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The Player's Eye: how narrative structures and gameplay elements influence the perspective of players on video game narratives

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Abstract

This thesis explores how different types of protagonists influence player interpretation of narrative in video games. It builds on theoretical foundations from game narratology and ludology, drawing particularly from Barry Ip's structural analysis of video game narratives, Sarah Stang's work on perceived player agency, and Gerald Farca's examination of internal focalization through silent protagonists. Further theoretical context is informed by narrative immersion theory from Melanie Green and Timothy Brock, mythic structure analysis by Joseph Campbell and Christopher Vogler, and the exploration of non-Western narrative forms such as Kishōtenketsu discussed by Jimmy Kindree. Together, these works shape an understanding of how narrative design, protagonist characterization, and environmental storytelling interact to shape the player's interpretive experience.

Design decisions were also influenced by ideas of fragmented storytelling and emergent meaning, supporting an open discovery model where players encounter optional exposition items that vary their understanding of the world. This approach was aimed at studying not only the impact of protagonist voice, but also how optional narrative elements influence interpretation.

To investigate these ideas, a narrative prototype game titled *Limbo's Gaol* was developed. The game presents a static world with branching protagonist interpretations across four narrative variants: a neutral character, a positive and accepting character, a rebellious character, and a silent protagonist. While the world, environmental storytelling, and exposition items remain constant, each narrative version provides a distinct internal lens through which players experience the story.

A playtest was conducted, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. Players' final choices (stay or escape the prison) were analyzed alongside their reasoning and interpretations of key narrative elements, such as the guards, the boss, the souls' purpose, and the prison's morality. Results show a strong correlation between protagonist personality and player perception. Characterized protagonists significantly guided interpretation, particularly when their viewpoint aligned with other conventional storytelling elements. Conversely, when the protagonist's view clashed with narrative cues, players either questioned the character's reliability or formed their own counter-narratives.

The thesis concludes with a framework for designing narrative agency through protagonist characterization. It outlines the implications of silent vs. characterized protagonists, the effects of narrative dissonance, and the importance of discovery-based storytelling. Guidelines are proposed for developers to consciously shape the player's interpretive journey depending on the narrative goals, whether to foster open interpretation or encourage alignment with a crafted perspective.

Limbo's Gaol demonstrates that the design of a protagonist, especially their degree of characterization and alignment with other narrative elements, can be a powerful tool in shaping not just story delivery, but how that story is felt, questioned, or believed by the player.

Resumo

Esta tese explora como diferentes tipos de protagonistas influenciam a interpretação narrativa por parte dos jogadores em videogames. Baseia-se em fundamentos teóricos da narratologia e ludologia dos jogos, com especial destaque para a análise estrutural das narrativas em videogames de Barry Ip, o trabalho de Sarah Stang sobre a percepção da agência do jogador, e a investigação de Gerald Farca sobre a focalização interna através de protagonistas silenciosos. O enquadramento teórico é ainda enriquecido com a teoria da imersão narrativa de Melanie Green e Timothy Brock, a análise da estrutura mítica de Joseph Campbell e Christopher Vogler, e a exploração de formas narrativas não ocidentais, como o Kishōtenketsu, discutida por Jimmy Kindree. Em conjunto, estas obras ajudam a compreender como o design narrativo, a caracterização do protagonista e a narrativa ambiental interagem para moldar a experiência interpretativa do jogador.

As decisões de design foram também influenciadas por ideias de narrativa fragmentada e de significado emergente, sustentando um modelo de descoberta aberta onde os jogadores encontram itens de exposição opcionais que alteram a sua compreensão do mundo. Esta abordagem teve como objetivo estudar não apenas o impacto da voz do protagonista, mas também como os elementos narrativos opcionais influenciam a interpretação.

Para investigar estas ideias, foi desenvolvido um protótipo de jogo narrativo intitulado *Limbo's Gaol*. O jogo apresenta um mundo estático com variações narrativas baseadas em quatro versões do protagonista: um personagem neutro, um personagem positivo e conformado, um personagem rebelde, e um protagonista silencioso. Enquanto o mundo, a narrativa ambiental e os itens de exposição se mantêm constantes, cada variante narrativa oferece uma lente interna distinta através da qual os jogadores experienciam a história.

Foi realizada uma sessão de testes com recolha de dados quantitativos e qualitativos. As escolhas finais dos jogadores (permanecer ou escapar da prisão) foram analisadas juntamente com os seus raciocínios e interpretações de elementos narrativos chave, como os guardas, o chefe, o propósito das almas e a moralidade da prisão. Os resultados demonstram uma forte correlação entre a personalidade do protagonista e a percepção narrativa dos jogadores. Protagonistas caracterizados orientaram significativamente a interpretação, especialmente quando a sua perspetiva se alinhava com os outros elementos de narrativa convencional. Por outro lado, quando a visão do protagonista entrava em conflito com os indícios da narrativa, os jogadores tendiam a questionar a sua fiabilidade ou a construir contra-narrativas próprias.

A tese conclui com uma proposta de estrutura para o design da agência narrativa através da caracterização do protagonista. Apresenta as implicações da escolha entre protagonistas silenciosos e caracterizados, os efeitos da dissonância narrativa, e a importância do design narrativo baseado na descoberta. São propostas diretrizes para que os desenvolvedores possam moldar conscientemente o percurso interpretativo do jogador consoante os objetivos narrativos, seja para fomentar uma interpretação aberta, seja para incentivar o alinhamento com uma perspetiva cuidadosamente construída.

Limbo's Gaol demonstra que o design do protagonista, sobretudo o seu grau de caracterização e o alinhamento com os restantes elementos narrativos, pode ser uma ferramenta poderosa para moldar não só a entrega da história, mas também a forma como essa história é sentida, questionada ou acreditada pelo jogador.

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This work and the times on which it spanned will go down on my life as a truly unique and influential experience, one that had moments of every range of enjoyability, and that shaped my being in ways that I am still not completely sure about. I would like to thank myself for fighting to go after my dreams.

Miguel Ramos dos Santos Gonçalves

"Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable"

Cesar A. Cruz

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Narratives are intrinsic to human nature. Since the earliest days of language and expression, human have used storytelling not only to entertain, but also to pass on knowledge, communicate emotions, and preserve culture. Stories allow us to understand lives other than our own, reflect on our values, and imagine alternate possibilities. They are, in essence, how we make sense of the world.

Video games, as a medium, have the unique potential to elevate narrative into something more than passive reception. Unlike literature or film, games offer interactivity, agency, choice, and consequence, which opens the door to new ways of telling and experiencing stories. The best games immerse players not just as observers, but as participants within a narrative framework. They do not simply tell stories; they let players live them.

As the Mexican poet César A. Cruz once said, "*Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable*" [1]. Art resonates because it speaks directly to the individual, shaped by their unique beliefs, memories, values, and personal histories. Every audience member brings their own perspective to a work, interpreting its meaning through a subjective lens, their unique eyes. In the case of narrative, this makes understanding how different story elements influence that perception essential. Writers and designers who are aware of these shifting perspectives can craft stories that resonate more deeply, guide players more precisely, and deliver emotional and thematic impact with greater fidelity.

This thesis explores how narrative structures and gameplay elements influence the perspective of players within video games. It investigates how a game's design can shape the player's understanding and emotional experience of a story, identifying patterns in how players insert themselves into a narrative or extract meaning through a character. Through critical analysis, practical implementation, and qualitative research, this work aims to uncover methods by which designers can align gameplay mechanics and narrative tools to create richer, more resonant storytelling experiences. In particular, this thesis proposes a division between what we term Extraction Narratives and Insertion Narratives, examining their implications on player immersion, interpretation, and emotional connection.

1.1 Context

In recent years, the video game industry has undergone a significant shift. Once dominated primarily by mechanical innovation and graphical prowess, it now increasingly embraces narrative complexity as

a central pillar of game design. Titles such as *The Last of Us* [2], *Undertale* [3], and *Journey* [4] have demonstrated that video games are uniquely suited to tell stories that are deeply emotional, thematically rich, and personally resonant. These games are not merely delivering plots, but are offering players a narrative space to inhabit, interpret, and live a story unique to the medium.

This rise of narrative-driven design presents a rich landscape of narrative strategies, especially in how games choose to frame the player's perspective. Many contemporary titles with strongly characterized protagonists, such as *God of War* (2018) [5] or *The Witcher 3* [6] aim to immerse players in a specific narrative and emotional journey. These games ask players not simply to inhabit a world, but to become a particular person within it, experiencing the story through their predefined traits, voice, and moral dilemmas. In contrast, other titles employ silent or minimally defined protagonists, like *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* [7] or *Hollow Knight* [8] to invite a broader sense of identification. Here, the character serves more as a vessel for the player's own thoughts and intentions, creating a space where interpretation and emotional resonance emerge more personally and less prescriptively.

Rather than being opposing narrative styles, these approaches represent different philosophies of storytelling in games: one that presents a crafted perspective, and one that invites the player to form their own. Understanding how these perspectives shape a player's perception of a story and how game mechanics reinforce or contradict that perception is at the heart of this thesis.

A key issue lies in understanding how players perceive the story they are part of. Two players may experience the same events but walk away with drastically different interpretations, shaped by their level of agency, their character's personality (or lack thereof), and the way gameplay presents narrative cues. Thus, it becomes critical to explore how gameplay and narrative work together to shape not just what the player sees but how they see it. This thesis positions itself at the intersection of game design and narrative theory, aiming to investigate how both elements influence the player's perception of a story.

1.2 Motivation and Objectives

The motivation behind this work is rooted in a central question: how does the structure of a video game, its narrative, gameplay mechanics and player interaction shape the perspective of the player experiencing the story?

Traditional media such as literature and film rely on authorial control over narrative and pacing. Video games, however, must relinquish some of that control in favor of interactivity. This invites a fundamental transformation in how stories are perceived, not only as a function of plot, character, and theme, but as an emergent property of player choice, agency, and gameplay structure. A well-crafted narrative in a game is not only told, it's lived.

This thesis aims to uncover how narrative structures (such as the Hero's Journey [9], or Kishōtenketsu [10]), specific game design decisions and how the differences between an Insertion and Extraction Narrative affect player perspective. Through theoretical exploration, game analysis, and qualitative testing, this work proposes a conceptual framework for understanding what it means to see a game's story through the player's eyes.

Specifically, the goals of this thesis are to:

- Analyze established narrative structures in video games.
- Explore the relationship between protagonist characterization (e.g., silent vs. expressive) and the degree of player identification.

- Investigate how interactivity and gameplay systems can reinforce or distort narrative perspective.
- Propose a categorization of narrative perception into *Extraction Narratives* and *Insertion Narratives*, examining their practical implications for design.
- Offer a set of design-oriented guidelines to aid developers in writing a narrative while having a better understanding on how the story will be interpreted by their audience.

Ultimately, this research strives not only to deepen our theoretical understanding of narrative in games, but to offer tools for designers who wish to craft stories that are experienced in ways unique to the video game medium that suit the intent of the author.

1.3 Research Questions

This is the main question we want to answer with this work:

- How can we structure the narrative and build the surrounding gameplay elements to shape the player's perspective of a narrative and deepen their bond and connection?
- How does the characterization of the protagonist change how a player perceives a story?
- What gameplay elements give room for interpretation or give a more guided experience?
- How does a developer plan a narrative to instill a certain perspective on the player by the means of gameplay elements and narrative structure?

1.4 Work Structure

Beyond the introduction this work has more 7 chapters. In Chapter 2 and 3 it can be found the state of the art. In Chapter 4 the design work is done according to the literary work. Chapter 5 is composed of the methodology on how the different elements of the state of the art come into play on the development of the prototype. In Chapter 6 the development of the prototype for this work is explained. In Chapter 7 we analyze the data from the prototype. In Chapter 8 it is created guidelines for future developers to use. In Chapter 9 we conclude the work and talk about future related works.

Introduction

Chapter 2

Narrative

Narrative is a fundamental human practice, present across a wide variety of mediums, shaping the way the story is received and interpreted. From oral traditions and written literature to visual arts and interactive media, narrative takes on different forms depending on the constraints and strengths of its medium. This chapter explores how narratives are structured and perceived in several key media types, with particular attention to literary storytelling. The aim is to understand how narrative structure and delivery influence audience perception, and how these insights can inform the design of narrative within video games.

2.1 Narrative in different media

2.1.1 Literature

Literature is one of the most traditional and deeply analyzed narrative forms. It relies heavily on the written word to build internal imagery, character depth, and emotional resonance. Through narrative structures such as the Hero's Journey and Kishōtenketsu, literature demonstrates the profound effect that form and structure have on how a story is experienced and interpreted by the reader [9, 11, 10, 12].

2.1.1.1 Hero's Journey

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* [9], Joseph Campbell outlines a recurring narrative structure found in myths and legends across cultures. He calls this structure the Hero's Journey, or the Monomyth. This framework divides the narrative into three major acts: Departure, Initiation, and Return. Each of these acts is composed of smaller, more specific stages such as the Call to Adventure, Meeting the Mentor, Trials and Tribulations, and the Return with the Elixir.

The popularity of the Hero's Journey lies in its archetypal nature. It offers a structure that resonates with universal human experiences such as growth, struggle, transformation, and self-discovery. By organizing the narrative into a recognizable pattern, the Hero's Journey makes stories more accessible and emotionally impactful for a wide audience [11]. This pattern not only guides the plot but also structures the emotional arc of the protagonist, allowing audiences to invest emotionally as they witness the character grow and evolve [13].

This structure is widely used in contemporary media, especially in fantasy and science fiction. Examples include Frodo’s journey in *The Lord of the Rings* [14], Luke Skywalker’s arc in *Star Wars* [15], and even Neo’s transformation in *The Matrix* [16]. These narratives emphasize character development, world exploration, and climactic confrontations that echo the Monomyth structure.

By focusing on a central protagonist undergoing trials and changes, the Hero’s Journey facilitates a strong bond between the audience and the hero. Readers empathize with the protagonist’s journey because it mirrors internal processes of change, struggle, and self-realization [17].

2.1.1.2 Kishōtenketsu

Kishōtenketsu [10] is another narrative structure that originates in East Asian storytelling traditions, particularly in Japanese and Chinese literature and manga. Unlike the Hero’s Journey, which relies on conflict and resolution, Kishōtenketsu operates on a four-part structure: Ki (Introduction), Shō (Development), Ten (Twist or Change), and Ketsu (Conclusion).

The key difference lies in the third act, Ten. While often translated as “twist,” Ten does not necessarily introduce conflict or confrontation in the Western sense. Instead, it introduces an unexpected shift in context, perspective, or tone, forcing the audience to reinterpret what came before [12]. This shift might not be dramatic or action-oriented, but philosophical, symbolic, or thematic.

A prominent example is the manga *Yotsuba!* by Kiyohiko Azuma [18], where everyday scenarios often take unexpected emotional or comedic turns without resorting to dramatic conflict. Another is the film *Spirited Away* by Hayao Miyazaki [19], which, while containing elements of challenge, largely unfolds through changes in environment, character perspective, and spiritual discovery rather than traditional antagonism.

Kishōtenketsu emphasizes internal change and reflection over external resolution. It values introspection, ambiguity, and emotional resonance, often highlighting the philosophical or moral implications of a situation rather than its dramatic resolution [20].

This shift changes how the reader perceives the narrative. Without a heavily characterized protagonist driving the plot through choices and conflict, the story becomes more open to reader projection. It invites the audience to reflect and interpret rather than to follow a specific emotional arc. This structure is particularly effective for promoting self-insertion, as the protagonist often functions more as a lens than a distinct personality [21].

In contrast to the Hero’s Journey, which fosters emotional connection through character identification, Kishōtenketsu encourages cognitive and emotional engagement through interpretive openness and symbolic resonance [12, 22].

2.1.1.3 Philosophy

Philosophy is the systematic study of general and fundamental questions concerning existence, knowledge, values, reason, mind, and language [23]. Unlike many forms of narrative that construct fictional or dramatized accounts, philosophical texts often operate as a direct intellectual conversation between author and audience. Many philosophical works originated as oral teachings later transcribed by students, as in the case of Socrates through Plato [24], or the Buddha’s discourses written down centuries after being spoken [25].

Philosophical narratives are distinct in that they rarely rely on plot, characters, or setting. Instead, they explore abstract ideas and ontological inquiries, presenting arguments and counterarguments in a structured yet open-ended way [22].

This makes philosophical writing a deeply personal narrative form. The speaker or writer often addresses the reader directly, invoking "you" and inviting them into an inner dialogue [21]. This rhetorical style creates a sense of intellectual intimacy, where the reader becomes a co-participant in the unfolding reasoning process [22].

This stripped-down form of narrative is uniquely suited to self-examination and existential inquiry. Since it bypasses most elements of fiction such as characterization, conflict, and resolution, it encourages the reader to insert their own self into the text. This makes philosophical narrative especially relevant when considering design tools for introspective or player-driven storytelling in games [21].

2.1.2 Movies

Movies combine visual imagery, sound, performance, and editing to deliver narrative in a multisensory way. Unlike literature or philosophy, film allows for a high level of control over pacing, perspective, and emotional tone. This makes movies an intensely guided experience, where the director and editor shape nearly every second of audience perception [26].

The film medium can utilize a wide range of narrative strategies. Some films adopt the Hero's Journey structure, such as in *The Matrix* or *Star Wars*, which engage viewers through clearly defined protagonists, arcs, and climaxes. Others, such as works by Terrence Malick or Andrei Tarkovsky, lean toward abstract or poetic structures that favor atmosphere and introspection over traditional plot mechanics [26, 27].

Movies often rely on visual storytelling where meaning is conveyed not just through dialogue, but through lighting, framing, and montage. This allows for nonverbal narrative experiences, where the audience is prompted to interpret tone and subtext through imagery. One powerful example is found in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, where long visual sequences carry deep philosophical weight with minimal exposition [26].

However, unlike literature or philosophy, film typically limits the viewer's agency [26]. The audience cannot choose where to look, what to question, or how long to linger on a particular moment. While this control can make the emotional journey more focused and impactful, it also positions the viewer more passively within the narrative. Character empathy is often built through acting and cinematography, and viewers are encouraged to identify with protagonists through camera perspective and music cues [28].

As a result, narrative in film tends to be more immersive but also more prescriptive, where the emotions and interpretations desired by the filmmaker are often foregrounded, leaving less room for ambiguity or self-insertion than in literature or philosophy [28].

2.1.3 Verbal storytelling

Oral storytelling is one of the oldest narrative forms, predating written language. Whether in the form of myths told around a fire, parables handed down across generations, or a grandparent telling tales to a child, verbal storytelling is deeply embedded in human culture and cognition [29].

One of the key features of oral storytelling is its personal and performative nature. The storyteller and the listener share the same space, making the narrative a social act. Tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and rhythm all contribute to how the story is received. The storyteller can adapt the delivery based on the audience's reactions, adding suspense, humor, or clarity as needed. This interactivity makes oral storytelling a uniquely dynamic form of narrative.

Another characteristic of verbal storytelling is its use of memory and tradition. Oral stories often follow formulaic patterns or motifs, like repetition, rhyme, or the "rule of three" to aid memorization and ensure

transmission across generations [30, 31]. These conventions also make the narrative more engaging and participatory, as listeners anticipate familiar beats or endings.

Unlike written or cinematic narratives, oral storytelling often blurs the line between fiction and reality. Because it's embedded in social interaction and cultural tradition, its impact relies not only on the story's content but on the relationship between the teller and the audience. This intimacy fosters emotional connection and allows listeners to insert themselves into the story, imagining themselves as characters or moral agents within the tale.

This directness makes oral storytelling particularly influential on the listener's perspective [32]. With minimal mediation, the story feels like it's being told for and to the individual. This personal address echoes the philosophical narrative style and serves as a useful parallel for video games, where direct engagement with the player can enhance immersion and emotional resonance.

2.1.4 Protagonist

Protagonists are central to most narrative forms, serving as the primary lens through which the audience experiences and interprets a story. Given their narrative importance, it becomes essential to examine how the mode of protagonist expression, whether characterized or silent, affects the audience's engagement and interpretation of the narrative [33].

2.1.4.1 Types of protagonist in terms of expression

A characterized protagonist has clearly defined traits, emotions, beliefs, and behavioral patterns. They express how they feel about events, environments, and relationships within the narrative, effectively guiding audience empathy and emotional understanding [34].

A concrete example is found in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, where protagonists like Iron Man or Thor vocalize their internal states, anchoring viewers emotionally and morally in otherwise fantastical settings [34].

In contrast, a silent protagonist functions more like a narrative blank slate, relying on action, minimal dialogue, or contextual cues for expression. This design choice supports audience projection and self-insertion, making the personal or philosophical resonance of the narrative feel more universal [33] [35]. Games have historically used silent protagonists, such as Gordon Freeman in *Half-Life* or Corvo Attano in *Dishonored*, to create a direct channel for player identification [33, 35].

Notably, the John Wick films have a mostly silent hero whose internal states are conveyed through physicality rather than speech, and *Wall-E* uses nonverbal cues to evoke powerful emotional engagement [33].

Many protagonists exist on a spectrum between these types. Characters like Link (*The Legend of Zelda*) or the Courier (*Fallout: New Vegas*) have limited dialogue but still convey distinct identity through action and context, balancing guidance and interpretive freedom [33].

2.1.4.2 How these protagonists influence narrative perception

The type of protagonist strongly influences how the audience perceives narrative.

With a characterized protagonist, the audience experiences the narrative through a defined emotional perspective. Their emotions, moral compass, and biases shape how events and relationships are interpreted, creating empathy and narrative cohesion but reducing flexibility [34].

A silent protagonist, by contrast, invites a more participatory engagement. Without explicit emotional guidance, audiences draw conclusions and interpret motivations independently, a dynamic that aligns well with player-driven narratives where decisions shape the story [33, 35].

Supporting characters also play different roles depending on protagonist type. With characterized protagonists, NPCs act as emotional mirrors or contrasts. In silent-protagonist stories, NPC reactions must communicate significance through implication, requiring the audience to actively interpret relationship dynamics.

Characterized protagonists make internal struggles explicit, thoughts, emotions, transformations, offering catharsis and emotional clarity. Silent protagonists express struggle through action, leaving audiences to understand through behavioral cues, which can enhance immersion or cause ambiguity [35, 36].

Finally, the resolution of narratives differs: characterized protagonists typically resolve through internal growth, while silent protagonists often resolve narratives through action, prompting each audience member to derive personal meaning.

In interactive media, silent protagonists empower players to project their identity into the game world, increasing immersion and personal interpretation. Characterized protagonists offer richer, guided emotional experiences but can limit player agency. Designers should align protagonist style with narrative goals to harness these dynamics effectively.

2.2 Narrative in video games

2.2.1 Current state of narrative in video games

The narrative capabilities of video games have significantly evolved in recent decades. What once were simple text prompts or short backstories in arcade titles have grown into cinematic storylines on par with film and literature, thanks to advancing technology, detailed voice acting, expansive worlds, and branching dialogue systems [37, 38].

Modern narrative-driven games cover a wide stylistic spectrum. On one end, highly scripted experiences like *The Last of Us* [2] and *Red Dead Redemption 2* [39] offer emotionally rich, tightly authored journeys. On the other, open-ended narratives such as *Disco Elysium* [40] enable players to craft their own story through choices and systemic interactions [41].

Indie titles have expanded narrative experimentation further. With fewer market constraints, developers have explored unconventional storytelling techniques, unreliable narrators, metafictional commentary, and non-linear time structures. Games like *Undertale* [3], *Return of the Obra Dinn* [42], and *What Remains of Edith Finch* [43] exemplify these approaches [41].

Narrative has emerged as a core element in game design. Writers, narrative designers, and even philosophers often contribute to development teams to embed thematic depth and emotional resonance throughout gameplay and worldbuilding [38].

Nevertheless, challenges remain. Balancing player agency with authored storytelling is complex. Branching narratives and moral choice systems must maintain coherence and real consequential weight. Narratively disjoint gameplay, referred to as ludo narrative dissonance, can disrupt immersion when player actions contradict the story [37, 44, 45].

Despite these challenges, the trajectory of narrative in video games is one of expanding sophistication. With technological advancements and design innovation, the medium increasingly approaches storytelling that is interactive, emotionally complex, and uniquely game-driven.

2.2.2 Hero's Journey in video games

The Hero's Journey, or monomyth, as proposed by Joseph Campbell, has significantly influenced storytelling across media, and video games are no exception [9, 46, 47].

In interactive media, the Departure often appears as a tutorial or catalyst that transitions the player from the familiar into the unknown. A prime example is *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, where Link departs Kokiri Forest after receiving the Call to Adventure from Navi [48, 49, 50].

The Initiation phase corresponds to the core gameplay: players encounter challenges, acquire new abilities, and master them as they explore temples and overcome foes, mirroring Campbell's model [51, 47].

Finally, the Return typically involves a climactic confrontation and resolution. Games like *Horizon: Zero Dawn* or *God of War* conclude with emotional payoffs reflecting hero growth [47, 52]. In *Ocarina of Time*, Link faces Ganon and returns to a transformed Hyrule, symbolizing psychological restoration [53, 54].

What makes this structure especially compelling in games is that players enact the hero's growth rather than simply observe it. This interactivity imbues the transformation with real weight, making players feel responsible for Link's evolution and setbacks [55, 47].

That said, not every game adheres to this model, and many actively subvert it. Titles like *Papers, Please*, *The Stanley Parable* reject monomyth conventions, favoring narratives built on choice, constraint, and subversion [47]. Still, the Hero's Journey remains a powerful framework in action-adventure and RPGs, where personal growth and epic stakes are expected.

2.2.3 Narrative in video games versus narrative in other media

One of the defining characteristics of video games as a narrative medium is their interactivity [56]. Unlike literature, film, or traditional oral storytelling, where the audience remains a passive observer, video games demand active engagement from the player. This interactivity introduces a fundamental shift in how narrative is experienced, constructed, and interpreted.

It is important to clarify that interactivity in narrative games does not necessarily refer to the player's ability to alter the story's outcome or major plot points, although such branching narratives do exist. Instead, it refers to the player's capacity to influence the rhythm, pacing, order, and often the mode of narrative discovery. For example, in open-world games, players can choose when and how to engage with various narrative elements, such as side quests, environmental storytelling, or character dialogue. This freedom grants the player a degree of authorship in shaping their personal experience of the story world [57].

This contrasts sharply with media such as literature and cinema, where the narrative is fixed and carefully controlled by the creator. In those forms, the author or director dictates not only what events occur, but in what sequence, through whose perspective, and at what pacing. The reader or viewer has no agency to deviate from the intended progression of the narrative, which results in a more uniform reception of the story among audiences [58].

In video games, the player's perspective and emotional engagement are not only shaped by the narrative content but also by how they navigate the game space and interact with the systems and characters within it. A player might spend hours exploring a desolate corner of a post-apocalyptic world, absorbing subtle environmental cues about its history, while another might rush directly through the main storyline and miss those details entirely. These emergent experiences contribute to what has been called a "personalized narrative," where meaning is constructed through play rather than merely observed [59].

Narrative

Moreover, video games often blend narrative with gameplay mechanics, reinforcing story themes through interactive systems. For instance, a game focused on survival might communicate narrative tension not just through dialogue or cutscenes, but through resource scarcity, character fatigue, or limited save opportunities [60]. These mechanics actively immerse the player in the protagonist's struggles, achieving a type of experiential storytelling not possible in passive media.

The interplay between agency and authorship in video games creates a dynamic tension that continues to challenge traditional understandings of narrative. While some critics argue that player freedom can dilute authorial intent, others see it as an opportunity for deeper, more resonant engagement [61]. What is clear, however, is that the narrative potential of video games lies not only in their stories but in the unique ways those stories are experienced through interactivity.

Narrative

Chapter 3

Narrative in gameplay

Having talked about how narratives can be found in video games we will now look at the ways the gameplay design of a game can affect the way that narrative is perceived by the player and the current techniques employed by designers in the current state of the gaming world.

3.1 Hero's Journey and Kishōtenketsu in the gameplay

The structures of the Hero's Journey and Kishōtenketsu, traditionally used in literature and film, can be mirrored in the gameplay design of video games to shape a player's experience. When translated into gameplay structure, these narrative arcs can determine how levels are designed, how skills are introduced and escalated, and how the player's emotional engagement is paced.

In the Hero's Journey structure, the gameplay often begins with a tutorial or opening level that represents the "Call to Adventure." This is followed by a gradual increase in difficulty and complexity, corresponding to the "Initiation" phase, where the player learns new mechanics and overcomes challenges. The "Return" phase often mirrors the final act of the game, where the player's accumulated knowledge and powers are tested in climactic battles or puzzles.

A clear example is seen in *Hollow Knight*, where the player begins with limited tools and understanding of the world. As the player explores and gains abilities, they metaphorically cross thresholds and face trials, mirroring the Hero's Journey. By the end, the player is empowered to face the final challenges with the mastery acquired through the journey.

Kishōtenketsu, on the other hand, is less focused on conflict and more on contrast and thematic evolution. In gameplay, this might mean the introduction of a gameplay mechanic (Ki), its development and familiarization (Sho), an unexpected twist or mechanic inversion (Ten), and then a resolution (Ketsu) that recontextualizes the player's experience. This structure is common in puzzle games like *Baba Is You*, where new logic rules are introduced gradually, and the twist lies in the reinterpretation of previous rules, leading to a satisfying conclusion of understanding.

Another notable implementation of Kishōtenketsu in gameplay is found in games like *Journey*. The game introduces a simple movement and gliding mechanic (Ki), develops a sense of scale and progression

(Sho), presents a drastic environmental shift and emotional turn (Ten), and then delivers a reflective ending (Ketsu). The entire game mirrors the player's emotional and experiential arc, even though conflict is minimal or abstract.

These structures provide designers with a framework for pacing and emotional resonance. Whether through character empowerment, narrative revelation, or gameplay evolution, they support the alignment of the player's experiential arc with the game's story arc.

3.2 Narrative exposition mechanics

Narrative exposition in games does not solely rely on traditional storytelling methods such as dialogue or cinematics. Gameplay mechanics themselves are often utilized as vehicles for narrative exposition, blurring the line between storytelling and player interaction. Below are some of the most commonly employed exposition tools and their impact on narrative delivery.

3.2.1 Cutscenes

Cutscenes are a long-established narrative tool used to deliver structured exposition in a cinematic format. During these sequences, the player typically loses direct control of the game, and the developers take over to showcase predetermined events. Cutscenes are often used to introduce characters, deliver emotional beats, or transition between major narrative acts [62].

Games like *Metal Gear Solid 4* make extensive use of cutscenes to emphasize emotional character moments and cinematic spectacle, framing the game's events as grand and deeply personal. While cutscenes can offer high narrative fidelity, overuse or poor timing can disrupt the player's sense of agency, creating a tension between gameplay and story.

3.2.2 Quick Time Events

Quick Time Events (QTEs) introduce a hybrid between cinematic storytelling and interactivity. In these sequences, the player must react to prompts (such as pressing buttons at the right time) to influence the outcome of a cinematic event. This technique retains narrative control while keeping the player actively engaged [62].

QTEs became particularly popular with games like *Resident Evil 4* and *God of War III*, allowing for epic action sequences without requiring complex control inputs. However, they are often criticized for feeling superficial, as they may only simulate interactivity rather than allowing meaningful player choices.

3.2.3 Playable story bits

These segments resemble cutscenes but keep the player in partial control, often restricting movement or mechanics while allowing the player to explore or interact with objects. They offer a more immersive alternative to traditional cutscenes by making the player an active participant in otherwise scripted moments [62].

In *The Last of Us Part II*, the player can control Ellie during intimate or mundane moments, such as exploring a music store or interacting with companions. These scenes add depth to characters and relationships by creating experiential empathy, though they reduce the designer's ability to direct player attention precisely.

3.2.4 Journals and audio logs

Journals, letters, and audio recordings scattered throughout a game's environment provide a non-linear, optional method of delivering narrative context. They empower players to piece together lore and backstory at their own pace, encouraging exploration and curiosity [63].

In games like *Bioshock* or *Prey*, audio logs offer fragmented, sometimes tragic glimpses into the lives of other characters, adding emotional resonance and narrative density without requiring full cutscenes. However, their optional nature means that key narrative information can often be missed by players who are less inclined to explore or read.

3.3 World Design

The physical and systemic design of a game world is a critical vehicle for storytelling. Whether through the environment itself or the characters and systems that populate it, world design can deliver a powerful, often subliminal narrative experience [64].

3.3.1 Environmental Storytelling

Environmental storytelling conveys narrative through visual design and spatial arrangement rather than direct exposition. The physical space, the layout of a room, the positioning of corpses and graffiti on walls tell a story on its own, allowing players to infer events and world history without dialogue.

The *Dark Souls* series is renowned for its use of environmental storytelling. The placement of enemies, architectural decay, and visual motifs all contribute to a cohesive world that invites interpretation. Players develop personal theories and understandings of the world through careful observation, fostering a form of emergent storytelling [65].

3.3.2 NPCs

Non-playable characters (NPCs) are central to the delivery of narrative in interactive worlds. Their behavior, dialogue, and relationships with the player character all contribute to worldbuilding and story progression [66, 67].

In games with a characterized protagonist, like *The Witcher 3*, NPCs refer to Geralt's past, personality, and known choices. This creates a feeling of a living world that responds to a fixed identity. By contrast, games with silent protagonists, such as *Dark Souls*, have NPCs who speak more generally, leaving interpretive space for players to project their own personalities onto the character. This duality reflects different narrative philosophies: one of authorship, the other of player embodiment.

3.3.3 Map Traversal

The way a player navigates the world can also function as a narrative tool. Map traversal can reflect freedom, confinement, danger, or transformation. Open-world games emphasize player agency in determining narrative pace and order, while linear paths enforce a more controlled and authored experience [68].

In *Death Stranding*, traversal itself is thematically tied to the narrative. The act of delivering packages across a ravaged landscape echoes themes of isolation, perseverance, and connection. Meanwhile, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* gives players nearly full freedom from the start, allowing exploration to become an organic method of narrative discovery.

3.4 Progression

Progression systems in games serve both mechanical and narrative functions. Through player growth, whether via new abilities, gear, or visual evolution, games can signal character development and narrative escalation.

3.4.1 Gameplay progression

The player's character progression is very influential on the feel of the story. Looking at the game *Dishonored*, we can see that the character starts out with simple powers, like teleportation. This fits the purpose of the introductory levels of the game, with the message of evasion and stealth. Later into the game the player unlocks more abilities, that they can either choose to go into either more and better evasion tactics, also environmental manipulation or go into a more forceful and brutally approach, which correlates to the both ways the game and narrative can be played out [69].

These gameplay progression designs affect the narrative in such a way that permits the player feel the narrative progression through the way they play the game.

3.4.2 Visual progression

The progression is normally tied with the visual aspect of it. By making the visuals of the player throughout the story progress with the narrative it can make it more cohesive and immersive. An example of this is the game *God of War (2018)*, where Kratos begins the story with a reserved and worn look, his armor and equipment being plain and practical. As the narrative and gameplay progress, not only does Kratos grow closer to his son and confront his past, but his visual appearance changes, his gear becomes more ornate and battle-worn, reflecting the journey he has undergone. This kind of visual evolution helps players feel a sense of growth, both narrative and mechanical.

Another example can be found in *The Last of Us Part II*, where Ellie's physical state visibly deteriorates as the game progresses. Her appearance becomes more ragged, bruised, and dirty, signaling both the physical and emotional toll the journey takes on her. These visual cues, although not mechanical in nature, deeply affect how the player perceives the narrative's emotional arc.

Visual progression can also occur through the environment. Games like *NieR: Automata* change the look of the world based on the current narrative state, reinforcing themes of decay, loss, or resolution. This dynamic helps in synchronizing the player's emotional understanding with the game world, reinforcing a feeling of immersion and consequence.

Chapter 4

Narrative Design

Having explored how gameplay systems contribute to storytelling Chapter (3) and how different narrative structures and conventions shape player perception (Chapter 2), we can now begin to synthesize these insights into a more focused design framework. From our research, we identify two broad modes of narrative perception in video games: **Extraction Narratives** and **Insertion Narratives**. These categories allow us to explore how the relationship between player and protagonist shapes the storytelling experience and how different gameplay and narrative mechanics support this connection.

While these narrative types exist on a spectrum, they represent two distinct strategies in how developers can engage their players emotionally and cognitively with the story.

4.1 Extraction Narrative

Extraction narratives center the experience on a fully realized protagonist through whom the player observes, interprets, and emotionally experiences the story. Rather than projecting themselves into the world, players extract meaning from the journey of a character with specific thoughts, motivations, and conflicts. This approach is highly aligned with traditional storytelling methods in film and literature, where the protagonist is the vehicle for empathy and thematic exploration.

4.1.1 Characterized vs Silent Protagonists

As detailed in Chapter 2, characterized protagonists are vital for Extraction Narratives. These characters are not meant to reflect the player's identity but to serve as a lens into a world or situation outside the player's lived experience. Characters like Kratos in *God of War* or Joel in *The Last of Us* are emotionally complex and thematically rich, allowing for nuanced storytelling that builds empathy through character development. Their personalities, histories, and relationships are integral to the narrative.

In contrast, silent protagonists typically detract from this type of narrative since they offer limited emotional expressiveness and no internal conflict. Without a strong authorial voice, the narrative risks becoming shallow or too reliant on external events for emotional weight.

4.1.2 Hero's Journey

The Hero's Journey, with its focus on transformation and personal growth, aligns naturally with Extraction Narratives. The protagonist moves from the known to the unknown, undergoes trials, and emerges changed. This arc is best served when the character is fully fleshed out. For instance, in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, Arthur Morgan's personal evolution is tied directly to the Hero's Journey structure, enabling the player to witness the development of a character shaped by consequence, morality, and mortality.

4.1.3 Kishōtenketsu

Although less common in Western games, Kishōtenketsu can still serve Extraction Narratives through its emphasis on contrast and emotional turn. Games like *Life is Strange* or *Firewatch* use this structure to deepen emotional investment without relying solely on conflict. The player follows a protagonist whose reactions to emotional shifts are critical to the experience, thus extracting meaning from those changes.

4.1.4 Philosophy

Extraction Narratives are ideal for philosophical themes because they allow the game to build its commentary around the internal conflict or worldview of the protagonist. *Spec Ops: The Line*, for instance, critiques the player's actions by framing them through the disintegration of Captain Walker's psyche. The protagonist becomes a mirror for moral introspection, as the player is forced to grapple with the dissonance between action and consequence.

4.1.5 Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater

Metal Gear Solid 3 is a masterclass in Extraction Narrative. Naked Snake is not a cipher for the player; he is a character molded by ideology, betrayal, and history. The game's extensive use of cutscenes, philosophical dialogue, and its heavily authored structure puts the player in Snake's shoes to observe, rather than rewrite, his descent into becoming Big Boss. The narrative weight hinges on Snake's personal tragedy, which is only meaningful if the player accepts the disconnect between themselves and the protagonist.

4.1.6 Other Examples

The Witcher 3: Geralt's defined personality and values allow players to experience moral dilemmas from a distinct perspective.

Uncharted 4: Nathan Drake's internal conflict between adventure and family serves as the emotional core of the game.

4.1.7 Player perspective

In Extraction Narratives, the player operates in a hybrid state: they control the character but don't become the character. This duality allows the game to maintain narrative consistency while still offering interactive depth. The narrative is perceived through a "directed lens," with player agency constrained to decisions and interactions that align with the character's identity.

4.2 Insertion Narrative

Insertion narratives, by contrast, are designed to allow the player to embody the protagonist. These games minimize authorial voice in favor of player agency, enabling the player to project their identity, values, and interpretation directly into the story world. The story is not just observed, it is lived.

4.2.1 Characterized vs Silent Protagonists

Silent or lightly characterized protagonists are commonly used in Insertion Narratives. As discussed in Chapter 3, games like *Dark Souls* or *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* present worlds that are reactive to player behavior but do not prescribe emotional responses. This design empowers the player to generate their own narrative interpretations, enhancing immersion and agency.

4.2.2 Hero's Journey

The Hero's Journey in Insertion Narratives often focuses less on internal transformation and more on mechanical mastery and exploration. The transformation is perceived as the player's own. In *Hollow Knight*, for example, the narrative is cryptic and environmental, but the structure still follows a journey from weakness to strength. The silent protagonist enables players to interpret their experience within the bounds of their own imagination.

4.2.3 Kishōtenketsu

Kishōtenketsu's structure is uniquely suited to Insertion Narratives due to its reliance on contrast and juxtaposition rather than conflict. *Journey* and *Outer Wilds* both employ this structure, presenting players with an unfamiliar world that they slowly decipher. The "twist" is often an environmental realization or a shift in player understanding, not a dramatic narrative turn. This rewards player curiosity and exploration.

4.2.4 Philosophy

Games like *Dark Souls* or *The Witness* explore philosophical ideas through ambiguity and player-driven interpretation. Without a strong authorial protagonist, the themes emerge from gameplay patterns, world design, and emergent player choice. Insertion Narratives make philosophy participatory, discovery becomes an act of reflection.

4.2.5 Death Stranding

In *Death Stranding*, Sam Porter Bridges is a character that mostly keeps to himself. There is characterization, mainly coming from other characters, but Sam for the most part remains silent, or of very few opinions. In a game like *Death Stranding*, a game about exploring not only a corrupted cryptic world, but exploring the meaning of human connection and the links that tie people together, a silent character like Sam provokes the player to put themselves in his shoes, living the events through their own eyes and questioning the game message and morale directly through their own bias.

4.2.6 Other Examples

Minecraft: Narrative emerges from player actions and goals.

Skyrim: The world reacts to player choices, with a minimally defined protagonist.

Outer Wilds: The story unfolds through exploration, without cutscenes or character exposition.

4.2.7 Player perspective

In Insertion Narratives, the player and protagonist are essentially merged. The player's perception of the narrative is shaped directly by their decisions, pace, and attention. The game world is built to support this subjectivity through environmental storytelling, non-linear progression, and minimal exposition.

4.3 Tackling the problem

Understanding the divide between Extraction and Insertion Narratives allows developers to make intentional design decisions based on how they want players to perceive the story. Rather than seeing these as mutually exclusive categories, we can consider them as poles on a continuum. Many modern games blend elements of both, creating hybrid experiences that offer strong thematic resonance while preserving agency.

The challenge, then, is to identify which mode serves the goals of a specific game. A narrative about political responsibility might demand a strong protagonist voice, while an emotional story about isolation could benefit from a silent one.

In the following chapter, we will explore how these narrative strategies were applied in the prototype game *Limbo's Gaol*, and what the player feedback suggests about the impact of protagonist design on player engagement and emotional investment.

Chapter 5

Methodology

Rooted in the theoretical foundations explored in Chapters 2 through 4, the approach combines design-based research and comparative narrative analysis through the creation and deployment of a controlled narrative prototype titled *Limbo's Gaol*. The methodology connects narrative theory, gameplay analysis, and philosophical reflection to inform and structure the experiment, enabling a systematic examination of player perception within interactive narrative spaces.

5.1 Research Strategy and Design

The methodological strategy adopted for this thesis follows a design-based research model, where a custom-built video game prototype is both the product of theoretical inquiry and the medium through which the core research questions are examined. This approach would be good for an interactive media study of this nature, allowing theory to be instantiated within a playable form that can then be analyzed in terms of its impact on user experience.

The design of *Limbo's Gaol* was guided by a central hypothesis: that the degree and style of protagonist characterization, particularly the distinction between silent and characterized protagonists, directly affects how players interpret narrative meaning, form emotional bonds, and construct internal narrative perspectives.

To test this, a controlled comparative framework was adopted. The prototype features a static narrative world, presented identically across four versions, while the varying narrative would differ solely in the expression and voice of the protagonist. This isolates protagonist characterization as the independent variable, while all other narrative and gameplay elements remain constant. The objective would then be to observe how the varying narrative would influence how players interpret the static narrative.

5.2 Theoretical Connections

The design and methodological decisions of the varying narrative of the prototype are rooted in the theoretical discussions presented in the State of the Art of narrative structures and protagonists types:

5.2.1 Extraction vs. Insertion Narrative

The prototype would be structured around the dual concepts of **Extraction Narrative** and **Insertion Narrative**:

- **Extraction Narrative:** emphasizes a predefined, emotionally expressive protagonist whose world-view shapes the player's understanding. This aligns with narrative forms in literature and cinema, where meaning is extracted from the journey of a particular character.
- **Insertion Narrative:** allows the player to project their own interpretations and values onto a blank-slate protagonist, emphasizing immersion through ambiguity and personal reflection.

These two approaches correspond to the structural variance in protagonist voice across the prototype. Characterized versions fall under the Extraction paradigm, while the silent version exemplifies Insertion Narrative. A more neutral characterized protagonist would also fall into the Insertion Narrative style.

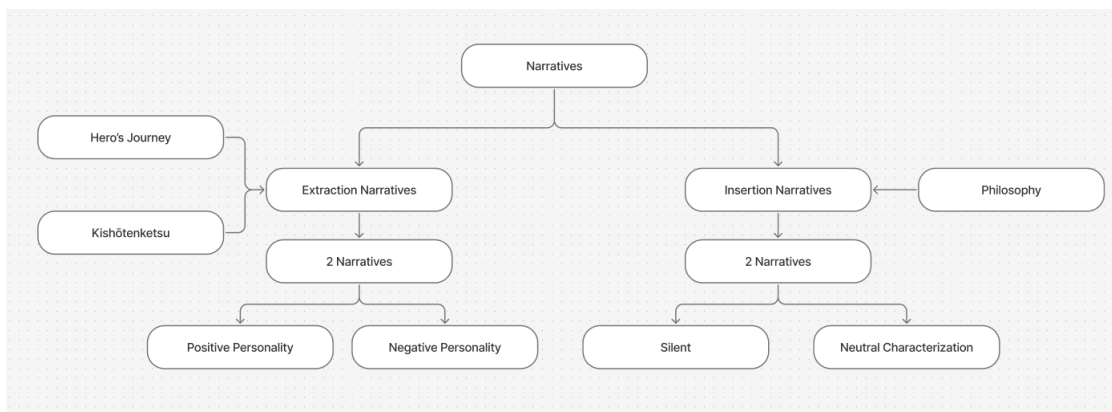


Figure 5.1: Methodology of the narratives for the prototype

5.2.2 Narrative Theory Foundations

The methodology draws extensively from the narrative models outlined in [Chapter 2](#):

- **Hero's Journey and Kishōtenketsu:** would serve as a base for the Extraction Narrative versions, where characters would vocalize their opinions and share their thoughts on how they view the world. The narrative structures analyzed would help on how to build a world that would have story and effect on the character's fictional journey that they had to live to reach the place they are now in the start of the game.
- **Philosophy:** would be used on the design of the narratives of the silent and the neutral protagonists, where the exposition of the story would be focused more in questioning, neutrality and introspection in order to call for player interpretation.

5.2.3 Narrative Tools

From the researched narrative exposition tools, the ones that would suit the best a project with multiple narratives and a small scope would be environmental storytelling and exposition journals / audio logs. These narrative tools would allow for easy adaptability and are good for interpretation as they offer room

for multiple views on the same elements. The gameplay design would also stay static through all narrative versions.

- **Environmental Storytelling:** Serves as the static narrative. Would be the base that would be the same between all narratives, offering a good playground for interpretation depending on the player's perspective.
- **Exposition Journals:** Would offer different exposition depending on the narrative version. The exposition would offer different perspectives through which to see the story and the world around the player.

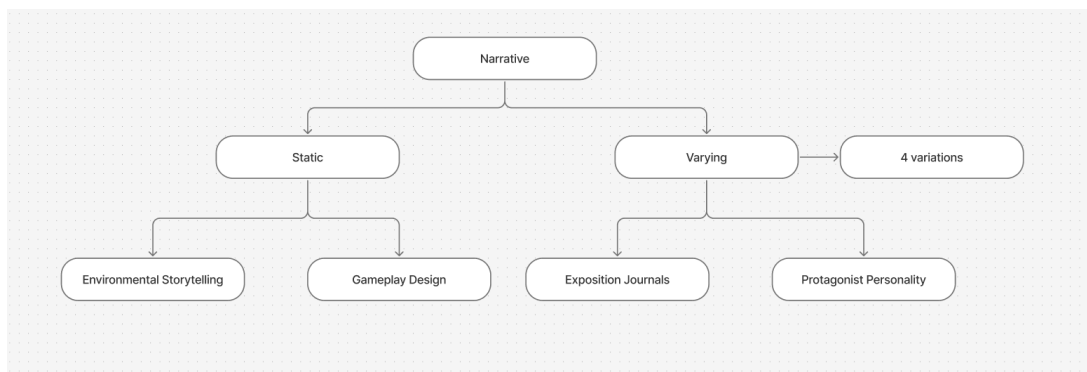


Figure 5.2: Methodology of the narratives tools for the prototype

5.3 Research Questions

The prototype would focus on answering the following research questions:

1. How can we structure the narrative and build the surrounding gameplay elements to shape the player's perspective of a narrative and deepen their bond and connection?
2. How does the characterization of the protagonist change how a player perceives a story?
3. What gameplay elements give room for interpretation or give a more guided experience?
4. How does a developer plan a narrative to instill a certain perspective on the player by the means of gameplay elements and narrative structure?

The answers to these questions would come out in form of conclusions to the analysis and as developer guidelines on how to develop narratives with the protagonist influence in mind.

The next chapter will go more in-depth on how the prototype was design and how each element was thought out depending on its goal.

Methodology

Chapter 6

Prototype Design: Limbo's Gaol

To move beyond theory, a custom-built prototype game, of name *Limbo's Gaol*, was developed using the Godot Engine, with the objective of testing a subset of the narrative and gameplay elements previously researched. This prototype serves as a practical case study, designed to test how varying levels of protagonist expression can alter the reception of a shared narrative world. It explores the dynamic between characterized protagonists, who guide players with voiced opinions and emotions, and a silent protagonist, who remains unvoiced and ambiguous. By controlling the world design and events while changing only the nature of the protagonist, the project isolates the effect of narrative framing.

The entire prototype was developed using the Godot Engine, with all 3D models created in Blender and the sound design produced in Reaper. Every visual element, including models, visual effects, and voice lines were custom-made specifically for the prototype, ensuring a cohesive and original audiovisual experience tailored to the project's narrative goals.

6.1 Purpose and research-driven design

The decision to focus on protagonist expression emerged from the theoretical foundation established in the preceding chapters. A synthesis of narrative theory, ludology, and philosophical reflection led to the central hypothesis: that the degree and nature of protagonist characterization directly influences how players interpret, internalize, and emotionally respond to a game's story.

Key theoretical influences included Joseph Campbell's *Hero's Journey*, which outlines a universally resonant narrative structure centered on character transformation, and the Japanese narrative structure of *Kishōtenketsu*, which emphasizes contrast and twist without conflict. These models suggest that the structure and presentation of a protagonist's journey frame the emotional and cognitive relationship between audience and narrative.

Furthermore, insights from narrative philosophy underscored how the intimacy or detachment of the narrative voice can fundamentally reframe a story's meaning. When the protagonist's thoughts, feelings, and reactions are vividly expressed, the player is more likely to empathize with their journey, viewing events through their lens. Conversely, a silent or blank-slate protagonist invites players to insert their own perspectives, resulting in a more self-reflection narrative where the interpretative narrative falls fully on the receiving end.

Drawing on this theoretical background, the design of the prototype game was shaped by a narratological duality. A key distinction drawn from earlier research was between two narrative typologies: *insertion*, where players are encouraged to project themselves into the protagonist's role, and *extraction*, where players are meant to observe and analyze a pre-defined character. This formed the central axis around which the experimental design revolved.

To effectively test this duality, the prototype was structured to isolate protagonist expression as the sole variable, since narratives have too many elements to test in a work of this nature and size. The design goal envisioned four distinct versions of the same game world, each populated with identical gameplay mechanics, environmental storytelling, plot structure, and world-building. The only difference between versions would be the personality, voice, and expressive quality of the player character. This methodological control allowed for a comparative study of how varying degrees of protagonist expressiveness could shape narrative interpretation, emotional engagement, and immersion.

6.2 Narrative structure and implementation

In order to rigorously examine the role of protagonist characterization on player experience, the narrative framework of the prototype was methodically divided into two interdependent layers: the **Varying Narrative**, which was mutable across different protagonist versions, and the **Static Narrative**, which remained consistent across all implementations.

6.2.1 Varying Narrative

The Varying Narrative encompassed all player-character-specific expressions, primarily through dialogue and views of the game world. This layer represented the core experimental variable and was tailored uniquely for each version of the protagonist.

In the characterized versions, the protagonist was given a distinct personality, shaped by tone, vocabulary, emotional expression, and philosophical worldview. These characters were fully voice acted, offering not only exposition but also judgments, emotional responses, and personal reflections on in-game events, environments, and characters. For instance, one version might react to shackles with pain and sorrow, interpreting it as a tool for evil, while another might dismiss it as irrelevant or even have a positive insight about their nature.

The silent protagonist version, by contrast, would employ no voice acting. Instead, their interactions would be delivered through utilitarian text. These text lines would be stripped of subjectivity, favoring factual or observational statements. Rather than interpretive commentary, the silent version of the protagonist would simply deliver facts about the concept at hand ("Shackles used by the souls while working the daily tasks.") rather than speculate on its meaning or express an emotional reaction. This would create a narrative vacuum into which the player could project their own interpretations and emotions.

By designing the Varying Narrative in this way, the prototype allowed for a clean comparison of player experience under different conditions of narrative agency: authored versus player-driven, voiced versus silent, interpreted versus observed.

6.2.2 Static Narrative

Complementing the Varying Narrative was the Static Narrative, which comprised the foundational storytelling elements that remained consistent across all versions of the game. This layer was responsible for

conveying the core lore, themes, and emotional tone of the world through indirect, environmental means rather than direct exposition by the protagonist.

The Static Narrative relied heavily on environmental storytelling techniques. These included visual motifs in level design, symbolic use of architecture, ambient soundscapes, lighting, and the strategic placement of in-world artifacts such as letters and objects of ritual significance. These elements were crafted to evoke a consistent sense of place and history, offering players a shared interpretive baseline regardless of which protagonist they were playing.

By decoupling this layer from the protagonist's voice or perspective, the design ensured that all players encountered the same narrative raw material. However, the way this material was processed, filtered, or framed was mediated by the protagonist's degree of characterization in the Varying Narrative. This created a dynamic tension between authored world and interpreted experience, with the protagonist acting as either a conduit or a canvas, depending on their design.

The juxtaposition of these two narrative layers, one fixed, one variable, was essential for testing the core hypothesis. It allowed for controlled experimentation with narrative framing, emotional tone, and interpretive agency, providing insight into how players relate to a story when the lens through which it is told shifts, even as the world itself remains unchanged.

6.3 Planning the prototype

The conceptual design of the prototype took shape as *Limbo's Gaol*, an oppressive, otherworldly prison where souls are sent after death. The player inhabits one of these souls, awakening at the heart of this bleak realm. As they traverse its vast infrastructure, they are invited to uncover its secrets, confront its contradictions, and ultimately determine their own fate. This setup offered a rich environment to test how different protagonist voices could reframe an identical narrative experience.

To isolate the variable of protagonist expression, four narrative versions were designed, each featuring a different approach to player-character voice and perspective:

1. **The Balanced Veteran:** A neutral, reflective voice combining disillusionment with lingering hope.
2. **The Repentant:** A guilt-ridden yet optimistic character who embraces the justice of their punishment.
3. **The Rebellious Newcomer:** An angry, defiant voice that rejects the prison and its legitimacy.
4. **The Silent Observer:** A voiceless, emotionless perspective offering purely descriptive commentary in a text format.

6.3.1 Planning the protagonist voices

Each protagonist was written to embody a distinct worldview and interpretive framework. Their narrative tone, vocabulary, and reactions were designed to shape how the player perceived the same events and environments.

The protagonists bodies (meshes) were designed without much plan, being the result of mid-development planning.

6.3.1.1 The Balanced Veteran

This voice occupies a middle ground between cynicism and empathy. The Veteran approaches the prison with quiet contemplation, recognizing both its cruelty and its order. Their reflections often express a weathered acceptance of reality, noting the absurdity of the prison while still acknowledging its symbolic logic. By refusing extreme judgment, this protagonist encourages players to dwell in ambiguity and consider multiple interpretations of the world.



Figure 6.1: Balanced Veteran

6.3.1.2 The Repentant

The Repentant frames the entire experience as deserved penance. Haunted by a severe sin committed in life, this character accepts their suffering as just. Their tone is melancholic yet peaceful, and they often interpret beauty or comfort within the prison as a form of grace. This perspective transforms the prison into a space of moral reckoning, a place where guilt can be transformed into acceptance. Players engaging with this voice are steered toward reading the narrative as the souls spending their time in a redemptive and rehabilitative institution.



Figure 6.2: Repentant

6.3.1.3 The Rebellious Newcomer

The Newcomer reacts with rage and disbelief. They view the prison as an authoritarian nightmare and question the legitimacy of its systems and inhabitants. Their lines are emotionally charged, often sarcastic,

bitter, or openly hostile. This voice invites players to adopt a critical lens, positioning the narrative as an allegory for unjust punishment or systemic control. Unlike the Balanced Veteran, the Newcomer offers little room for nuance, instead promoting resistance and confrontation.



Figure 6.3: Rebellious Newcomer

6.3.1.4 The Silent Observer

In the silent version, the protagonist offers no personal voice. Instead, observations are presented in neutral, fact-based text with minimal interpretation. There are no emotional responses, ethical judgments, or contextual framing. This approach maximizes player agency, inviting them to draw their own conclusions from the environment and events. It also aligns with design philosophies that emphasize existential reflection and minimal authorial intrusion.

The Silent Observer would share the same character model as the Balanced Veteran.

6.3.2 Planning the Realm

The game's world, the static narrative layer, was constructed using primarily environmental storytelling and sparse written artifacts. The goal was to create a realm that felt both hostile and curiously livable, a place where contradiction was built into the fabric of existence. This would create tension between the bleakness of the prison and the oddly comfortable routines of its residents, offering fertile ground for player interpretation.

6.3.2.1 The Crack of Doom

The prison world was imagined as a realm suspended above a vast, never-ending lake of lava, converging into a central abyss known as the Crack of Doom. This visual metaphor for annihilation serves as a symbolic representation of oblivion, spiritual gravity, and the inescapability of death. Its omnipresence throughout the level design serves as a constant reminder of existential dread and finality.

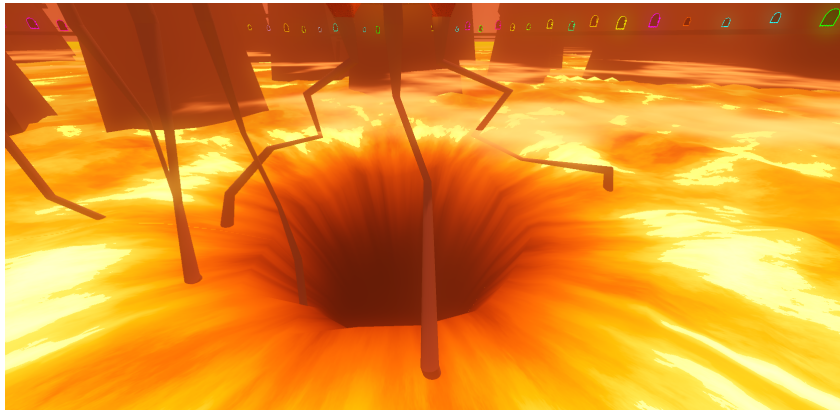


Figure 6.4: Crack of Doom

6.3.2.2 The Prison

The central structure of the game world is a sprawling network of towers, walkways, and corridors, an endless prison-city that stretches across the sky. Its scale was designed to evoke feelings of insignificance and confinement. Long, elevated bridges connect monolithic buildings, with no discernible endpoint or clear direction. The verticality and repetition of architecture reinforce the sense of imprisonment and liminality.

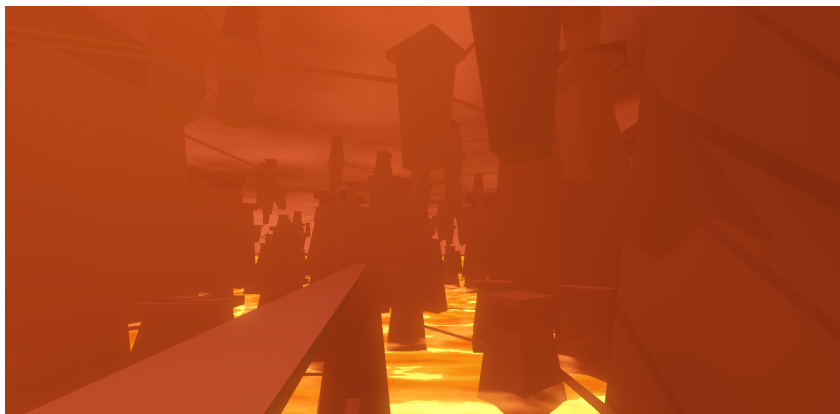


Figure 6.5: The Prison

6.3.2.3 The interior design

The interiors were designed to be sterile and devoid of joy. Simplicity was prioritized in both layout and visual style: sharp geometry, low detail, and an absence of decorative elements. This austerity reinforces the prison's dehumanizing logic and supports the game's philosophical themes of judgment, routine, and existential inertia.

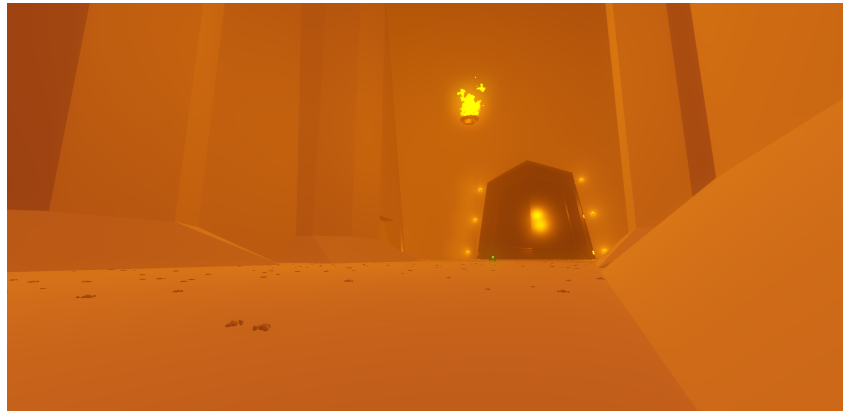


Figure 6.6: Interior Design

6.3.2.4 Visual clutter

To avoid making the world feel static or lifeless, subtle particle systems were introduced to suggest the presence of unseen systems and entities. Souls are shown as luminous silhouettes crossing bridges, hinting at a bureaucratic afterlife with routines and rules. Occasionally, more abstract, otherworldly entities appear, floating beings that defy conventional understanding. These systems would be crucial in making the world feel lived-in and spiritually complex.



Figure 6.7: Visual clutter to add life into the realm.

6.3.2.5 The journals and puzzles

Exposition Journals were designed as part of the world rather than intrusive collectibles. These included objects like shackles, food trays, admission documents, and weapons. All suggestive of former lives and existing routines. Each item served as a narrative prompt, with the protagonist (except in the silent version) providing interpretive commentary.



Figure 6.8: Exposition Journal: Shackles. One of the interactable Exposition Journals that would have protagonists talk about or show a descriptive text.

Puzzles were similarly integrated into the world design. They were not abstract logic games but symbolic mechanisms: levers marked with animal totems associated with punishment, or mechanisms that mimic rituals. These design choices emphasized immersion and thematic cohesion over mechanical complexity.



Figure 6.9: Lever with a crow statue on top. This was one of the puzzle levers used in the prototype with symbolic imagery. The crow symbolizes Death.

6.3.3 Gameplay structure and narrative delivery

To ensure that the effect of protagonist voice remained the central variable, the gameplay itself was kept intentionally simple and non-disruptive. The game avoids traditional challenge-based progression in favor of exploration and discovery. Players can move through the prison in a semi-linear fashion, triggering narrative events at their own pace.

Interaction is limited to reading notes, triggering voice lines or text responses, and watching short cutscenes. This design minimizes cognitive load, allowing players to focus on interpretation rather than mechanics.

Narrative is delivered through:

- **Exposition Journals:** Diegetic items that offer insights on the world and narrative. In the characterized versions, these are commented on by the protagonist. In the silent version, they are presented as plain descriptions.

- **Environmental cues:** Visual and spatial storytelling that provides thematic resonance and world-building without explicit exposition.
- **Cutscenes:** Short, scripted moments that mark transitions between areas or offer glimpses into the realm or represent a narrative event.

6.3.4 Narrative Pacing and Spacing

Given the short playtime of the prototype (estimated at 10–15 minutes), special care was taken to control pacing. The goal was to prevent players from rushing through the experience without absorbing its emotional and thematic content.

6.3.4.1 Physical spacing

The game world was designed with spatial pacing in mind. Environments are large enough to require traversal time but not so vast as to feel tedious. This movement time allows players to process recent narrative beats and maintain immersion in the mood and rhythm of the experience.

6.3.4.2 Cutscene spacing

Cutscenes serve more than a narrative or cinematic function. They act as reflective pauses. One key cutscene was placed between the two main levels to allow players a moment of rest and contemplation. This interlude was designed to give breathing room, helping players digest the previous area before entering the next.

6.3.4.3 Voice line freedom

To ensure that voice-acted lines were not skipped or ignored, the system was designed so that players could move freely during narration. Voice lines would continue playback until completion regardless of player movement or interaction. This design preserved narrative flow without sacrificing player agency.

In the silent version, however, this solution was more difficult to implement. Because textual descriptions could be closed by the player at any time, there was no reliable way to guarantee full narrative delivery. It was hoped that the player's natural curiosity would prevent them from skipping too much content, though this remained an open challenge in the prototype's implementation.

6.3.5 The game finale

At the end of the prototype, a final choice was introduced: the player could either remain in the prison or escape. This decision point served as a straightforward method for quantitatively evaluating how players interpreted the narrative. The assumption was that the protagonist's framing would guide this decision. It was expected that players influenced by the Balanced Veteran or Silent Observer would be split between staying and escaping, while those guided by the Repentant would be more likely to remain, and those playing as the Rebellious Newcomer would predominantly choose to escape.

6.4 Planning of the analysis

The core aim of this prototype was to investigate how the perspective of the protagonist influences player interpretation of the game's narrative. Consequently, the primary data to be collected was qualitative in

nature. The plan was to gather player impressions of each narrative component, such as the world, the characters, and the events, through open-ended questions.

The data collection was structured around a survey administered at the end of each playthrough. Each participant would play only one version of the narrative to avoid contamination of interpretation across multiple perspectives. After completing the game, they would immediately respond to the survey.

The survey included optional personal metadata, such as age, gaming habits, and familiarity with narrative-driven games, allowing for comparative analysis of how different demographics responded. The main section of the survey consisted of qualitative questions probing how players interpreted the world, the nature of the souls, their perception of the guards and the Boss, the rationale behind the souls' presence in the realm, and the reasoning behind the player's final choice.

After collecting the responses, patterns would be analyzed across different narrative versions. The goal was to identify consistent influences from the protagonist's voice on player perception, as well as any outliers or anomalies that suggested a weaker or different kind of influence.

6.5 Implementation of the prototype

How was the story structured and integrated into the different narrative versions and ultimately into the game?

6.5.1 The Story

The world into which players are thrown is called *Limbo's Gaol*, meaning *Limbo's Jail* in archaic English. This realm serves as a place where souls go to atone for the sins committed in their past lives. All souls entering this place have committed terrible acts, but upon arrival, they lose all memory of their previous existence.

The entity known as the Boss is a strong believer in rehabilitation. He rules the prison with strict discipline, employing guards to ensure that souls perform meaningless labor during the day, a form of penance for their forgotten crimes. However, he gradually improves living conditions for those who demonstrate good behavior, organizing parties for the best-performing souls and avoiding the use of violence as a form of control.

Souls who behave consistently can be promoted to the role of guard. As guards, they help maintain order, but they are never instructed to use force, only intimidation. The Boss believes that, over time, souls should learn to recognize and choose good over evil, breaking free from the cycle of suffering and oppression. Guards are expected to lead by example, performing good deeds for others and refraining from violence. When a guard has proven their reformation over a long period, they gain access to the *Soul Sword Altar*, which allows them to pass on to the next life, escaping eternal suffering.

Despite its hideous, oppressive, and bleak appearance, *Limbo's Gaol* is intended to be a place of healing. It is designed to guide lost souls, who strayed in life, toward rediscovery in death, preparing them to enter the next life with a renewed and hopefully better perspective.

This is the static, underlying story of the game, the foundational narrative that all protagonists interpret in different ways. The hope is that, by altering the protagonist's perspective, the player's interpretation of this fixed story will shift accordingly.

6.5.2 Narrative design and integration in the game

The overarching narrative was the first element to be structured. A basic outline was developed to establish what the player would encounter, ensuring that the major themes and world elements were consistently delivered across all narrative versions.

The game would begin with a cutscene introducing the setting, after which the player would find themselves on a long narrow path leading to the center of the world. This area, a garbage disposal facility suspended over the Crack of Doom, contained a puzzle that, once solved, opened a portal to the second phase of the game. Scattered throughout the first level were interactable journal entries that introduced core concepts such as the nature of the realm and the reasons for the player's presence there.

For the sake of simplicity we will start calling the Narrative Versions by number. Where the Balanced Veteran is Narrative 1, the Repentant is 2, the Rebellious Newcomer is 3 and the Silent Observer is 4.

Journal entries for the first level (item names and narrative variations):

- Shackles:
 1. These are the shackles that hold us in place when we are hard at work. Quite tight on the skin and impossible to break. Thankfully we don't need them in our free time.
 2. These are the best shackles one could ask for if not given a choice on wearing one. They are tight, but don't hurt. And all these souls around would just lazy all day if not helped to. We don't even have to wear them when we are not working.
 3. These shackles are what bind us in place! They grab onto our bodies and don't allow us to do anything but work repetitive meaningless tasks! Damned would they be if they would be put through such treatment! They take them away when we are not working like it compensates for anything!
 4. Shackles used by the souls while working the daily tasks. They hold tightly without damaging the ghostly matter and are unbreakable by nature. The guards take them away when the souls are left to roam freely.
- Tray of Food:
 1. Every single day I wonder if we would eat something different. Every single day I'm disappointed. The taste is bland and boring. Like all the walls around us. At least it does fill you up.
 2. We eat the same every day. Would be bad if we could even taste anything other than a bland flavor. And it has good nutritional values.
 3. They dare to call this food. Every single day is the same, most despicable, disrespectful plate of bland trash conceivable. I wonder how much they would like to have it shoved down their throats.
 4. Plate of food. Given to all souls at lunch and dinner time. Composed of a bland gooey matter. The souls are unable to taste, so the cooks put little effort into the recipe or adding variety. Very good in energy levels, perfect for a good workforce maintenance.
- Letter of admission:
 1. A letter of admission. I got one of those when I first got here. Had my basic info but didn't really tell me what I'm doing here. I wonder why we got here in the first place.

Prototype Design: Limbo's Gaol

2. The letter of admission of someone. Everyone got in here for a reason, all have forgotten but me. I don't really know why, but I vividly remember the devastating sin I committed before dying.
 3. The cursed letter of admission... The marker of the moment we all enter this hellish place. I have no idea why we are here, all I know is we need to get out!
 4. Letter of admission. All souls get one when they get here. Souls forget their past life, not knowing the reason as to why they arrive. But all that is meant to come will come.
- The Crack of Doom:
 1. This fission on the world's bottom almost looks like an exit. It's where they throw all the trash, it must lead somewhere. Has anyone ever made the plunge? I wonder why we are here, and if we even can get out.
 2. This fission on the world's bottom almost looks like an exit. It's where they throw all the trash, it must lead somewhere. Has anyone ever made the plunge? I wonder why we are here, and if we even can get out.
 3. The bottom of this forsaken realm. The guards throw all trash and unwanted items down the hole, it must lead somewhere. One day I will gather the courage to make the plunge. In the name of liberty! Free from the unjust imprisonment we have!
 4. A rupture in the center of this world. The guards use it as a tool to destroy unwanted items. Souls believe it to be the exit of this world. The true reason for its existence is unknown by all but the Boss.
 - Memory from the Past:
 1. Looks like a memory, maybe even an event from before the soul got here. I wonder whose it is and what the full story is. Doesn't look like a very happy one, nor what they did was nice.
 2. This does bring back memories from the days before. I wonder why I am the only one who sees the vision of my sin. The only thing I can say now is sorry... I truly deserve to be here.
 3. Imagery of torment by someone's actions... Left here by the overlord of this place to instill fear and make us fear escaping. That won't affect my valor, we don't deserve to be here.
 4. A memory from an unknown soul. All souls leave their memories behind when they come into this place. For some reason, some of these memories gain physical form, letting souls view a glimpse of someone's previous life. This one is one of evil occurrences.

Following the portal's activation, the player experienced a short cutscene as they were transported to the second level: a vast prison facility housing the offices of the Boss and the guards' headquarters. This phase explored themes such as how souls were treated, the power dynamics between the souls and the guards, and the broader metaphysical concept of limbo.

Journal entries for the second level (item names and narrative variations):

- Pile of Beds:
 1. Even though this place looks boring, and we are imprisoned here, life is pretty comfortable. Although it seems this party went pretty wild for them to be throwing the good beds all over the place...

Prototype Design: Limbo's Gaol

2. The place treats us well. Way better than what we deserve for being here. The bedsheets are warm and comfortable and this mess created from a party just shows how lenient they are with us.
3. They imprison us here and then make us comfortable with good beds and fun parties. Trying to make us forget that we are here against our will and that we are not to ever get out!
4. The aftermath of an intense party. The Boss likes to throw fun parties when the occasion calls for it. The infrastructure and furniture tries to be comfortable and cozy, even though the look might be intimidating and hostile.

- Pile of Weapons:

1. The guards use these weapons to intimidate us, but I have never seen them use them anywhere nor on anyone. Seems almost like they are here with us and not against us. Truth be told normal souls can get upgraded to guard duty. I guess they know our side.
2. A well-behaved and cooperating soul may get promoted to a guard who will use one of these weapons. Even though I have been here long, I have never seen them be used for bad.
3. The tools of oppression. Guards patrol these halls holding these weapons, making us do our "duties" and stay in order. A behaved soul may become a guard they say, but what they want is for one to earn the right to oppress the others. This way they all keep each other in control based on fear of them becoming the oppressed again.
4. Weapons used by the guards of this realm. A soul may become a guard if the Boss deems them fit for the role. These weapons have never drawn blood, but they sure look intimidating.

- Balloons:

1. I have been here a long time. Work is repetitive, boring and intense, but the days are not so bad. We have some good times, it's almost starting to grow on me.
2. From all the places I could have ended up, this prison is the best I could have. The work is bearable and on the worst day it's boring. A lot of time we get to have fun and have a good time.
3. These parties and activities serve to blur the fact that we are here against our will. They want us to forget that we are stuck here and start to think it's our new home. I hate this place.
4. Balloons from the ongoing party. The Boss makes an effort for all souls to have periods of fun and enjoyment during their eternal stay, to compensate for the arduous and monotonous work days.

- Clock:

1. All clocks strike 3 all the time. Almost like time here is of no importance. I wonder what the purpose of this place is and why we are meant to be here.
2. Time is not important when the stay is eternal. Here we must stay and here we must not worry of the seconds that go by. Other things to worry about.
3. Even time fears this place. All clocks stand still as we are just meant to forget that days are even a concept. The suffering is eternal and the idea that freedom might come one day is not wanted.

4. Clocks don't work here as time is not a concept of importance. They stand still at 3 and there they stay. Souls should not worry about the seconds that pass, but instead of why they are where they are.

At the end of this level, the player discovered an altar bearing the Soul Sword. This object initiated the final choice. Choosing to stay meant simply walking away. Choosing to escape caused the sword to fall upon the player, symbolically "*killing*" them and releasing their soul from the realm.

6.5.3 Prototype development

The prototype was developed using the Godot Engine, with Blender used for 3D modeling and Reaper for audio production.

Development began with the creation of the narrative system, which allowed for seamless switching between the four protagonist voices. Godot's node-based system proved ideal for implementing this functionality quickly and reliably.

Next, the world itself was constructed. The environment needed to be immersive enough to support exploration and player investment. All assets, including environmental structures and props, were created in Blender, following paper prototypes of the level layouts.

Once the environment was integrated into Godot, visual effects were added to enhance the feeling of a lived-in world. This included environmental particles, ambient animations, and visual clutter.

Cutscenes were added next, providing both transitions and emotional beats. Finally, sound design and audio implementation were completed, ensuring that the game's pacing and narrative flow were cohesive.

6.6 Impossibilities and complications

While the prototype achieved its core objectives, several limitations emerged that may have influenced the results of the analysis.

6.6.1 Narrative length

Due to time constraints, the prototype was limited to approximately 10–15 minutes of gameplay. Although many short-form narrative experiences have proven effective in conveying powerful stories (e.g., *Florence*, *A Short Hike*, or *Journey*), brevity posed challenges for immersion and emotional investment. A shorter experience risks limiting the depth of engagement, especially for players unfamiliar with introspective or interpretive gameplay.

This constraint also reduced the amount of character development possible for each protagonist. As a result, some voices may have felt underdeveloped or too overt in their tone, influencing how strongly their perspective shaped the player's interpretation.

6.6.2 Player attention span

Prior to development, informal inquiries revealed that many players often skip cutscenes or voice lines during gameplay. This raised concerns about whether players would fully engage with the narrative elements of the prototype.

To mitigate this, voice lines were made unskippable but allowed to play while the player continued exploring. This solution was well received in playtesting, as it maintained narrative delivery without forcing players into passive viewing.

However, for the Silent Observer version, this approach could not be replicated. Text-based journal entries could be closed at any time, creating the possibility that players might skip important narrative content.

6.6.3 Simplistic narrative structure

The narrative structure was deliberately minimal to accommodate the project's limited scope. However, this simplicity may have unintentionally amplified the influence of the protagonist voices. With fewer environmental or narrative cues and elements to balance the experience, players may have relied more heavily on the protagonist's interpretation, making the contrast between perspectives feel exaggerated or one-dimensional.

While this could strengthen the prototype's ability to demonstrate the impact of characterization, it also introduces the possibility that results may not generalize to more complex or nuanced narrative structures.

6.6.4 The ending conundrum

A key concern with the final choice was the appeal of the escape option. Regardless of their narrative interpretation, players might choose to escape simply because it seemed more exciting or interesting, rather than because it aligned with their protagonist's or their own viewpoint.

There was no straightforward solution to this. Instead, the survey included a follow-up question asking players to explain why they made their choice. These responses are crucial for interpreting whether the decision was made thematically or arbitrarily, and will be analyzed closely in the final evaluation.

Chapter 7

Data Analysis

With the theoretical framework established, and the practical prototypes tested, this chapter focuses on the analysis of the player responses gathered during the playtesting phase. As outlined in earlier sections, the tests were designed to explore how different narrative structures, Extraction and Insertion narratives, are perceived and internalized by players when integrated into a game and how the characterization, or lack of, of the protagonist would affect the perspective of the players.

The primary focus of this analysis lies in the qualitative feedback obtained from participants. Rather than relying on purely statistical or numerical results, this research emphasizes the subjective experiences, emotional reactions, and reflective insights provided by players. These responses offer a richer understanding of how narrative design affects player immersion, interpretation and identification with the protagonist.

In the sections that follow, we will examine recurring themes, contrasting viewpoints, and meaningful patterns that emerged from the data. Special attention will be paid to how players interpreted narrative cues, how they felt about the agency and perspective granted to them, and whether they felt a stronger connection to the story in one narrative approach over the other. These findings will then be contextualized within the broader discussion from previous chapters to assess how theory and practice converge or diverge within narrative and game design.

7.1 Data gathered

The study collected data from 18 volunteers who participated in the playtesting phase. Each participant played the prototype individually, with no prior knowledge of the narrative variations or the research objectives, ensuring their experiences and feedback were unbiased and genuine. The assignment of narrative versions was randomized among participants to distribute the different story experiences evenly. The data collected was completely anonymous and with consent of the participants.

The project was distributed both in person and online. All participants had the experiences fully to themselves, having zero input from any source other than the game, leaving them to experience everything with zero influence. The narrative option was randomized, asking them to remember which option they had so they could later answer it on the form. The in-person playtest was done with people present in the Game Design Course room in Chalmers University of Technology and the online test was distributed to known

people, covering a more diverse range. After each person played the game, they would proceed to fill in the form with their opinions of the narrative while it was fresh.

Number of participations per narrative version:

Narrative Version	Number of Participants
Narrative 1 (Balanced Veteran)	4 participants
Narrative 2 (Repentant)	6 participants
Narrative 3 (Rebellious Newcomer)	6 participants
Narrative 4 (Silent Observer)	2 participants

Table 7.1: Number of *Limbo's Gaol* playtest participants

Due to the way the prototype was distributed, in person and online, it was hard to make the distribution even, which explains the distribution we ended up with. So, it's important to keep in mind these numbers when analyzing the answers, as some versions have a higher quantity of information for analysis.

The prototype featured four distinct narrative variations: three characterized narratives, each with a unique protagonist personality and voice, and one silent protagonist narrative where the player's character was intentionally left uncharacterized. This design choice was rooted in the theoretical framework developed in earlier chapters, which explored how protagonist characterization influences player identification and immersion.

Participants did not know beforehand which narrative they would experience, knowing only the number of their version, which helped in capturing authentic responses to the narrative style itself, rather than preconceptions about the character or story.

The data collected can be divided into three primary categories: metadata, pre-form data, and qualitative narrative feedback. This next section focuses on the metadata and pre-form data, which provide critical background context and assist in interpreting players' subsequent responses.

7.1.1 Metadata

To better understand the relationship between player background and narrative reception, participants were offered the opportunity to share personal information through a metadata form. While participation in providing this data was optional, it would allow for demographic and experiential insights that could help identify trends or outliers in the way different players engaged with the prototype.

The metadata collected included the following categories:

- **Age:** To observe potential age-related trends in narrative preference or comprehension.
- **Gender:** To examine whether gender identity influenced narrative engagement or identification.
- **Gaming Frequency:** Rated on a scale from 0 to 10, this measured how often participants play video games, providing a gauge of their general gaming habits.
- **Years of Gaming Experience:** This quantified the length of time participants have been playing games, helping to contextualize familiarity with game mechanics and storytelling conventions.
- **Familiarity with Narrative-Driven Games:** Rated from 0 to 10, this helped to assess how accustomed players were to games where narrative plays a central role.

- **Preferred Storytelling Impact:** A question asking participants what aspects of stories (in books, films, or games) affect them the most emotionally or cognitively.

This metadata provides context for interpreting the diversity of player perspectives and how individual differences might influence narrative experience, a point deeply connected to the earlier theoretical discussions on player agency and identification.

7.1.2 Pre-form data

Before participants responded to narrative-specific questions, some immediate data was gathered to establish the foundation of their experience:

- **Narrative Version Played:** Participants indicated which of the four narrative versions they had experienced.
- **Interactive Items:** Players reported which in-game items or narrative elements they interacted with during the play session. This data helped track engagement with specific parts of the narrative and provided insight into how interaction influenced their perceptions and feedback.

Collecting this preliminary information was vital for linking players' subjective responses to the specific narrative path and gameplay interactions they experienced, enabling a nuanced comparison between the characterized and silent protagonist conditions.

7.1.3 Qualitative data

The qualitative data collected was designed deliberately to capture the depth and nuance of each player's interpretation and emotional response to the narrative elements presented in the prototype. Rather than simply measuring surface-level reactions, these open-ended questions aimed to explore how players made sense of the story world, characters, and their own agency within the narrative framework.

This approach aligns with the theoretical foundation laid out in Chapter 2, where the subjective experience of players was emphasized as central to understanding narrative impact. It also reflects the narrative design goals discussed in Chapter 4, which prioritized player interpretation and meaning, making as key components of immersive storytelling.

The following questions were posed to players, each intended to probe different facets of their engagement with the narrative:

- What is your view on the realm?
- What is your view on the souls and their life there?
- What is your view on the guards?
- What is your view on the Boss?
- Why are the souls in that realm?
- What ending did you choose?
- Why did you make the choice you made?

Collectively, these qualitative questions provide a comprehensive picture of player engagement and interpretation. The analysis of these responses in the following sections will identify recurring themes, notable divergences, and meaningful connections to the earlier theoretical groundwork.

7.2 Analyzing the interpretations

As previously discussed in Chapter 6, the four narrative versions used in the prototype were as follows:

- **Narrative 1 (Balanced Veteran):** A more neutral stance where the protagonist neither liked nor completely disliked living in the realm, but was gradually becoming accustomed to it.
- **Narrative 2 (Repentant):** A characterization where the protagonist considered living in the realm as their rightful destiny, believing it was where they should remain for their sentence.
- **Narrative 3 (Rebellious Newcomer):** A strongly negative viewpoint, where the protagonist despised the realm and focused solely on escaping, viewing their captivity as unjust.
- **Narrative 4 (Silent Observer):** A non-characterized narrative with no explicit protagonist traits, leaving interpretation entirely up to the player.

In this chapter, we analyze players' responses based on the specific narrative they experienced. Additionally, we consider which interactive items each player engaged with, as these interactions affected how the story unfolded and influenced player perceptions. This detailed approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the impact of narrative structure and characterization on player interpretation.

7.2.1 The Final Choice

At the conclusion of the gameplay, players were presented with a simple yet meaningful choice: to either remain in the prison-like realm or to escape. This choice served as a direct behavioral indicator of how each narrative version influenced player decision-making.

Based on the design intentions and narrative tone, the expected trends were as follows:

- Players who played **Narrative 1** or **Narrative 4** were expected to show a more balanced **distribution between staying and escaping**, reflecting either a neutral attitude or personal interpretation.
- Players experiencing **Narrative 2**, with its acceptance of the realm as rightful destiny, would be more inclined to choose to **stay**.
- Players exposed to **Narrative 3**, characterized by a strong desire for freedom and a sense of injustice, would most likely opt to **escape**.

7.2.1.1 Quantitative analysis

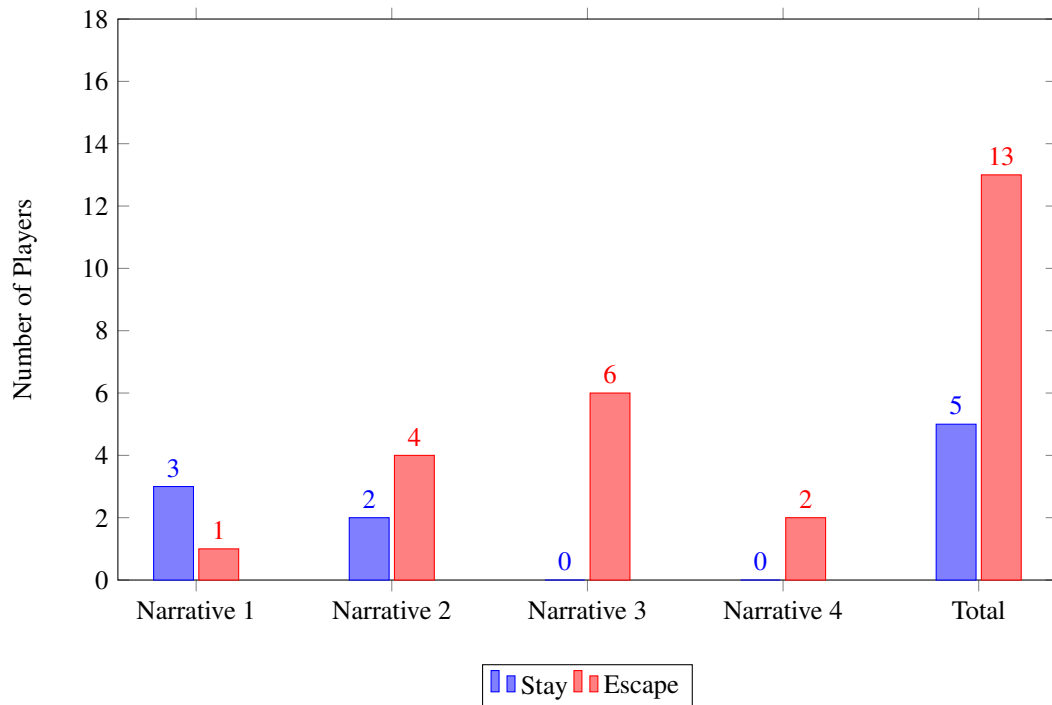


Figure 7.1: Final choice made by players at the end of their Limbo's Gaol' playthrough, distributed according to the narrative version experienced.

As shown in Figure 7.1, the total number of players who chose to escape the realm was significantly higher than those who chose to stay. This outcome aligns with the prediction discussed in Chapter 6, where the escape option was anticipated to be more appealing due to its narrative and emotional weight, drawing players toward that decision, however that might not be the sole reason.

Examining the results of **Narrative 1**, which featured a protagonist with a neutral attitude, neither fond of the realm nor actively resisting it, we observe that **75%** of players chose to **stay**, while **25%** opted to **escape**. This distribution matches the predicted behavior for a protagonist whose stance does not strongly influence one outcome over the other, although with the low player count the percentages seem to set themselves too apart.

Narrative 2 produced an unexpected result. Despite presenting a protagonist who believes the realm is their rightful place and accepts it as their fate, only **33.3%** of players chose to **stay**, while the remaining **66.6%** chose to **escape**. This sharp contrast suggests a strong dissonance between the character's beliefs and the player's interpretation of the game world, possibly due to the influence of environmental storytelling that paints the realm in a darker, more oppressive light.

Narrative 3 confirmed expectations, with **100%** of players choosing to **escape**. The protagonist in this version openly resents the realm and views it as unjust, and this clear emotional framing appears to have aligned perfectly with the players' choices.

Narrative 4, which involved no protagonist characterization, had only two participants. Despite the small sample size, it is interesting to compare its results with those of Narrative 1. Both narratives offer a neutral or interpretive stance on the world, allowing players to form their own conclusions. When combined, these two groups show a near-even split between staying and escaping, reinforcing the idea that in the

absence of explicit protagonist direction, players lean more heavily on their own interpretations, often shaped by the game's tone, setting, and visual cues.

From this quantitative analysis, several conclusions can be drawn. Most notably, the personality or absence of personality in the protagonist significantly influenced the players' interpretation of the story and the realm. However, the protagonist was not the sole narrative device at work. The game also employed environmental storytelling, sound design, and worldbuilding, elements which at times complemented or contradicted the protagonist's outlook.

For example, the dark, cold, and isolating tone of the environment naturally aligned with Narrative 3's negative perspective, reinforcing the desire to escape. This synergy may have amplified the emotional response in players. Conversely, the optimistic or accepting attitude of the protagonist in Narrative 2 clashed with the bleak visual and auditory language of the world, likely creating a sense of narrative dissonance that led players to reject the character's views and instead choose to escape. It is also worth noting, as mentioned in Chapter 6, that the short length of the experience may have affected the results. The limited time available might not have been sufficient to develop the story enough to counterbalance the stark contrast between the worldbuilding and the protagonist's personality in Narrative 2, potentially explaining why this particular narrative did not resonate as effectively as the others.

In the case of the neutral Narrative 1 and the silent Narrative 4, players appeared more free to interpret the world themselves. Interestingly, Narrative 1's neutral but voiced framing may have slightly shifted player perception in favor of staying, perhaps suggesting that the realm was not entirely hostile. On the other hand, the more text-driven and character-free Narrative 4 may have caused players to fall back on familiar media tropes of oppressive, inescapable worlds, pushing them toward escape.

The final takeaway from the quantitative analysis is that the presence and personality of the protagonist did, in fact, influence the players' final choices. To gain a deeper understanding of how and why this influence occurred, it is necessary to conduct a qualitative analysis focused on the reasoning behind each player's decision.

7.2.1.2 Qualitative analysis

After stating which ending they chose, players were asked to explain the reasoning behind their decision.

Regarding the option to stay, only participants who played Narrative 1 or Narrative 2 selected it. These players consistently stated that their reasoning was aligned with the mentality of the protagonist. One Narrative 2 participant, for instance, expressed that they felt the character had done something wrong in the past and deserved to remain in the realm, adding, "*I feel like someone deserving of leaving would not think like that*".

As for the players who chose to escape, the reasoning varied depending on the narrative they experienced.

One participant who played Narrative 1 mentioned they personally wanted to stay, but felt that the character would choose to escape. This contrasts with other Narrative 1 participants who interpreted the protagonist as someone who would prefer to stay. This highlights how a neutral character leaves room for individual interpretation, allowing players to project their own understanding onto the story.

In Narrative 2, all four players who chose to escape acknowledged that they believed the protagonist would prefer to stay. However, they opted to escape either because they disagreed with the character's perspective or because they viewed the world as too grim to justify remaining. This suggests a conscious separation between character intention and player agency.

The players who experienced Narrative 3 expressed motivations that aligned with the protagonist's mindset or choosing to escape as a natural extension of the character's desire to break free from an unjust imprisonment.

Finally, the Narrative 4 players explained their choice to escape by stating that it felt like the intended goal of the experience. This interpretation likely stemmed from the environmental storytelling, which painted a bleak picture of the realm. The lack of a defined protagonist or opinionated item descriptions pushed players to rely more on their own assumptions and genre expectations, which tend to associate such settings with a need to escape.

Even though the graph results didn't entirely align with the initial expectations, especially in the case of Narrative 2, we can still identify a clear pattern in the players' thought processes. All participants were distinctly influenced by the protagonist they played as. Even when players didn't agree with the character's views, their experience was undeniably shaped by the perspective they were placed into. This suggests that the protagonist plays a significant role in shaping how players interpret and engage with the game world. While the protagonist may not always direct the player's perspective in a fixed direction, they act as a powerful narrative force, either reinforcing the player's beliefs or serving as a point of contrast that provokes reflection.

We can observe that a single narrative element, such as the protagonist, can strongly influence the player's perspective on the story. However, to gain a deeper understanding of how this influence manifests throughout the experience, we will now analyze player interpretations of the different narrative elements presented across the game.

7.2.2 Narrative Elements

7.2.2.1 Interpretation of the Realm

In Narrative 1, the consensus was that the realm was a bleak, sad and an oppressive place, a kind of limbo after death where souls are punished without meaning or end.

In Narrative 2, players also described the realm as hellish, but some responses introduced a notably different tone. One player described it as having a *"slightly goofy relaxed tone"*, while another called it *"cozy"*, expressing interest in learning more about the day-to-day life in the realm and suggesting that, for a prison, it was not so bad. Although some players still viewed the realm strictly as a place of punishment, with one even suggesting the protagonist was merely brainwashed into thinking it was good, the overall trend shows that the protagonist's positive outlook encouraged players to see some redeeming aspects in the setting and to search for the good within it.

In Narrative 3, all players interpreted the realm as a sad and unwelcoming place, comparing it to hell or an industrial, hellish factory. Elements such as parties or comforts were dismissed as tools to boost productivity or deceptive illusions. This aligns directly with the protagonist's view, which is marked by strong disapproval of the realm.

In Narrative 4, one player expressed confusion and did not understand the point of the setting, while the other described it as gritty but noted that the prisoners did not seem to have such a bad time.

From these results, we can conclude that the players' opinions on the realm were indeed influenced by the perspective of the protagonist. Most tended to agree with the character's interpretation. However, it is particularly interesting to observe that some players consciously rejected the protagonist's outlook, forming their own interpretations that clashed with the character's beliefs. This indicates that while the protagonist can guide interpretation, the player's agency and personal judgment still play a strong role in

shaping narrative perception. In the neutral version of the narrative, players tend to conform to the other narrative tools, like environmental storytelling and their interpretation of their surroundings.

7.2.2.2 Interpretation of the lives of the inhabitants

In Narrative 1, players generally perceived the lives of the inhabitants as boring, monotonous, and somewhat bleak, but not entirely miserable. Several noted that there were some redeeming aspects, such as good days and moments of free time. Some participants questioned the purpose of the parties and whether the souls had simply adapted to their roles. Overall, the outlook suggested a neutral stance. While not ideal, life in the realm was not devoid of meaning or small comforts.

In Narrative 2, players tended to focus more on the positive aspects of life in the realm. Some described it as rehabilitative and even satisfactory. One player referred to it as an *"ideal inferno"*, while others noted a sense of empathy and enjoyment despite the grim setting. Still, they acknowledged the confusing hierarchies and the ambiguity regarding who truly holds power in the realm. Overall, the tone was more optimistic than in other narratives, albeit still tinged with the setting's inherent bleakness.

In Narrative 3, players expressed overwhelmingly negative views of the souls' lives. The experience was described as meaningless, depressive, and devoid of purpose. Players interpreted the comforts and parties not as genuine positives, but as manipulative tools designed to make the souls forget they were imprisoned. These elements were viewed as part of an oppressive system rather than sincere attempts at improving quality of life. The outlook here was consistently and strongly negative.

Narrative 4 players also viewed life in the realm as monotonous and meaningless, though with less elaboration due to the smaller sample size.

From this data, it becomes evident that players' perspectives on the lives of the souls were heavily influenced by the protagonist they embodied. A significant majority of participants adopted the protagonist's preconceived view. Narrative 1 players tended to offer a more balanced interpretation, while those in Narrative 4 relied more on environmental storytelling and conventional readings of such oppressive settings. Players of Narratives 2 and 3 aligned more clearly with their protagonists' attitudes, with Narrative 3 prompting especially strong emotional alignment.

The contrast between the strength of influence of Narratives 2 and 3 is one of the most compelling and unexpected outcomes of the analysis till this point. This comparison will be examined in greater detail at the conclusion of the full study.

7.2.2.3 Interpretation of the guards

In this section, it is worth noting that several players did not find the item that provides detailed context about the guards. As a result, some participants reported having no particular opinion on them.

Players in Narrative 1 generally viewed the guards as non-threatening, even friendly. Some described them as passive figures who shared similarities with the other souls. One player went as far as to call them incompetent, stating that they did not perform their duties effectively.

Narrative 2 players had a generally relaxed view of the guards, describing them as *"chill and stupid"* but also funny and non-violent. Several noted that the guards' presence at parties and the fact they never used their weapons were strong indicators that the environment was not as hostile as it seemed. A few participants questioned the guards' existence entirely or noted that their seemingly benevolent role contradicted the philosophical tone of the rest of the world.

In contrast, players of Narrative 3 perceived the guards as cruel, indifferent, and incompetent. They echoed the protagonist's belief that any good actions by the guards were merely tools of oppression. For example, suggesting that lowering their weapons was a calculated move to maintain control. The idea that former souls had been promoted into guards was interpreted as a systemic strategy to perpetuate oppression through fear of falling back into subjugation.

Of the Narrative 4 players, one noted that the guards appeared to enjoy more freedom than the souls, while the other did not understand their role or personality at all.

As with earlier analyzes, a clear trend emerges where players tend to adopt the perspective of the protagonist they play. In the more neutral narratives, opinions on the guards varied, while the more polarized narratives saw participants aligning more closely with the protagonist's views. Narrative 3 once again exhibited the strongest alignment, while Narrative 2 players presented a broader spectrum, ranging from agreement with the protagonist to skepticism, viewing the character as delusional or overly idealistic. Nonetheless, the overall trend of protagonist influence remains consistent.

7.2.2.4 Interpretation of the Boss character

Players in Narrative 1 expressed a range of opinions about the Boss. One participant stated that the Boss *"tries to present a very friendly facade"* and questioned whether the character was even real. Another described the Boss as not particularly intimidating, while a different player called them either *"cool or a narcissist"*, uncertain of which label applied. One participant suggested that the Boss manipulated the souls into cooperating with their imprisonment, but also acknowledged that the Boss tried to improve their quality of life through events like parties and by avoiding oppressive orders to the guards. Overall, interpretations hovered around a neutral stance, with views ranging between mildly positive, portraying the Boss as benevolent, and more skeptical, casting them as manipulative but offering benefits to the residents, perhaps with ulterior motives.

In Narrative 2, the Boss was generally viewed in a more positive light. Players described them as trustworthy, non-threatening, and generous, with one even calling them *"magnanimous"* and the Boss everyone wishes for. However, some participants detected arrogance or a need for validation, likely due to the Boss's theatrical behavior and showmanship. Again, multiple players questioned the Boss's existence or framed the protagonist as potentially delusional or unreliable in their narration.

Players of Narrative 3 overwhelmingly viewed the Boss negatively, describing them as a manipulator, narcissist, and someone who harbors disdain for others. One participant notably diverged from the trend by referring to the Boss as a *"cool guy"*, a surprising contrast to the rest of the group in this narrative.

Narrative 4 players were split, with one describing the Boss as *"lavish"* and another simply calling them *"fun"* due to the parties they hosted.

In summary, the trend observed in earlier sections remains consistent. Players in the more neutral narratives (1 and 4) expressed scattered and balanced views on the Boss, while players in the more extreme narratives (2 and 3) aligned more clearly with the protagonist's opinions. Narrative 2 players, joined by some Narrative 1 players this time, again demonstrated uncertainty towards the existence of the Boss or towards the reliability of the protagonist's mind, likely due to the character's distinctive and unconventional perspective or the Boss character being non-conventional in a setting such as this.

7.2.2.5 Interpretation for the reason the souls are in the Realm

Overall, players who experienced Narrative 1 expressed uncertainty about the reason the souls reside in the Realm. Some hypothesized that the souls were there to atone for sins committed in a past life, yet even these players admitted to being unsure about their interpretations.

In Narrative 2, all players agreed that the souls were present in the Realm as a consequence of sins from their previous lives, serving time to atone for their actions. Several players noted that the souls seemed to belong there, reinforcing the idea of just punishment. Some framed this belief as part of the souls' own worldview, while others speculated that the lack of suffering might be the result of brainwashing. Once again, we observe the trend of some players accepting the protagonist's point of view while others adopt a more skeptical stance, viewing the narrative as potentially manipulative or unreliable.

Surprisingly, players in Narrative 3 either did not reflect much on this topic or were completely unaware of any intended reasoning. Only one participant referenced the idea of the Realm being a form of hell. Others speculated the souls were there because they had signed a contract (relating to the Letter of Admission) or because the prison required workforce. While it is true that the protagonist in this narrative does not explicitly explain why the souls are in the Realm, it had been expected that the combination of environmental storytelling and genre conventions would still lead players to infer some form of punishment or atonement. This expectation was not met.

Narrative 4 players likewise showed confusion on this point and did not present any cohesive interpretation.

In summary, this topic emerged as the most ambiguous and confusing for players across all narratives, with the sole exception of Narrative 2. Unlike other narrative elements, the reason for the souls' presence in the Realm was left largely to interpretation in most versions, which may have hindered player comprehension. This could be attributed to the short length of the experience, which may have made it harder for players to form complex interpretations, or perhaps to the phrasing of the question itself ("Why are the souls in that realm?"), which might have been unclear. The only concrete conclusion that can be drawn is that Narrative 2, the only version to explicitly address the topic through in-game items such as the *Memory from the Past* and the *Letter of Admission*, was also the only one in which players consistently grasped the narrative rationale. When the protagonist directly acknowledges the subject and offers a clear opinion, it appears to leave a stronger impression on the player. In contrast, narratives where the protagonist either vaguely or entirely avoided naming the topic, only offering their feeling on the topic without mentioning it clearly, left players without a definitive interpretation.

7.2.3 Missing items and the impact on overall interpretation

There were several instances where players missed key items containing crucial information about certain narrative elements. The most notable case involved players who overlooked the *Pile of Weapons*, an item that provided essential context about the guards. As a result, those players had little to no opinion regarding the guards' role or behavior in the prison.

A closer look at the *Pile of Weapons* reveals that it frames the guards as non-aggressive figures who contribute to the smooth functioning of the prison, without actively harming the inmates. In Narrative 3, this same item is recontextualized: although the guards do not use force, their inaction is portrayed as a form of complicity, aligning with the protagonist's view that the prison is inherently oppressive. Thus, this item serves as a narrative node that can influence the player's interpretation, either reinforcing a more benign view of the prison or highlighting its underlying malice, depending on the narrative lens.

Interestingly, four out of the five players who chose to stay in the prison encountered the *Pile of Weapons*, suggesting a strong correlation between the discovery of this item and a more favorable opinion of the prison. While we cannot conclusively claim that missing the item would have altered a player's decision, the data supports the idea that access to specific narrative fragments significantly shapes player interpretation.

This finding highlights the importance of optional environmental storytelling. Unlike forced exposition, where all players are given the same information, games that allow players to freely explore and uncover lore create more individualized experiences. As a result, different players may walk away with varied understandings of the same world, shaped by the narrative pieces they encountered, or missed.

7.2.4 Norm-Disputing Protagonists

In this prototype, the narrative challenges what is typically expected from settings of this nature. A rehabilitation center disguised as a hellish prison is far from conventional. Despite this, the story conveyed through environmental and visual cues, such as the bleak atmosphere, desaturated colors, and oppressive architecture, strongly aligns with the more traditional depiction of a punitive afterlife.

Among the four protagonists, only the one in Narrative 2 directly recognizes and embraces the true nature of the realm as a place of rehabilitation. The other protagonists either adopt a more neutral stance or actively reject the idea, interpreting the world as a site of injustice or meaningless suffering.

From the analysis, we observed that players tended to align with the perspective of the protagonist they were given, especially in the more polarizing narratives. However, the protagonist from Narrative 2 produced an unexpected effect. Because their optimistic view clashed so strongly with the bleak world design and conventional storytelling cues, many players were left conflicted. This led to thought-provoking reactions, with several players questioning the protagonist's sanity or even suspecting that some narrative elements might be figments of their imagination.

A clear pattern emerged: when the protagonist's worldview diverges too sharply from the perspective the player forms through other storytelling elements and game design, the result is cognitive dissonance. This dissonance can lead players to reject the protagonist's interpretation and form their own, sometimes opposite, conclusions.

This is especially intriguing because, although the Narrative 2 protagonist holds the most accurate interpretation within the world's canon, players either aligned with them fully or rejected their views entirely. This reveals a powerful narrative dynamic, one in which a protagonist's perspective can be used to elicit divided audience reactions, depending on how it resonates or conflicts with other layers of storytelling.

Such a phenomenon can be intentionally used in narrative design to provoke critical engagement from players, encouraging them to reflect on the reliability of in-game perspectives and consider how bias, tone, and context shape their understanding of the story.

7.2.4.1 Open discovery vs. Single path

This prototype, although simple and not expansive, allows players to explore freely and discover the Exposition Journals organically, without being forced to interact with any specific one.

As a result, some players missed certain journals and consequently key parts of the story. This design choice strongly affects how players interpret the narrative, as the version of the story they piece together is entirely dependent on the items they encounter. The absence of some contextual elements can cause players to interpret other elements differently, or even misunderstand the intent of the story.

This is an interesting system to design around, as level layout and item placement can intentionally create different narrative experiences. By doing so, developers can encourage varied interpretations and even multiple sub-narratives depending on the player's route. However, this also means developers need to be cautious with how and where vital plot points are placed, ensuring that critical information isn't easily missed if narrative clarity is desired.

7.2.4.2 Player count on the silent protagonist narrative

Narrative 4 had a very low number of participants, which limited the scope of the analysis for that group. A more extensive playtest with better distribution across all narrative paths would be necessary to reveal patterns or conclusions that this test could not.

Still, from the limited data gathered, we can observe that players who experienced Narrative 4 generally held views similar to those who played Narrative 1. Based on this, we can tentatively conclude that both a neutral protagonist and a silent protagonist produce comparable effects in shaping the player's perception. In both cases, the lack of a strong guiding perspective leaves players to interpret the world more freely, resulting in a broader variety of perspectives and opinions.

7.2.4.3 Metadata

The metadata collected did not yield any significant or noteworthy patterns. This may be due to the small overall sample size of 18 participants, and especially because around half of them did not provide metadata at all.

Had the playtest included a significantly larger and more balanced participant pool, some interesting trends or correlations may have emerged. However, under the current conditions, the metadata analysis remains inconclusive and ultimately non-influential.

7.3 Conclusion

With this analysis complete, we can confirm that the nature of the protagonist in a game strongly influences how players interpret the game's story.

We observed that players tend to align their views with those of the protagonist, especially when the protagonist holds a strong and well-defined perspective on the world around them. When the protagonist adopts a more neutral stance, or remains silent altogether, players are more likely to construct their own interpretations, leading to a wider variety of narrative perspectives.

Additionally, when the protagonist's views align with the narrative conveyed through other tools, such as environmental storytelling, players are more likely to agree with their perspective. However, when the protagonist's outlook contradicts the conventional understanding of the world, players are often split between aligning with the character or rejecting their perspective entirely, sometimes even questioning the character's sanity or reliability.

Gameplay design elements, such as open discovery and non-linear exploration, also impact how the story is received. Players who miss key narrative items may form entirely different interpretations of the world. This shows how mechanics as simple as level layout and item placement can intentionally (or unintentionally) generate a variety of sub-narratives based on the player's path and choices.

Data Analysis

Overall, this study highlights the powerful role that the protagonist plays in shaping a player's perception of a game's story, and how that effect can be reinforced or challenged through narrative structure, gameplay design, and player agency.

Chapter 8

Conclusion and Developer Guidelines

Being done with the analysis, we will now explore what purpose it serves for developers writing game stories and developing interactive experiences. Specifically, we will look at how they can carefully shape the narrative to reach their intended audience in the way they envision, guiding players toward the intended perspective and emotional engagement.

8.1 Games are for Anyone, but Not for Everyone

The first thing to acknowledge is that every person is different. Players come from diverse backgrounds, hold distinct life experiences, and possess unique lenses through which they view and interpret the world around them.

This diversity is highly relevant when designing narrative games, as it is impossible to ensure that all players will interpret a story in exactly the same way or have an identical emotional experience. The way players perceive and react to a story will always be filtered through their own personal history and worldview.

Understanding this fact, and designing with it in mind, is crucial to avoid unrealistic expectations. Developers must accept that not every player will resonate with the narrative in the same way, even within a specific target audience. The reality is that it's only possible to gently carve a path that will attract players to follow, but there will always be strays who will pick their own direction.

In this chapter, we will discuss how developers can design narrative structures, protagonists, and gameplay experiences in a way that nudges players toward a particular understanding. There will always be outliers, and that's not only acceptable, but also part of the beauty of the human experience.

8.2 As a developer how can you shape a narrative to give the players a specific experience?

There are many components to a game that influence the narrative. We can separate them into the narrative elements (story, characters, exposition tools, environmental storytelling, etc.) and the gameplay elements

(level design, player abilities, etc.). All these elements come together to create unique experiences and all of them influence the game in different ways.

This work focused more on the influence of the protagonist and how their design affects the perspective of the player on the game's narrative. However, all game elements around it are also important, mixing with the protagonist in unique ways and shifting the narrative in unpredictable ways.

8.2.1 Design for the different levels of player agency in interpretation

A narrative can be designed to convey a specific message and guide the player toward a particular perspective, or it can be crafted as an ambiguous experience, encouraging the player to explore, question, and ultimately construct their own interpretation of the story.

The main component that determines this level of interpretative agency is the protagonist, the player's eye through which the world is viewed. Designing the narrative in an Insertion or Extraction style will change how the player will view the narrative, either living it through a character or experience it as themselves.

In the case of Limbo's Gaol, development in Chapter 6 and analysis in Chapter 7, we observed a direct correlation between the protagonist's personality and the way players interpreted the game's narrative. The conclusion was clear: the way a protagonist is written strongly influences the player's perception of the story.

Characterized protagonists in Extraction Narratives, especially those with strong, vocal opinions, tended to guide players toward a specific interpretation. In most cases, players aligned with the protagonist's worldview, resulting in a shared and consistent narrative experience. However, protagonists with neutral personalities or silent protagonists in Insertion Narratives had a weaker guiding effect and instead created a space for player interpretation. Protagonists with a neutral stance produced results that mirrored those of silent protagonists, where player opinions were more diverse and personal.

Depending on the narrative goals, developers must choose between an Insertion or Extraction Narrative and whether to implement a characterized or silent protagonist. If choosing a characterized protagonist, it is critical to decide what kind of personality and worldview the character should embody, as this will directly shape the player's understanding of the story.

8.2.1.1 The influence of different characterized personalities

Among characterized protagonists, different personality types produce varying outcomes.

During playtesting, protagonists with neutral attitudes had limited influence on player perception. Players projected their own interpretations onto the story, resulting in a wide variety of narrative readings.

Conversely, protagonists with strong, opinionated worldviews significantly shaped how players understood the story. When such a character's perspective aligned with the worldbuilding and environmental storytelling, that is, when the character's views matched the "**conventional**" reading of the setting, players overwhelmingly adopted that perspective.

However, when the protagonist held a contrarian or unconventional stance, the results became more nuanced. Some players followed the protagonist's view, while others rejected it entirely, questioning their reliability or even their sanity.

From these findings, we can conclude the following: if developers want players to adopt the protagonist's worldview, the character should align with the narrative of the other game's elements, setting and themes. Their views should reinforce what the player already senses from the world around them. Building

the game environmental storytelling, gameplay systems, like abilities, and other gameplay elements in such a way that they would fit and reinforce the current theme and story creating a cohesion that will help players side with the game's protagonist.

On the other hand, if developers want to challenge the player, encouraging critical thinking, uncertainty, or multiple perspectives, then designing a protagonist with a more unconventional or contradictory worldview can be a powerful tool. This approach generates friction between the player and the character, prompting reflection and interpretation rather than passive agreement. Designing the environmental storytelling, gameplay elements and developing the overall theme and setting in such a way that goes against the protagonist's perspective will create this dissociation that will grant thought-provoking essence, encouraging multiple perspectives of the same narrative.

8.2.1.2 Summary

When designing for player agency in narrative interpretation, developers should carefully consider the type of protagonist used and how it guides, or opens space for, player interpretation:

- **Full player agency:** Design an Insertion Narrative, using a silent protagonist or a very neutral characterized protagonist. Letting the players experience the story by their own perspective, forming their own interpretations with minimal narrative guidance.
- **Guided interpretation:**
 - **Player alignment with protagonist:** Design an Extraction Narrative, using a characterized protagonist whose views align with the story being told by other narrative elements. *Example:* In a bleak prison setting, the protagonist sees the world as oppressive and expresses a desire to escape.
 - **Thought-provoking and open to interpretation:** Design an Extraction Narrative, using characterized protagonist whose perspective challenges the conventional interpretation of the setting or theme. *Example:* In a seemingly hellish prison, the protagonist accepts their fate, believes in redemption, and views their stay as just and even positive.

8.3 As a Developer how can you design a game to be interpreted and experienced in multiple ways?

If you, as a developer, wish to create a game that naturally fosters multiple interpretations and invites thought-provoking experiences, you must design both the narrative and gameplay elements to avoid being overly linear or restrictive.

Regarding the protagonist and narrative structure, an *Insertion Narrative* is often the most suitable choice. This allows players to insert themselves into the character, either through a silent protagonist or a neutral characterized one. The key is to leave interpretative space for the player, space to perceive, project, and emotionally respond to the narrative from their own unique perspective.

The way narrative elements are delivered also plays a crucial role. A non-linear, discovery-based approach where story elements are scattered across the game world allows players to miss, skip, or stumble upon exposition in different orders or combinations. This leads to emergent, personalized interpretations of the same world, reinforcing the idea that each playthrough can uncover a distinct narrative experience.

8.3.1 Summary

To design a narrative that incentivizes multiple interpretations an Insertion Narrative is more suitable and gameplay design should be done in a way that the game doesn't restrict the player and instead lets them experience the narrative in a non-linear way.

8.4 Research Questions

Looking back at the research questions, we can now revisit them through the lens of the conclusions drawn from the analysis and development of the guidelines.

8.4.1 How can we structure the narrative and build the surrounding gameplay elements to shape the player's perspective of a narrative and deepen their bond and connection?

Narrative structure and gameplay elements act in tandem to guide player perception. By carefully choosing between an Insertion or Extraction narrative and aligning the narrative delivery with gameplay (such as environmental storytelling, level pacing, and mechanics that reinforce narrative tone), developers can influence how players relate to the world and protagonist.

For example, a linear, story-driven design with a strongly opinionated protagonist in an Extraction Narrative can cultivate emotional alignment and narrative immersion. Meanwhile, non-linear exploration and indirect storytelling, especially in Insertion Narratives, offer players space to emotionally engage in their own way.

Cohesion between the protagonist's worldview and the tone of narrative elements strengthens narrative consistency, while dissonance between them can invite critical thought and interpretive variation.

8.4.2 How does the characterization of the protagonist change how a player perceives a story?

The personality, voice, and perspective of the protagonist significantly shape the player's interpretation of the narrative.

Characterized protagonists with strong worldviews in Extraction Narratives guide the player toward specific interpretations, especially when their perspective aligns with the worldbuilding and game mechanics. Players tend to adopt the protagonist's outlook, resulting in a consistent narrative experience across different playthroughs.

On the other hand, protagonists with neutral, ambiguous, or silent personalities, especially within Insertion Narratives, invite a broader range of personal interpretations. These characters act as vessels for the player's own emotions and judgments, resulting in more diverse and individualized narrative readings.

Thus, the strength, clarity, and alignment of the protagonist's personality directly affect how much control the developer retains over the narrative message, and how much interpretive agency is granted to the player.

8.4.3 What gameplay elements give room for interpretation or give a more guided experience?

Gameplay elements play a critical role in shaping the player's interpretative freedom. Systems that encourage exploration, non-linear discovery, and player-driven interaction, such as scattered environmental clues, optional dialogues, and emergent narrative mechanics, tend to foster open-ended interpretation.

In contrast, gameplay systems that are tightly scripted, linear, or that heavily reinforce a singular tone or message serve to guide the player toward a more unified experience.

Additionally, the alignment between narrative mechanics and the protagonist's worldview is pivotal: when the mechanics echo the emotional state or thematic concerns of the character, the player's perception is more likely to align with the intended narrative arc.

8.4.4 How does a developer plan a narrative to instill a certain perspective on the player by the means of gameplay elements and narrative structure?

To instill a particular perspective, the developer must design a narrative experience in which all elements (characters, setting, dialogue, game mechanics, and environmental storytelling) work together toward the same thematic and emotional goal.

This involves choosing a narrative structure (e.g., Extraction with a characterized protagonist) that supports authorial intent, designing gameplay systems that reinforce the desired emotional tone, and ensuring that environmental storytelling and level design subtly echo the protagonist's view.

For instance, if the goal is to foster sympathy for a protagonist who feels trapped and hopeless, the game might use claustrophobic level design, dark lighting, oppressive sound design, and limited player agency to reinforce those emotions.

Conversely, to encourage the player to question the protagonist's reliability or morality, the developer can design gameplay systems that contradict or undermine the protagonist's statements, prompting players to think critically rather than accept the narrative at face value.

Ultimately, shaping the player's perspective is about creating narrative and mechanical cohesion, or deliberate dissonance, depending on whether the goal is alignment or reflection.

Chapter 9

This work and possible future others

This research focused on the design of protagonists, narrative structure, and adjacent gameplay elements, such as non-linear traversal and optional exposition tools and how they influence the player's perspective of the story.

We found that the design of the protagonist and their personality strongly affects the perspective of the players on the narrative. We concluded that non-linear gameplay design promotes multiple interpretations of the same narrative and the creation of sub-narratives.

Many other narrative components and gameplay design also influence interpretation, but due to the scope limitations of this research, these are the conclusions drawn and guidelines created based on the narrative and gameplay parameters explored in the prototype and grounded in the literature reviewed.

This project is but a glimpse into the ways players perceive and internalize narrative through play. There is still a vast landscape of untapped research. Future studies could examine deeper narrative structures from literature, such as the *Hero's Journey*, *Kishōtenketsu* or philosophy, and explore how these affect perception in an interactive medium. Investigating environmental storytelling more thoroughly, and how the design of game worlds influences the emotional and interpretive stance of players, would also be valuable. Further exploration could include how different exposition tools, like in-world journals, cutscenes, or dialogue systems, can be designed to subtly (or overtly) steer perception. Likewise, gameplay elements such as level design, player abilities, or enemy aesthetics can drastically shape narrative tone. For instance, surreal enemy design might psychologically prime players to interpret the world as distorted or symbolic, impacting their narrative expectations and immersion.

There is a wide range of adjacent research paths, specially ones that would go more into the specifics, that could deepen our understanding of how players construct narrative meaning in games.

And with that, this work reaches its conclusion, offering a new perspective on the player's perspective.

This work and possible future others

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Appendix A

Limbo's Gaol project material

A.1 Play Limbo's Gaol

- **Project Link:** <https://miguelrsgoncalves.com/limbo-gaol>
- **Itch.io Link:** <https://miguelrsgoncalves.itch.io/limbos-gaol>

Limbo's Gaol can be played by downloading the game (Windows only) or playing directly on my personal Itch.io page. If the link no longer works due to any reason, search Limbo's Gaol on Itch.io.

I highly recommend playing the downloadable version, as it has better visuals as well as better loading times. The web export has some bugs too.

More information can be found on the project's page on my personal website.

Limbo's Gaol project material

Appendix B

Analysis data gathering tools

- **Forms Link:** <https://forms.gle/oT6b2iNvhxPFWs1C9>

The form used for data gathering can be found in the link above.

For the ease of use and easy distribution I used Google Forms as the tool for the form creation. The form contained the following questions:

- Metadata:
 - Age
 - * < 18
 - * 18–24
 - * 25–34
 - * 45–54
 - * 55+
 - Gender
 - * Woman
 - * Man
 - * Non-Binary
 - * Other
 - How often do you play video games? (0 to 10)
 - How many years have you been playing games?
 - * < 1
 - * 1–5
 - * 6–10
 - * 10+
 - How familiar are you with narrative driven games? (0 to 10)
 - When engaging with stories (books, films, games), what impacts you the most? (Multiple Choice)
 - * Story's Message

Analysis data gathering tools

- * Plot
- * Characters
- * World Building
- * Theme / Setting
- * Visuals or Style
- * Music / Sound Design
- Pre-Form Data:
 - What Narrative did you play?
 - * Narrative 1 (Blue ghost with voice lines)
 - * Narrative 2 (Green ghost with voice lines)
 - * Narrative 3 (Red Pink ghost with voice lines)
 - * Narrative 4 (Blue ghost no voice lines)
 - What items did you interact with? (Multiple Choice)
 - * Tray of Food
 - * Shackles
 - * Crack of Doom (Fissure in center of the world)
 - * Memory from the Past
 - * Letter of Admission
 - * Portal Instructions
 - * Pile of Weapons
 - * Pile of Beds
 - * Balloons
 - * Clock
 - * Message from Boss
 - * Party Poster
- Qualitative Narrative Feedback (Open ended questions):
 - What is your view on the realm?
 - What is your view on the souls and their life there?
 - What is your view on the guards?
 - What is your view on the Boss?
 - Why are the souls in that realm?
 - What ending did you choose?
 - * Stay
 - * Escape
 - Why did you make the choice you made?