corresponding participant data and context. This allowed for easy sorting, filtering, and comparison of codes across the dataset. Related codes were grouped together within the spreadsheet, enabling the identification of broader patterns that represent potential themes.

The next phase of thematic analysis focused on reviewing the themes to ensure they accurately captured the essence of the data. This process involved two levels of review: first, at the level of individual coded data extracts, and second, at the level of the overall thematic structure. Using the Excel spreadsheet, each theme was revisited to ensure that its grouped codes were coherent and aligned with the overarching theme. Individual data extracts were examined to verify their alignment with the assigned theme, and any inconsistent or misplaced codes were either reassigned to a more suitable theme or discarded. The themes were then evaluated against the entire dataset to ensure they offered a comprehensive and accurate representation of the participants' experiences. This step involved identifying any gaps or redundancies within the themes.

The coding process was inductive and based on the participants' responses, with initial codes developed from the interview data. Codes with similar meanings were compared and grouped based on their relevance to the research objectives and the experiences described by participants. When a code could reasonably fit more than one theme, the original interview response was reviewed to determine the context and the most appropriate theme. Codes that did not sufficiently relate to the research focus were discarded. Differences or contradictory responses between participants were retained during the analysis and considered when reviewing and refining the themes, rather than being excluded from the dataset.

In the fifth phase of thematic analysis, the focus shifted to defining and naming each theme to ensure it encapsulated the underlying meaning of the data. This required a detailed review of each theme to articulate its scope, purpose, and relevance to the research questions. Using the Excel spreadsheet, each theme was revisited to examine the specific codes and data extracts it contained, and a concise description was written to explain its core idea and its reflection of the participants' experiences. Below are the identified themes and their descriptions, detailing the core ideas they represent and their relevance to the participants' experiences. illustrates the themes and sub-themes derived from the data, providing a clear overview of their scope and relationship with the participants' experiences.

During the analysis of the interview data, the responses from the later participants largely reflected the codes, themes, and sub-themes identified in the earlier interviews, with no substantially new themes emerging. This suggests that the ten interviews provided sufficient thematic information for the exploratory objectives of the study. TABLE II. presents the identified themes and sub-themes.

The final phase of thematic analysis involved compiling the findings into a coherent and structured report. As the themes were defined and named, they were documented alongside their corresponding data extracts to present participants' statements while also interpreting and expanding on the insights derived from the data. The report was organized to provide a clear and concise narrative, ensuring coherence within each theme and

across the broader thematic framework. The six main themes and 23 sub-themes, together with participant quotes, were presented in a way to provide a clear and organized overview of the findings.

TABLE II. THEMES AND SUB-THEMES IDENTIFIED

Themes	Sub-Themes
Character Personalization	Character selection
	Character customization
	Personal expression
Social Interaction	NPC and ally relationships
	Teamwork and cooperation
Goals	Self-made goals
	Game-given goals
	Preference of goal
Gameplay Rewards	Attraction to the game
	Style of play
	Strategy of gameplay
	Decision-making in games
	Replayability
	In-game and real-life impact
	Emotional engagement
	State of emotion
	Personal development
	Impact of rewards
	Functional reward
	Aesthetic reward
Completion	Sense of completion
	Preference for completion
	Personal fulfilment

Character Personalization: This theme encompassed the ability of players to create, select, and modify their in-game characters. It reflected how participants valued features that allowed self-expression and identity through character customization. Participants often expressed that creating a character in their image or with unique traits made their gameplay experience more engaging and personal.

- Character selection is the process of choosing a predefined character that fits the player's strategy or preference.

"Every character has different skills and how they build, how they act at each time and every second of the game..." (Participant 4).

- Character customization allows players to personalize their experience, either by modifying their character's appearance or, in some cases, creating unique items or features within the game.

"Customization of my character makes me feel more immersed in the game." (Participant 9).

- Personal expression in games allows players to showcase their individuality through the choices they make in customizing their characters or the way they engage with the game.

"I like using weird, or I guess unconventional skins because I like to express myself in that way." (Participant 1).

Social Interaction: This theme described the cooperative and relational aspects of gameplay, including teamwork, alliances, and interactions with both NPCs and allies. In contrast, games without social interaction focus solely on individual gameplay, where players engage with the game's mechanics and challenges independently, without relying on teamwork or alliances.

- NPC and ally relationships can range from neutral to deeply emotional, depending on the narrative and gameplay experience.

"One time where you need to save a certain NPC before you complete a certain quest. I accidentally completed the quest first, and then that makes the NPC die. That makes me sad." (Participant 4).

- Teamwork and cooperation are essential elements in many multiplayer and cooperative games, where success is often determined by how well players collaborate.

"We need 5 people to come together to find synergy with each other." (Participant 2).

Goals: This theme captured participants' motivations and objectives within the game, whether these were assigned by the game or self-created. This theme highlighted the diverse ways participants approached goal setting, with some finding satisfaction in structured tasks and others enjoying the freedom of crafting their own paths.

- Game-Given Goals, which referred to objectives set by the game, such as quests, missions, or achievements

"I usually follow the missions as they are because they are already fun and structured." (Participant 7)

- Self-Made Goals, which reflected the personal challenges or milestones players created for themselves, such as mastering a skill or exploring hidden areas

"...creating my own goals is one of my ways to have fun while also achieving my objective." (Participant 1)

- Preference of goals reflects players' inclinations toward either game-given missions or self-made objectives

"Because the game's missions can feel repetitive or boring, creating my own challenges keeps things more interesting." (Participant 6)

Gameplay: The theme covered participants' experiences and interactions with game mechanics, decision-making, and strategies.

- Attraction to the game involves the unique features that draw players in, whether the complexity, relaxing gameplay, or engaging mechanics

"The gameplay. It is fast-paced, collaborative, and keeps things exciting." (Participant 7)

- Style of play refers to the personal approach players take when engaging with a game, whether that involves exploring its mechanics, focusing on the main objectives, or experimenting with unique strategies

"I would go with completing the story first and then do the other side things later." (Participant 5)

- Strategy of gameplay involves how players approach challenges, plan their actions, and make decisions within the game

"...we need to find the best combination, how to counter the enemy." (Participant 2)

- Decision-making in games revolves around how players weigh their options and choose actions that will impact their gameplay experience

"I do consider the consequences, especially if they affect the storyline as well as the relationship with the characters." (P9)

- Replayability refers to the enjoyment players find in revisiting a game, often driven by the desire to see new outcomes, explore different choices, or achieve better performance

"I do replay games to see different outcomes because I like seeing or actually enjoying the story." (Participant 1)

- In-game and real-life impact highlights the difference between the decisions made in video games and their consequences compared to real-life choices

"Making a choice in-game has fewer consequences than real life." (Participant 4)

- Emotional engagement in games enhances the overall experience, influencing how players feel while playing

"Playing games is just generally fun. You can play as many different types of games as you want, so there's always a way to have fun." (Participant 1)

- State of emotion in gaming refers to the range of emotions that players experience while playing, influenced by in-game events, challenges, and personal investment in the game

"If I found that my team isn't helping to stop the enemy from capturing the point, I will get mad—like, very mad." (Participant 8)

- Personal development in gaming refers to how players grow and improve their skills, strategies, and decision-making abilities through gameplay

"I do feel like my skills improve over time. I get better at managing tasks efficiently." (Participant 7)

Rewards: This theme focused on the impact of in-game rewards on participants' motivation and satisfaction.

- Impact of rewards refers to how in-game rewards influence a player's motivation, enjoyment, and sense of accomplishment

"It increases my motivation, especially when they give me better equipment as a reward." (Participant 3)

- Functional reward refers to in-game rewards that directly impact gameplay, such as unlocking new abilities, enhancing character performance, or providing essential equipment

"If the game is more toward PVE, it's better to get rewards that benefit the player." (Participant 2)

- Aesthetic reward refers to in-game rewards that enhance the visual appearance of characters, weapons, or environments without directly affecting gameplay

"If a game is heavier on PvP, it's better to focus on cosmetics." (Participant 2)

Completion: The Completion theme reflected participants' desire for a sense of fulfilment and closure in their gaming experiences.

- Sense of completion refers to the satisfaction and accomplishment players feel when they successfully finish a task, mission, or long-term objective in a game

"It will give me a certain satisfaction because I achieved the goal." (Participant 4)

- Preference of completion refers to the aspects of a game that players find most satisfying to complete, whether it's missions, challenges, collectibles, or personal goals

"It feels rewarding to complete a challenging level or task, and it adds to the enjoyment because I think completing the missions is what keeps me engaged and makes the whole experience more satisfying." (Participant 7)

- Personal fulfilment refers to the emotional satisfaction players seek when playing, whether it is for relaxation, fun, personal achievement, or a way to unwind

"It's mostly just to have fun because life can get boring sometimes." (Participant 1)

IV. DISCUSSION

In this study, six main themes were identified in participants' descriptions of Player Choice: Goals, Character Personalization, Gameplay, Social Interaction, Rewards, and Completion. These themes and sub-themes describe different contexts in which participants experienced and interpreted Player Choice. As shown in Fig. 2, player choices begin with attraction to the game. Participants described being initially drawn to games by factors such as gameplay mechanics, visuals, and narrative elements. This finding is consistent with Yee [24] who identified several key motivational components that influence player attraction, categorized into achievement, social, and immersion factors.

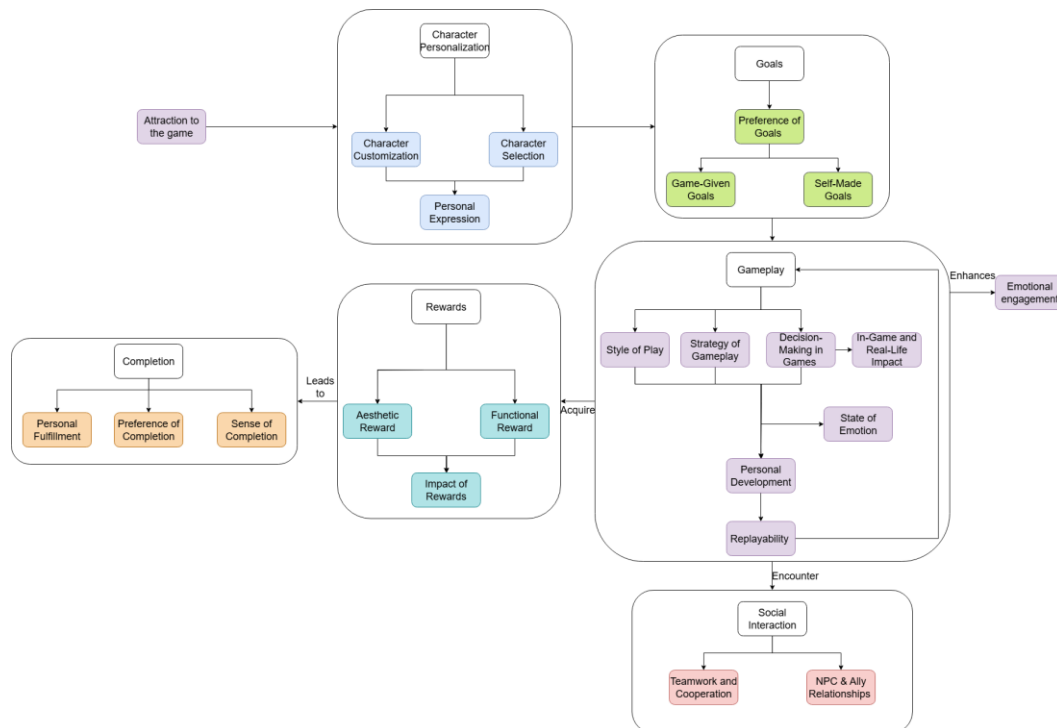


Fig. 2. Interpretive conceptual framework of themes associated with player choice.

Within the achievement component, players may be attracted by the desire for advancement, seeking power, rapid progress, and status symbols, or by an interest in the mechanics of the game. Competition also plays a role, appealing to players

who enjoy challenging others in competitive environments. Beyond achievement, the social component contributes to player attraction through socializing, which involves engaging in conversations, assisting others, forming relationships, and

deriving satisfaction from teamwork [24]. In multiplayer and cooperative games, these elements encourage sustained engagement, as players develop bonds with teammates and communities. The immersion component further influences attraction by offering experiences such as discovery, where players enjoy uncovering hidden aspects of the game, and role-playing, where they create and embody a persona with a unique background. Customization also plays a crucial role in attraction, as players take interest in modifying their character's appearance to reflect their identity or preferences. Additionally, some players are drawn to games for escapism, using the virtual environment to temporarily detach from real-world concerns [24].

This initial attraction naturally leads to character personalization, where players engage in shaping their in-game identity. Within this, two key aspects emerge: character selection, where players choose a predefined avatar or role, and character customization, which allows for modifying appearance, abilities, and other attributes. Participants described how choosing or modifying characters allowed them to reflect their preferences and identity. These findings are consistent with Jupit [10], who discussed how character-related choices can reflect players' identities and preferences. Even in games with limited customization options, players can still express themselves through the choices, actions, and decisions they make. Additionally, Ducheneaut et al. [17] suggest that avatar creation enables players to create idealized digital identities, often reflecting societal standards of attractiveness. This process may contribute to their sense of satisfaction and strengthen their connection to their virtual persona. These personalization options contribute to personal expression, allowing players to showcase their creativity, identity, and unique preferences within the game world.

As players establish their in-game identity through character personalization and pursue their goals, their choices can shape how they experience and interact with the gameplay. Participants depicted different styles of play based on their preferences and the ways they interacted with the game world. Players adopt varying approaches, such as preferring third-person over first-person perspectives or engaging in non-combat activities like collecting resources and trading instead of focusing on the main storyline [10]. These preferences not only define their in-game experience but also influence the strategies they use to overcome challenges. Gameplay strategy involves making tactical decisions, managing resources, and developing unique methods to progress. Players also actively plan strategies to ensure self-preservation, fulfil objectives, or overcome in-game obstacles. These strategic choices may provide opportunities for players to develop or practise different skills during gameplay [10].

Decision-making in games is also an important aspect of gameplay, as players face moral dilemmas, story-driven branching points, and moment-to-moment choices that can shape their experience. Tancred et al. [12] categorize these into systemic and scripted decisions, each affecting the game's outcome differently. For example, *Dishonored* uses a branching narrative where a low- or high-chaos playstyle determines the ending; *Papers, Please* integrates systemic choices that influence gameplay through hidden mechanics; and *The Walking Dead*

employs scripted choices where key narrative moments shape the story's progression. These decision-making structures influence players' sense of agency and the moral weight of their choices.

Responses from the participants showed how their in-game choices could reflect their real-world values and behaviours. This may indicate that players sometimes draw on considerations from outside the game when making in-game choices. Krcmar and Cingel [25] examined moral and strategic reasoning during video game play and reported that experienced players tended to rely more on moral reasoning during gameplay. Their findings suggest that players may draw on moral considerations from outside the game when making in-game choices. However, these findings do not necessarily establish that in-game choices directly shape real-life perceptions or behaviours.

The finding also shows how style of play, strategy of gameplay, and decision-making were related to their emotional experiences, including feelings such as excitement, frustration, or relaxation throughout the gaming experience. Cao et al. [26] found that game difficulty significantly shapes these emotions, with more challenging game sessions associated with increased negative emotions and higher arousal. This finding provides a possible explanation for the emotional experiences described by the participants. At the same time, the analysis identified how players learned, adapted, and practised problem-solving, patience, and strategic thinking during gameplay. Some players focus on improving their skills and tracking their progress, whereas others play primarily for enjoyment without prioritizing development. Research has also reported potential associations between video game play and aspects of cognitive performance and perception [27], although the extent and consistency of these benefits remain debated. These findings suggest that gameplay may provide opportunities for players to develop or practise certain skills, but further research is needed to establish the extent of these effects.

The impact of personal development extends further by contributing to replayability, where players seek alternative playthroughs, explore new challenges, or make different choices to experience the game from multiple perspectives. Frattesi et al. [28] highlight that rather than concluding their experience after finishing the story, players may continue playing to unlock achievements, earn trophies, or explore multiple endings. As players refine their skills, strategies, and adaptability, they become more proficient in overcoming obstacles, optimizing their gameplay, and mastering mechanics. Furthermore, difficulty levels encourage players to replay games, as increased challenge motivates them to refine strategies and further optimize gameplay [28]. The relationship between replayability and gameplay may contribute to continued player engagement.

The finding highlighted emotional engagement as an important aspect of the gameplay experience, particularly when players became deeply immersed in the game. Beginners enjoy games with easier difficulty because frequent wins create instant gratification, while experienced players find greater engagement in overcoming tough challenges [29]. This balance between difficulty and reward may contribute to maintaining emotional investment. If a game is too easy, players may lose interest,

whereas excessive difficulty can lead to frustration. However, when the level of challenge is well balanced with players' skills, they are more likely to experience flow, becoming fully immersed in the gameplay and often losing track of time [30]. This balance between skill and challenge has been shown to promote deeper flow experiences and increase players' motivation to continue playing.

During gameplay, players encounter social interaction, which significantly shapes their overall experience. The analysis identified teamwork and cooperation, as well as NPC and ally relationships, as key aspects of social interaction. This interaction can take place through teamwork and cooperation, where players collaborate in multiplayer settings to achieve shared objectives, strategize in competitive environments, and build camaraderie through cooperative gameplay. Research suggests that cooperative gameplay can strengthen teamwork and improve overall team performance, while competitive gameplay may hinder collaboration and teamwork effectiveness [31]. Additionally, NPC and ally relationships play a crucial role in single-player experiences, where interactions with AI (Artificial Intelligence)-controlled characters contribute to immersion and emotional investment. Meaningful relationships with NPCs, whether through story-driven bonds or gameplay mechanics, influence player decisions and narrative outcomes. Meaningful interactions with NPCs can enhance players' emotional engagement by fostering feelings of attachment and connection to game characters [32]. These virtual allies not only support storytelling by offering dynamic interactions but also provide strategic assistance in combat, puzzles, and exploration. Engaging with allies, forming trust, or experiencing betrayals can elicit strong emotional responses, strengthening the player's attachment to the game world. Character attachment in games is not merely about liking a character but encompasses various forms of emotional connections, including admiration, concern, and trust [33]. This indicates that players often develop meaningful bonds with game characters, treating them as trusted friends, protégés, or even respected adversaries. These diverse emotional experiences contribute to deeper engagement, influencing player decisions and enhancing the overall gaming experience. By integrating social interaction into the gaming experience, players not only enhance their engagement but also develop strategic thinking, adaptability, and a deeper emotional connection to the game.

As players continue playing, they will receive rewards that can contribute to their motivation. These rewards can be functional or aesthetic, each serving a different purpose. Functional rewards, like power-ups, new abilities, or better equipment, help players improve and progress in the game. These rewards make it easier to overcome challenges and feel a sense of achievement. On the other hand, aesthetic rewards, such as character skins, outfits, or decorations, do not affect gameplay but allow players to express their style and personality.

The impact of rewards is important because they keep players engaged and excited. Functional rewards make players feel stronger and more capable, while aesthetic rewards let them personalize their experience. The process of earning rewards may encourage players to keep playing, whether to improve their skills or simply enjoy collecting new items. Reward systems enhance gameplay by establishing status, fostering

social connections, and motivating collaboration, particularly in searching for hidden content [34]. Rewards also make game mechanics more enjoyable by setting clear goals, reducing boredom, and stimulating curiosity. Furthermore, rewards could enhance player motivation and contribute to greater interest and enjoyment, particularly when games provide a diverse variety of reward types [34].

The goals and rewards identified in the analysis may also contribute to a sense of completion in the gaming experience. As players work toward achieving their objectives, whether game-given or self-made, and receive functional or aesthetic rewards, they may develop a sense of progress and accomplishment.

The goals and rewards may contribute to a sense of completion, which can be experienced in different ways. As players approach the end of a game, their perception of completion may vary based on their personal goals and in-game choices. The analysis indicated that players may define completion differently, with some seeking to finish the main storyline, unlock all achievements, or reach specific milestones. Others may strive for 100% completion by collecting every item and finishing all side quests, while some may be satisfied with simply reaching the end of the story. These different preferences suggest that players may develop their own sense of completion based on their goals and gameplay experiences. Previous research has similarly suggested that players can experience completion according to their individual actions and preferences [10], [12]. Players may experience a sense of completion when they feel in control of when and how they conclude their gameplay [10], [12], [13]. If the outcome does not meet their expectations, some players may replay the game to achieve a more fulfilling conclusion [12], [28]. Finally, this may contribute to personal fulfilment, as players reflect on their journey and experience feelings of mastery, satisfaction, or emotional closure based on their playstyle and goals. Video games have also been associated with feelings of control and achievement, which may make accomplishments feel more rewarding [35].

V. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORKS

This study investigates player choice in digital games through interviews, recruited via purposive sampling, and reviewing related works. The analysis revealed key themes and sub-themes that illustrate how players engage with choices during gameplay, highlighting factors such as Character Personalization, Goals, Gameplay, Social Interaction, Rewards, and Completion. Although the study did not aim to generalize across all gaming contexts, it provides valuable insights and directions for future research.

Firstly, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on player experience by exploring player choice as a distinct aspect of gameplay rather than treating it as a subcomponent of agency, autonomy, or decision-making. By focusing directly on how players perceive and articulate their choices, the study provides exploratory insights into how choice may shape players' experiences in digital games. These findings suggest that player choice may be related to aspects of immersion, motivation, and identity, and further research is needed to examine these relationships.

Secondly, the study shows that the way players understand and value player choice depends greatly on context. Factors such as the genre of the game, its mechanics, and the player's cultural or personal background influence how choices are experienced. For example, some players view choice mainly to express their identity through character personalization, while others associate it more with narrative goals, rewards, or opportunities for social interaction. This suggests that player choice in games is not a single, uniform concept, but rather shaped by the specific circumstances of both the game and the player.

However, this study has several methodological limitations. First, the study involved only ten participants recruited through purposive sampling. Although the participants had experience playing digital games and provided information relevant to the research objectives, the relatively small sample may not fully represent the broader population of digital game players. Second, the thematic analysis did not involve an independent inter-rater reliability assessment. This reflects the reflexive thematic analysis approach adopted in this study, in which researcher subjectivity is recognised as an integral part of the interpretive process of coding and theme development, rather than something that can be eliminated through coding agreement or reliability statistics [36], [37]. Accordingly, the themes were developed through the researchers' active engagement and interpretation of the interview data. Nevertheless, the influence of researcher interpretation cannot be completely excluded. Future research could strengthen the robustness of the findings through additional reflexive practices, collaborative discussion of interpretations, as well as larger and more diverse samples.

Lastly, the study suggests several avenues for further investigation. Future research should extend the findings through quantitative approaches, using a model to validate and measure player choice through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Such work can strengthen the generalizability of the findings and provide a standardized framework for studying choice in game research. In addition, larger and more diverse participant samples are recommended to capture the variation of player choice across genres, demographics, and cultural contexts.

DECLARATION OF AI ASSISTANCE

The authors used generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools to assist with grammar checking, improving sentence structure, and paraphrasing during the preparation of this manuscript. The authors reviewed and verified all AI-assisted content and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and final content of the manuscript.

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