

# THE IMPACT OF GAMING ON WELL-BEING AND COPING AMONG WOMEN



*(Journey, 2012)*

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Master's thesis Intercultural Communication

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June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2024

“The game took my hand and led me from a place of all consuming grief to a place where I could relive memories with happiness.”

Anonymous (Reddit, 2023)

## Foreword

257 days ago, out of curiosity, I asked a question on a female gaming community on Reddit about how video games have positively impacted their lives. As I read through the open, vulnerable, and deeply brave responses about how video games helped people during the most difficult times in their lives, my heart was warmed, and my drive was ignited. This experience led me to write this thesis, which aims to amplify these powerful stories. This thesis has become a part of me; it reflects my passion and hard work, but I could not have completed it without the help of others. First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Christopher Jenks, who gave me the space to pursue my passion and provided invaluable guidance throughout this process. My dear grandmother, has been a rock during my moments of existential doubt, sharing her wisdom and keeping her cool. To anyone else who has contributed, I am deeply grateful. And most importantly, all the brave individuals who shared their experiences with me, a complete stranger, and contributed their stories to this work, I honor and thank you.

I hope you find as much pleasure in reading this thesis as I did in writing it, and that these stories touch you as profoundly as those did me 257 days ago.

Rosa Lynn van den Hoven

Amsterdam, 27<sup>th</sup> June 2024

## Abstract

With over 3.26 billion players globally, video games are more than just entertainment; they are powerful mediums shaping how individuals learn, behave, and connect in today's world. Despite the growing interest in exploring positive gaming experiences and their potential to improve well-being, the majority of studies have primarily focused on male gamers, video game addiction, violent games, and aggression, often highlighting the negative impacts on mental health. This study delves into the often-overlooked perspectives of female gamers, who comprise approximately half the gaming population. Using a narrative analysis in female gaming communities and surveys, this research builds on the limited research exploring how women perceive the positive impact of video games on their well-being during difficult life experiences.

The findings reveal that all elements contributing to well-being, according to Seligman's (2011) PERMA model—positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment—can be facilitated and promoted by playing video games. Additionally, games can offer emotional fulfillment and management, respite and relief, personal growth, a sense of belonging, and a source of happiness in various difficult life experiences such as depression, anxiety, stress, and self-esteem issues.

These insights contribute to understanding the discursive resources used by female gamers in a culture dominated by male narratives and discourses. They also provide insights into creating supportive, inclusive, and empowering environments both in games and within gaming communities, enabling better utilization of gaming's potential to positively impact women's lives.

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## Chapter 1 | Introduction

We live in a generation more aware of mental health and well-being than ever before. As the number of people reporting mental health issues continues to rise, there is a growing search to find meaning in our lives and alleviate our suffering (Park et al., 2023).

In this digital age, entertainment forms such as video games are vastly popular, with approximately 3.26 billion players worldwide in 2023, which accounts for around 41% of the global population. Albert Einstein once noted, “One of the most powerful motives that attracts people to science and art is the longing to escape everyday life.” This longing to escape is a central draw of video games, offering a sanctuary from the complexities of life, allowing us to build new structures, create new meanings, and be whoever or whatever we want to be. Video games are more than just entertainment; they are powerful mediums that center players within narratives, shaping how individuals learn, behave, and connect in today's world. Since digital games became widely available in the 1980s, they have been received with skepticism by the public and scholars, who often emphasize the negative consequences of playing video games (Ensslin, 2012). However, in the last decade, increasing research has focused on the positive impacts of gaming, specifically the potential to improve well-being (Halbrook et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2014).

Research exploring the potential positive outcomes of playing video games has identified connections between gaming and positive emotions experienced by players (Ryan et al., 2006; Kutner & Olson, 2008; Wang et al., 2008; Przybylski et al., 2009a; Allahverdipour et al., 2010, as cited in Jones et al., 2014). Not only have positive emotions in relation to gaming been found, but gaming has also been identified as a way of effective coping during difficult life experiences. Iacovides and Mekler (2019) found that gaming during difficult life experiences can offer respite from stress, help deal with feelings, foster social interactions, facilitate personal growth, and provide a lifeline in existential doubt.

Despite this growing interest in exploring positive gaming experiences, the majority of studies have primarily focused on male gamers, video game addiction, violent games, and aggression, often highlighting the negative impacts on mental health (Kuss et al., 2022). Recognizing that video games are among the most influential forms of entertainment in modern society and culture (Jones, 2008), it becomes evident that there is a need to fill this research gap and explore their potential impact on well-being, particularly during difficult life experiences of players. More specifically, there is a need to examine the often-overlooked perspectives of women.

Nearly half of all gamers are women, highlighting their significant role in gaming (Newzoo, 2024). Nevertheless, women face challenges in the male-dominated gaming industry and culture. Shaw (2015) characterizes game culture as 'masculine, heterosexual, and white,' with women often facing objectification in video games and harassment within the gaming community. Studies show that women are underrepresented in video games, both visually and in terms of the frequency of references to female characters (Heritage, 2019). Male characters more often occupy positions of power and engage in violence, while women are frequently depicted as passive, victims, or in distress (Heritage, 2019).

Additionally, female characters are often depicted as hypersexualized, and male characters as hypermasculine (Chang, 2015). The game industry has also been criticized for its lack of diversity and inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters, with heteronormativity seen as the standard. People of color are often underrepresented and portrayed in stereotypical or negative ways in video games (Leonard, 2003). Characters of color are frequently depicted as background characters, criminals, or athletes and characterized by low intelligence or aggressive behavior, while white male characters dominate (Shaw, 2015).

Various advocacy groups have expressed concern about the lack of representation in the gaming industry, with movements like; 'Gamergate' addressing online misogyny, 'Black Lives Matter' and fan campaigns like 'I Need Diverse Games' (Malkowski et al., 2017). Recently, there

have been more efforts to promote diversity and inclusion in video games, with more women, non-binary characters, and stories appearing in games (Newzoo, 2024). Notable examples include Ellie in *The Last of Us*, Aloy in *Horizon Zero Dawn*, V in *Cyberpunk 2077*, Alyx Vance in *Half-Life, and Alyx* and Saga Anderson in *Alan Wake 2* (Newzoo, 2024). While these developments reflect improvements in diversity and representation, much work remains to be done (Newzoo, 2024). Research has shown that meaningful representation across all genders, identities, ethnicities, nationalities, and sexualities can significantly impact players' well-being and gaming experiences (Newzoo, 2024; Sawyer, 2019).

This study focuses on how women, including those who identify as women, trans women, or non-binary, cope with difficult life experiences through video games and the impact this has on their well-being. Understanding the female gaming experience is crucial in creating video games, especially in fostering supportive and empowering gaming experiences. These insights not only create more awareness and appreciation for the female demographic, but delving deeper into women's gaming experiences also fosters a more diverse and inclusive gaming culture overall. To this end, the central research question guiding this study is:

**‘How do women perceive the positive impact of video games on their well-being during difficult life experiences?’**

To answer the central question, it is divided into two sub-questions, which are as follows:

*RQ1:* How do women on Reddit discursively make sense of how gaming has positively impacted their well-being?

*RQ2:* What psychological themes emerge when women reflect on how games positively impact their lives during difficult life experiences?



It is important to note that while this research focuses on positive gaming experiences, it does not represent all gaming experiences. As previously mentioned, negative experiences exist within the gaming space, especially for marginalized groups such as women, the LGBTQ+ community, and people of color, who often face harassment, exclusion, and violence. Additionally, there are well-documented adverse effects on mental health, such as addiction. Since these issues have often been the primary focus within the research field and are also a general perception of the gaming space, the potential positive impact of gaming is frequently overlooked. By understanding and addressing both positive and negative experiences, we can strive for more supportive and inclusive gaming environments for all players.

## Chapter 2 | Literature review

This chapter explores the existing literature on how video games can positively impact well-being. It starts with an introduction to the concept of well-being, followed by an exploration of the approaches and elements that contribute to well-being. The last section delves into what difficult life experiences mean and how they are expressed in narratives.

### 2.1 Well-being and Gaming

Well-being is a fundamental concept of positive psychology. Ryan and Deci (2001) define it as “optimal psychological functioning and experience” (p. 142). Achieving high levels of well-being allows individuals to flourish and reach their highest potential.

Research on well-being has been approached from two perspectives: the hedonic approach and the eudaimonic approach. The hedonic approach views well-being as happiness derived from pleasure and the avoidance of pain (Ryan & Deci, 2001). In contrast, the eudaimonic approach views well-being as realizing one's potential and finding meaning and purpose in life (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Seligman's (2011) research on positive psychology lays a foundation for understanding the concept of well-being; he outlines five key elements that contribute to overall well-being and flourishing called PERMA: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. According to Seligman, none of these elements individually define well-being, but each contributes to it significantly.

The following sections explore all elements contributing to well-being and how they relate to video games. Within the context of this paper, video games refer to digital games played on consoles (e.g., Microsoft Xbox, Sony PlayStation, Nintendo Switch), personal computers, tablets, and mobile devices.

### *2.1.1 Gaming and Positive emotions: Hedonic consumption*

Positive emotions, such as happiness, warmth, affection, relaxation, and excitement (Seligman, 2011), play a crucial role in studying well-being. These feelings are often associated with hedonism, which focuses on the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Hedonism, as an approach to well-being, has been expressed in various forms but is generally perceived as the experience of pleasure within the context of well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). In gaming, the hedonic experience can be understood through the lens of hedonic consumption.

Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) conducted research on hedonic consumption, defining it as follows: “Hedonic consumption designates those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multisensory, fantasy, and emotive aspects of one's experience with products” (p. 92). These experiences encompass (1) multisensory aspects related to sensory inputs—e.g., tastes, sounds, scents, visuals, and tactile impressions; (2) fantasy elements—related to imagining or projecting things such as imagination, escapism, and role projection; (3) emotive aspects—e.g., feelings such as joy, playfulness, fun, arousal, and enjoyment (Hollebeek et al., 2022). Research on hedonic experiences in relation to video games by Abbasi et al. (2017) has identified video games as a “playful consumption experience,” defined as “an intrinsically motivating, active, and self-based video game playing behavior that is executed for a player’s own sake and pleasure, which in turn involves a player getting playful hedonic experiences (feelings, sensory, and fantasy)” (p. 292). These hedonic experiences can be satisfied through game-related factors, such as the game's storyline, visual appeal, competitive aspects, mental stimulation, and/or social interactions (Hollebeek et al., 2022).

### *2.1.2 Gaming and Engagement: Flow, healthy escapism and coping*

Engagement refers to being emotionally involved or committed to an interest. Being positively engaged is linked to greater well-being and connectedness with others (Kelly, 2019). Engagement is a pathway to achieving a state of flow, a mental state first identified and researched by Mihaly

Csikszentmihalyi (2014). He describes flow as a deeply enjoyable experience where a person is fully immersed in a task. People experiencing this flow state reportedly lose their sense of time, feel more energetic, and become highly motivated, productive, and creative. Csikszentmihalyi (2014) states: “It's a feeling where action and awareness merge in a focused state. In a flow, a person loses self-consciousness; the vulnerable ego disappears” (p. 24).

Playing video games can help individuals achieve a state of flow, leading to mindfulness by making them feel relaxed, focused, happier, less stressed, and more understanding of others (Kelly, 2019).

Another concept related to engagement that is often studied in the gaming field is 'Escapism.' This concept often carries a negative connotation due to its frequent association with problematic and excessive gaming (Kosa & Uysal, 2020). However, one major factor driving individuals towards video games is their ability to escape from their everyday lives because it enables players to interact within a virtual world directly. This way of interacting is also known as 'active escapism.' Kuo et al. (2016) describes this phenomenon as a distinctive form of consumption in which consumers consciously engage in fantasy and role-play to cope. This stands in contrast to passive forms of escapism, in which consumers only act as observers, such as when watching TV (Kuo et al., 2016).

Escapism can have both negative and positive consequences. Specifically, moderate game use has potential health benefits. Kosa and Uysal (2020) explored these benefits in the context of video games, finding that gaming can help regulate emotions, manage mood, and aid in coping and recovery. Their findings suggest that mental disengagement through gaming can help reduce stress levels after demanding activities like work or school. Additionally, escapism serves as a strategy for managing mood, with individuals often turning to gaming to avoid negative emotional states and cultivate positive ones.

Zillmann (1988) proposed the 'mood management theory,' suggesting that consuming entertainment media can effectively help regulate negative emotions and restore balance,

ultimately increasing well-being. Kosa and Uysal (2020) also noted that escapism within games can aid in regulating emotions. For instance, games that explore the human experience, including themes like human suffering, can help gamers better understand their feelings. According to their research, this understanding can change perspectives and help regulate emotions.

For certain players, escapism offers a constructive coping mechanism. Kosa and Uysal (2020) define coping as: “The efforts spent for minimizing problems and stress” (p. 63). They mention three different types of coping: the first type of coping is problem-focused, where the person addresses the issue directly by taking action to solve it, like getting organized, managing time, or seeking active support; the second type is emotion-focused coping, which involves managing feelings related to the problem, often through distractions, relaxation, or talking to someone; the third and last type, avoidance-focused coping, involves completely avoiding the problem and refusing to engage with it. Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) have also identified meaning-focused coping, where strategies are used to alter the meaning of the situation to be more consistent with one's personal beliefs and goals. Video games are often associated with avoidance-focused coping, where players dive into a game to forget or ignore what is going on in their lives. This type often parallels addiction issues and excessive use. However, other coping strategies can also be observed in gaming. While people use various methods to cope with stress, such as watching TV, research has shown that actively participating in video games can relieve stress by empowering players and immersing them in fantasy worlds, enhancing their sense of presence (Kuo et al., 2016).

### *2.1.3 Gaming and Relationships: Communities of practice and social capital*

Relationships are essential to our well-being, reflecting the perspective that we are inherently social creatures (Seligman, 2011). Playing video games can facilitate interaction between players and observers, making them highly social. Gaming has emerged as a social platform, whether online, connecting with individuals worldwide or offline, and interacting with in-game characters.

The theory of communities of practice offers a valuable lens for understanding interactions within the gaming space (Jasny, 2023). According to this theory, these communities are formed around three elements, all of which are present in gaming communities: a shared domain of interest (such as gaming itself or specific games), mutual engagement (interactions among players online or through gaming forums/communities), and a shared practice (gaming culture, which includes specific language, norms, symbols, and rituals evolving from gaming experiences).

Online platforms like Reddit host subreddits catering to various interests within gaming, ranging from broad to highly specific topics. Users can follow and interact on subreddits dedicated to general gaming, female gamers, or specific games they play. Since the gaming space remains predominantly male-dominated, inclusive spaces for women, LGBTQ+ members, and other minority groups on these platforms are important. They provide essential environments for connection, sharing personal stories, and fostering solidarity and emotional support, mainly when dealing with social and personal challenges (Rodriguez, 2016).

Research has explored the social effects of playing video games, particularly its impact on the formation of social capital (e.g., Reer & Krämer, 2014; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006; Trepte et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2006, as cited in Reer & Quandt, 2019). Social capital is the value found in people's connections and trust, such as having a network of support from friends, family, and others (Reer & Krämer, 2014). There are two types of social capital: bridging and bonding. Bridging social capital relies on casual connections for helpful information, while bonding social capital is about close relationships that offer emotional and practical support (Reer & Krämer, 2014). Games have the potential to facilitate both bridging and bonding (Ni et al., 2023). Interactions with strangers in games typically foster bridging social capital, while communication with established friends bolsters bonding social capital (Ni et al., 2023).

When discussing the social dimensions of digital games, it is important to note that social experiences can significantly vary based on factors like the specific game, playstyle, and players'

attitudes. For instance, *League of Legends*, a widely played online multiplayer game, is unfortunately infamous for its toxic community, characterized by verbal abuse and unsportsmanlike conduct. Engaging in such environments can result in negative social experiences for players. On the other hand, games like *Stardew Valley*, a farm management simulation known for its calming world and welcoming community, allow for players to cooperate and connect. This underscores that the social impact of games depends on the type of game and community, and while positive experiences can enhance social connections, negative ones can detract from them.

#### *2.1.4 Gaming and Meaning: Eudaimonia and appreciation*

According to Seligman (2011), meaning in life arises from activities that contribute to a greater cause, aligning with the eudaimonic approach to well-being. According to this approach, true happiness is reached through finding meaning, fulfilling one's potential, and defining well-being by the extent to which an individual fully functions (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Beyond the fun and pleasurable experiences, games can also satisfy eudaimonic needs. Oliver et al. (2016) introduced the concept of “appreciation,” which differs from enjoyment as it involves a greater sense of meaning, emotional involvement, and deeper reflection on an experience. Appreciation is associated with elements like rich narratives, character connections, and social interactions that fulfill needs for relatedness (Oliver et al., 2016).

Bartsch and Oliver (2016, p. 89) state that in the long run, “the consumption of meaningful entertainment and the experience of appreciation can ‘strengthen individuals’ general ability to confront and cope with negative experiences, thus contributing to emotional stability and eudaimonic well-being.” In their research on video games as meaningful entertainment experiences, Oliver et al. (2016) found that enjoyment was closely linked to aspects of gameplay and fulfilling the desire for competency and autonomy. In contrast, appreciation was predominantly connected to storytelling elements and fulfilling the desire for insight and connection with others (relatedness), particularly with in-game characters. The ability for players

to connect with in-game characters and view them as significant to their own experiences has been suggested as a fundamental aspect of eudaimonic gaming experiences, facilitating personal growth and self-reflection (Possler et al., 2023).

#### *2.1.5 Gaming and Accomplishment: Self-determination*

Accomplishment refers to our pursuit of achievement, competence, success, and mastery in our lives (Seligman, 2011). Accomplishment, or self-realization, is also associated with the eudaimonic approach to well-being. A theory that centers around eudaimonia is Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which suggests that the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs – competence (feeling capable), autonomy (being in control of your actions), and relatedness (having meaningful relationships) – is crucial for intrinsic motivation and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

In the context of gaming, research has shown that video games can significantly meet these three needs, driving player motivation and enjoyment (Lee et al., 2023; Ryan et al., 2006; C. Jones et al., 2014). For instance, games can enhance competence by enabling players to learn and excel in different skills. They provide autonomy by giving players control, such as allowing them to create their avatars and choose which missions to undertake and which areas of the virtual world to explore. Additionally, games foster relatedness by facilitating social connections and interactions among players. According to the research by Kaya et al. (2023) on “Online Gaming Addiction and Basic Psychological Needs among Adolescents,” feeling responsible and finding meaning in life play a role in how basic psychological needs related to online gaming addiction. The study suggests that when individuals lack these feelings, they are more likely to experience gaming addiction. This emphasizes the importance of addressing players' psychological needs to prevent gaming addiction.



## 2.2 Difficult life experiences and Narrative identity

This study examines how gaming can positively influence the well-being of women during difficult life experiences. These difficult life experiences, as conceptualized by Herron et al. (2016, p. 1), refer to “life events and life transitions which render individuals in a vulnerable state.” These life events can include a spectrum of experiences, including struggles with mental health issues, coping with physical disabilities, enduring abuse in relationships, or facing larger-scale events such as pandemics.

When people share difficult life experiences with others, they are often constructed into personal stories, mentioning specific periods in their lives and what those experiences mean to them. According to Singer (2004), this entails creating and internalizing an evolving and cohesive life story, known as narrative identity. McAdams and McLean (2013) describe that through narrative identity, “people convey to themselves and to others who they are now, how they came to be, and where they think their lives may be going in the future” (p. 233). In her work on narrative identity processing of difficult life experiences, Pals (2006) suggests that adults who emerge strengthened or enhanced from difficult life experiences often engage in a two-step process: in the first step, the individual reflects deeply on the negative experience, considering how it felt, why it happened, its potential outcomes, and its significance in their life story; in the second step, they express a commitment to finding a positive resolution to the event. Studies show that the first step is linked to personal growth, while the second is associated with happiness. People often find valuable lessons and understanding when they talk about their difficult life experiences (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

In the context of games, specifically role-playing games (RPGs), this process of narrative identity can be enhanced (Bowman, 2024). RPGs are games where players take on the roles of characters and make decisions that shape the story and gameplay (Computer Hope, 2022).

According to Bowman (2024), in her article “Finding the Self in Role-Playing Games: Weaving Myth, Narrative, and Identity,” RPGs provide a unique platform for individuals to

explore and reconstruct their narratives in a safe and imaginative environment. These games enable players to engage with their own life stories and difficult experiences co-creatively and spontaneously, offering new perspectives and potential resolutions. According to her article, games can bring players five players the opportunity to (1) embark on and subvert a hero's journey, (2) reflect on their experiences by engaging with familiar stories and adding their own twists, (3) develop personal stories shaped by the player's own consciousness through game design, (4) explore personal and social identities through various roles they can play (Bowman, 2024). This exploration can lead to greater self-understanding and empathy for diverse perspectives. This underscores that during difficult life experiences, players in RPGs can potentially find new ways to process and understand their personal experiences and narratives, which can ultimately foster personal growth and well-being.

## Chapter 3 | Methodology

This study focuses on understanding how women perceive the positive impact of video games on their well-being during difficult life experiences. This focus will be investigated by using a mixed methods approach consisting of a narrative analysis and a survey study.

### 3.1 Narrative Analysis on Reddit

The narrative analysis focuses on answering the first sub-question: ‘How do women on Reddit discursively make sense of how gaming has positively impacted their well-being?’

The online discussion groups on Reddit serve as archives of personal narratives that are often internalized and evolving life stories (Singer, 2004). This platform was chosen to collect stories since it is anonymous, providing a safe space for people to express themselves openly.

A narrative analysis approach has been chosen to get an understanding of how women construct stories on the online platform Reddit about how gaming has impacted them. This study draws on Bamberg's (2012) definition of narrative analysis, which examines storytelling's structure, content, and function to convey and understand meaningful experiences.

#### *3.1.1 Data collection: Subreddit r/GirlGamers*

The data and stories are collected from the subreddit r/GirlGamers, the biggest Reddit community exclusively for women in gaming. Important to note is that the subreddit is open to the public; people of all genders and identities are welcome to join and read posts and comments. This community currently has 246k members and is part of Reddit's largest gaming communities by active users. As described in the r/GirlGamers biography, this is a safe space for women to hang out, talk about gaming, and play together (R/GirlGamers, n.d.). There is room for discussion on other topics around geek culture and experiences that occur in the gaming realm as a result of their gender (R/GirlGamers, n.d.). The posts within the r/GirlGamers subreddit must

follow the following rules: (1) be civil, keep it on-topic, and follow 'Reddiquette,' (2) No posts from men targeting women, (3) No posts that belong in weekly mega threads, (4) Please label triggering content, (5) Battle station posts only on weekends, (6) Game developers – contact mods first, (7) Researcher – Currently not accepting requests, (8) Giveaway guidelines, and (9) Use spoiler warnings (R/GirlGamers, n.d.).

In collecting these Reddit comments, several guidelines were followed, and specific keywords were used to search for threads in the discussions, namely: “Impact of gaming,”; “Positive impact games,”; “Impact on well-being,” and “Gaming improved life.” Using these keywords, three threads were identified from which comments were collected: “How have video games positively impacted your life?”, “How have video games improved your life?” and “Are there any games that helped you with self-love, mindfulness, or generally helped your mental health in any way?” These threads feature numerous comments from women sharing life stories on how games have positively impacted them. Although the comments do not explicitly ask for it, they almost always mention a difficult life experience.

The top comments (with the most likes) in these threads were selected for analysis, as these comments resonated most with the audience. In selecting comments, several criteria for consistency were applied: (1) They must be at least 50 characters long, (2) They should mention a difficult life event, (3) Each comment must have a different author, (4) They should reference the name or genre of a video game, (5) The stories should be told in first person since it has to be something that happened to the writer.

The difficult life experiences mentioned in the collected stories on the subreddit r/GirlGamers varied, falling into five categories: the largest group consisted of individuals dealing with mental health challenges, ranging from severe depression and suicidal thoughts to anxiety or panic disorders (n=9); the second largest group faced social challenges and isolation, with participants feeling lonely and unable to find social connections in their environments (n=6); following that were issues related to self-esteem and identity, where participants struggled with

low self-esteem or gender/sexual identity confusion (n=6); next came traumatic events and abuse, including those dealing with the loss of a loved one or a difficult childhood (n=4); lastly, there were individuals with physical health challenges (n=2).

### 3.1.2 Research design

McAdams and McLean (2013) provided a ‘Life-Story Construct’ framework to analyze difficult life stories, incorporating seven codes: Agency, Communication, Redemption, Contamination, Meaning-making, Exploratory narrative processing, and Coherent positive resolution. This framework offers a lens to analyze narratives and gain deeper insights into how players construct and make sense of challenging life events. It can be particularly useful in identifying aspects of well-being and personal growth within these narratives, which is the focal point of this research. Additionally, to examine mental well-being, Seligman's (2011) PERMA model will be employed, comprising positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and purpose, and accomplishment as guiding themes. I have developed a framework (Figure 1) that integrates these two models, acknowledging overlapping themes. The following framework outlines these themes and provides examples of their identification within stories:

| McAdams and McLean's Life-Story Construct (2013, p. 234) |     |   |   |
|--|-----|---|---|
| Theme  | Tag | Definition  | An example of a high score  |
| Agency<br>(Accomplishment-<br>PERMA)                     | AG  | This refers to how someone can shape their lives or impact others. Frequently, by showcasing skills, gaining confidence, accomplishing goals, or attaining a particular social standing | “I challenge myself to the limit academically, physically, and on my job. Since that time [of my divorce], I have accomplished virtually any goal I set for myself. ” |

|  |     |  |   |
|--|-----|--|---|
|  |     |  |   |
| Communication<br>(Relationships-<br>PERMA) | REL | The extent to which someone shows interpersonal bonds, whether through love, friendship or within a larger group. The narrative focuses on feelings of closeness, concern, and a sense of belonging. | “I was warm, surrounded by friends and positive regard that night. I felt unconditionally loved.”                                   |
| Redemption                                 | RED | Occurs where a negative situation results in a positive outcome. The negative is 'redeemed' by the good that follows.  | The narrator describes the death of her father as reinvigorating closer emotional ties to her other family members.                 |
| Contamination                              | NE  | Negative emotions overshadow the positive.   | The narrator describes how they fell into a depression when their father died.  |
| Meaning Making                             | LEA | This reflects how much someone learns from an experience; this can vary from no meaning (low score) to a concrete lesson (high score).   | "It really made me go through and relook at my memories and see how there are so many things behind a situation that you never see. |

|  |     |   |  |
|--|-----|---|--|
|  |     |   | Things are not always as they seem.”   |
| Exploratory<br>Narrative<br>Processing | DEV | This measures the extent of self-exploration as expressed in the story.<br><br>A high score suggests deep self-development and understanding. | "I knew I reached an emotional bottom that year . . . but I began making a stable life again, as a more stable independent person . . . it was a period full of pain, experimentation, and growth, but in retrospect, it was necessary for me to become anything like the woman I am today." |
| Coherent Positive<br>Resolution        | CPR | Refers to how well the story’s conflicts are resolved, leading to a positive and satisfying ending.   | “After many years, I finally came to forgive my brother for what he did. I now accept his faults, and, as a result, I think he and I have grown closer.”   |
| Seligman's PERMA model (2011)          |     |   |  |
| Positive emotion                       | PE  | Feelings like happiness, warmth, affection, relaxation, and excitement.   | “Since I've encountered this, my negative emotions don't overrule my life anymore,   |

|                     |     |   |   |
|---------------------|-----|---|---|
|                     |     |   | and I generally feel a lot happier."  |
| Engagement          | ESC | Engagement refers to the state of flow, escapism, or immersion.   | "I felt so deeply immersed in the task that I forgot the world around me."  |
| Meaning and purpose | MP  | Meaning refers to feeling a sense of purpose and fulfillment in life; this often arises from activities that contribute to the greater whole. | "I feel like I have finally found a sense of direction in my life, in which I also can positively contribute to help others." |

Figure 1 Framework McAdams and McLean (2013) and Seligman's PERMA model (2011)

3.1.3 Data analysis

Each story was organized into a table and divided into parts. Each part was coded and linked to various themes from the framework. After coding all stories individually, I categorized them into themes and compiled them into a coding overview table. Below, I present an example of the analysis of two comments in this overview (see Figure 2). This provided an overview of the different codes, allowing connections to be made between, for example, the difficult life experiences they mentioned, the game they mentioned, including its genre and mode; single player (S) vs. multiplayer (M), the game element that helped them, and the positive (end) result and impact on their well-being. This was an iterative process, with constant reference to the theoretical framework during interpretation. This facilitated the discovery of patterns and differences in how female gamers understand the impact of playing games on their well-being during difficult life experiences.



| Nr. | Game                     | Genre/<br>mode | Difficult life<br>experience | Game<br>element                                    | Impact on well-<br>being  | Positive (end)<br>result  |
|-----|--------------------------|----------------|------------------------------|--|---|---|
| 1   | Dragon<br>Age<br>Origins | RPG<br>(S)     | Depression                   | Anticipation<br>(game<br>release)                  | Joy (PE)<br>Purpose (MP)<br>Hope (MP)<br>Motivation (AG)<br>Coping (DEV)<br>Excitement (PE) | Coping with<br>depression,<br>Providing<br>enjoyment,<br>Improve<br>relationships |
|     |                          |                |                              | Storytelling,<br>Characters                        | Understanding<br>relationships (LEA)<br>Setting boundaries<br>(DEV)                         | Personal<br>growth,<br>Improve<br>relationships                                   |
| 2   | Persona<br>5             | RPG<br>(S)     | Depression                   | Anticipation<br>(game<br>release),<br>Storytelling | Hope (MP)<br>Purpose (MP)<br>Joy (PE)<br>Excitement (PE)                                    | Recovery<br>depression,<br>Managing<br>depression                                 |

Figure 2 Coding table narrative analysis - C1 & C2

## 3.2 Survey study

The survey study focuses on answering the second sub-question: ‘What psychological themes emerge when women reflect on how games positively impact their lives during difficult life experiences?’

Given the topic's sensitivity, asking individuals to reflect on how games helped them during difficult life experiences, a survey study was chosen instead of interviews. This approach ensures anonymity, reducing the intrusiveness of the research. Participants can complete the survey at their convenience, in their chosen comfortable environment, allowing them to take their time to think and reflect on the questions. The survey includes open-ended and closed-ended questions.

### 3.2.1 Participants

Participants were recruited from a diverse range of gaming subreddits, such as r/GFD, r/Cozygames, r/StardewValley, r/Patientgamers, r/Truegaming, and others, as well as from Discord channels like @Girlgamers, @Womaningames, and @WIGI. Additionally, participants were recruited from personal networks. The inclusion criteria specified individuals aged 18 years or older who are regular video game players. The analysis focuses on responses from participants identifying as women, non-binary, and trans women. There were 132 responses, of which 79 self-identified as women, 32 as men, 14 as non-binary, two as trans women, 2 as trans men, and 2 as other.

The following data is based solely on the 97 responses from individuals identifying as women, trans women, and non-binary. The age groups ranged from 18 to 54 years old, with the range of 24-35 being the most represented (n=53), followed by 18-24 (n=20), and 35-44 (n=17). Regarding the platforms participants played on, they were allowed to select multiple answers. The largest group played on PC (n=83), followed by Nintendo Switch (n=60), and then Mobile (n=53). The preferred gaming genres varied; participants were allowed to select multiple answers.

Role-playing games were the most popular genre (n=74), followed by Action/Adventure (n=61), and then Casual (n=59). Regarding how often participants played video games, more than half of the participants were daily players (n=50), followed by several times a week (n=29) and a few times per week (n=14). The difficult experiences in which participants played video games were wide-ranging, with 13 different categories found. The largest groups were participants dealing with mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety (n=52), work or school-related stress (n=24), social challenges and isolation (n=16), grief and loss (n=15), and family and relationship issues (n=14).

### *3.2.2 Survey design*

The survey briefly introduces myself as a research student, mentioning my institution, master's studies, and my passion for games and player experiences. Following that, the motivation for the research is stated, which is to learn more about the therapeutic effects of video games during players' difficult life experiences.

Next, the participants' rights are outlined, emphasizing that the survey is completely anonymous, and they can withdraw from the study anytime. Once they agree to participate, they are asked to complete the survey honestly. Additionally, it is stated that the survey would take approximately 10 minutes, depending on their input. At last, their contribution is emphasized as important for increasing knowledge about well-being and coping in games.

The survey starts with demographic questions about gender, age, preferred gaming consoles, preferred gaming genres, and gaming frequency, aimed at understanding the participants.

Next, the questions about their difficult life experiences were introduced as follows: “During our lives, all of us experience times of personal difficulty. Please think of a difficult time in your life during which you played video games (this could be current). Please describe this difficult time in your life. What was it you experienced as stressful, confusing, troubling, or

discouraging?’’ Examples of difficult life experiences are provided to give them an idea, such as mental health issues, social isolation, physical disabilities, loss, and identity questioning.

Then, they were asked which game(s) they played during this period of their lives and why. Following that, they were asked if gaming was helpful in any way at the time. If they responded: ‘‘Not very helpful’’ or ‘‘Not at all helpful,’’ participants were directed to the question: ‘‘Could you please explain why playing games has not helped you cope with the difficulties you were facing?’’ To understand the reasons for this. However, since this research primarily focuses on the positive impact gaming has brought to players' lives, deeper exploration is conducted into the experiences if they answered: ‘‘Yes, very helpful’’ or ‘‘Somewhat helpful.’’ First, they were asked: ‘‘Could you please explain how playing games helped you cope with the difficulties you were facing?’’ Following that, the connection between these helpful experiences and their mental well-being is explored, asking: ‘‘During the difficult time you mentioned, which aspects of your well-being were most improved by playing games?’’ The possible answers are based on Seligman's PERMA model (2011) and various coping mechanisms outlined by Kosa and Uysal (2020). Additionally, participants were asked: ‘Which of these game elements contributed to your positive gaming experience?’ to establish a connection between game elements and positive gaming experiences.

### *3.2.3 Data analysis*

The responses were analyzed using thematic analysis to understand how female gamers cope with video games in relation to their well-being during difficult life experiences. This analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach:

First, I familiarized myself with the data by actively reading and re-reading the responses. Next, I generated initial codes by labeling relevant data segments. I then searched for themes by examining the relationships among these codes. Following this, I reviewed and refined the themes against the coded data and the entire dataset. Once the themes were clear, I defined and named the final themes. Finally, I reported the findings. Nvivo and Excel were used to facilitate this process.

## Chapter 4 | Results

In this chapter, the outcomes of the narrative analysis and surveys are connected to the research questions formulated for this study.

### 4.1 Narrative analysis r/GirlGamers

The narrative analysis focused on how women on Reddit discursively make sense of how gaming has positively impacted their well-being. This chapter thoroughly examines 20 stories shared in comments collected from the r/GirlGamers subreddit. While all elements contributing to well-being were present in these stories, the ways they were expressed in narratives varied. The following sections represent the main findings of this analysis, with each chapter representing a combination of Seligman's PERMA model (2011) and McAdams and McLean's Life-Story Construct (2013):

1. Positive emotions
2. Self-Exploration and Learning
3. Engagement and Redemption
4. Relationships and Communication
5. Meaning and Purpose
6. Accomplishment and Agency

Each subsection is presented and explained below, with supporting quotes from the comments to illustrate the impact of gaming on their well-being.

#### **Positive emotions**

Positive emotions, such as happiness, warmth, affection, relaxation, and excitement (Seligman, 2011), were prevalent in all the comments analyzed. Games were most frequently described as evoking feelings of happiness and joy, which were mentioned eight times; feelings of confidence

and validation, which were mentioned five times; and feelings of relaxation and comfort, which were mentioned four times.

As discussed in the literature review, these positive experiences in the Reddit comments can be understood through hedonic consumption. This concept, introduced by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982), encompasses multisensory, fantasy, and emotive aspects of consumer behavior.

First, multisensory aspects are related to sensory inputs—e.g., sounds, visuals, and tactile impressions (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Many players described their experiences in terms of sensory inputs provided by the game. For example, the visual appeal and immersive worlds mentioned by players evoke multisensory enjoyment. One comment about *Outer Wilds* illustrates this: *“It was beautiful... Hands down my favorite game for the experience it gave me”* (C6). This quote reflects multisensory engagement, where the beauty of visual elements in the game contributes to the player's pleasure.

The second, fantasy, relates to imagination, escapism, and role projection (Hollebeek et al., 2022). Many comments highlighted that games offer an escape from reality, allowing players to immerse themselves in different roles and scenarios. As one player mentioned: *“Gaming feels like escapism and one of the few things in life that doesn't have to be productive, that's just purely there for my enjoyment. I can get really sucked up into different worlds, which is amazing.”* (C8). This quote highlights gaming's ability to transport players into immersive experiences that fulfill their need for non-productive enjoyment.

The third experience, emotive aspects, relates to feelings such as joy, playfulness, and fun. Players often described that with games, they found something to enjoy during times of hardship. Games often serve as a means to rekindle positive emotions and alleviate negative ones. For instance, during a period of depression, one individual shared: *“And after months of just nothing but sadness, I had something to look forward to. Something that brought me joy”* (C1).

These examples illustrate how video games, through their multisensory inputs, fantasy worlds, and emotive engagements, can evoke positive emotions in players and contribute to their well-being.

### **Self-Exploration and Learning**

For a significant number of women, games had a positive impact on their well-being because they allowed them to learn from their experiences or explore themselves. The way learning from video games was experienced varied. One individual expressed that gaming helped them learn more about their emotions, which allowed them to change their perspective on emotional expression. They highlighted the importance of embracing emotions, even when they are painful, stating: *“It helped remind me that it's good to feel your emotions, even when they hurt.”* (C17). This reflects a shift towards accepting and acknowledging one's emotional experiences rather than avoiding or suppressing them, which fosters emotional growth and resilience.

Similarly, another player expressed how gaming taught them the value of self-care and compassion through helping others: *“It felt like as I helped each of those bears, I was holding out a hand to myself, telling myself it's okay to be who I am.”* (C16). This illustrates a realization that by extending kindness and support to others within the game, they were also affirming their own worth.

A considerable number of women have felt empowered or gained deeper insights into themselves through their gaming experiences. This was identified in six out of twenty comments. When discussing the gain of self-confidence in the game, women often expressed that playing a certain role gave them confidence in themselves that they may not experience in their own lives. For instance, one individual remarked: *“I was very shy and awkward, but in these games, I felt confidence for all my decisions”* (C4). *“Dragon Age Origins let me just be in a world where I was a badass hero saving the world”* (C14). *“The role-playing made me feel like a different person, like a hero or something.”* (C15) In these instances, video games serve as a platform for women to feel more confident and capable by



immersing themselves in the game and playing different personas that make them feel empowered.

Not only was the improvement of self-confidence mentioned but self-exploration was also expressed in the story as a significant aspect, frequently found by women struggling with personal identity issues such as confusion surrounding their sexuality and gender identity. One woman described her experience, stating: *“Video games allowed me to explore my sexuality in a healthy and non-judgmental way, which was needed for me at the time, being a very repressed lesbian due to being raised religious. People act like representation is just to fill a quota, but it can really truly be the first time a person is exposed to a world where people are like you”* (C14). Another woman mentioned: *“These games kinda allowed me to “experience” some kind of femininity before I was allowed to know what transgender meant. I’m not sure that I would’ve found out so fast that I was actually a girl without them.”* (C9) A third woman shared: *“Games made me realize I’m not strictly straight... I’m demi sexual 😊 I often start liking characters only after spending time with them for a while.”* (C19).

In all instances where individuals expressed learning, gaining self-confidence, and self-understanding, single player role-playing games (RPGs) facilitated this growth. These findings align with Bowman’s (2024) article, which highlights how RPGs allow players to embark on a hero's journey. Players can embody powerful characters, leading to greater empowerment and confidence in expressing themselves in-game. Additionally, she highlights that RPGs allow players to explore personal and social identities through various roles, fostering self-understanding and growth. By creating and customizing characters, players can craft personas that resonate with them, whether it involves exploring a different gender or identity. This also includes interacting with other in-game characters, providing a safe space to explore aspects of themselves they might not feel comfortable expressing in real life, such as playing as a different gender or engaging in romantic relationships with characters of the opposite gender.

Moreover, Bowman (2024) mentions that RPGs offer rich, narrative-driven gameplay, allowing players to reflect on their own experiences and create their own journeys. Characters

often face choices that impact the story and their development, ranging from moral dilemmas to interpersonal relationships. These experiences give players new ways to process and understand their personal narratives, ultimately fostering personal growth and well-being.

### **Engagement and Redemption**

Engagement refers to being emotionally involved or committed to an interest, also known as immersion and escapism in games. This element emerged in seven out of twenty comments and was described as “*Escaping from the real world,*” “*Feeling Immersed in the game,*” or “*Providing a distraction from everything that was happening in the world.*” Despite escapism often being associated with something negative, as it literally means 'escaping the real,' for these women, it positively impacted their well-being. This aligns with Kosa and Uysal’s (2020) article on healthy escapism, highlighting that games can help regulate emotions, manage mood, and aid in coping and recovery.

These benefits were evident in the data and varied in severity. For some, gaming served as a way to reduce stress during demanding activities such as work and school. For others, escapism had a profound impact on coping with trauma. In instances where women recounted experiences of physical abuse, a tumultuous childhood, or the sudden loss of a loved one, games emerged as a lifeline—a coping mechanism to navigate through profound emotional pain. In all comments where a traumatic event was described, escapism was mentioned as a way to cope with their suffering. For example, one individual described escaping from a difficult childhood where they experienced abuse, as described: “*Back when I was younger, I had a really tough home life. ... At that time, to escape, I used to play JRPGs. I'm going to be honest--and this isn't an exaggeration--without that outlet, I don't know if I'd still be here today.*” (C10) And “*After being a victim of sexual assault and having suicidal thoughts, this was the first game I played just trying to keep my mind off it, and it worked.*” (C15).

As these quotes represent, while escapism is often stigmatized as a means of avoiding problems, for many women, it represents a vital coping mechanism, a lifeline in times of distress.

In almost all comments, and these two specifically, women constructed their life stories to redeem themselves, which refers to a negative situation resulting in a positive outcome (McAdams and McLean, 2013). The story starts with a reflection on a deeply negative experience, expressed in a vulnerable and open way, and then a positive twist is brought to the story through gaming. This aligns with the narrative identity processing from Pals (2006), which consists of a two-step process. The first step is reflecting on a negative experience, and the second step is the positive resolution of this event. According to Pals (2006), these steps are linked to personal growth, happiness, and greater resilience. These examples highlight how important gaming communities are for women as a safe haven to reflect and process their stories and experiences.

### **Relationships and Communication**

Relationships play a significant role in enhancing the well-being of women. Defined by McAdams and McLean (2013) as the extent to which someone shows interpersonal bonds characterized by feelings of closeness, concern, and belonging, this aspect was found in thirteen out of twenty comments analyzed, indicating its significance in players' experiences. Within this overarching theme, two distinct categories emerged in how female players described their experiences, falling into two clear categories: social connections through online and offline experiences.

Online connections emerged as a notable way of fostering connections with others. This involves interaction with both random players encountered within the game and established friends with whom they engage in online gaming sessions. These interactions were often described as providing a sense of camaraderie and relieving feelings of loneliness. For instance, someone expressed that playing online made them feel less alone and more connected to friends: *"BG3 also made me feel a bit less alone, as just before my fracture, I moved to the other side of the country, so I miss my friends."* (C8). Another player highlighted how gaming sessions served as a bonding activity with family: *"As the kids got older, we would sit together and chat and comment watching each other play, as a kind of family bonding."* (C12)

However, while online interactions offer a valuable means to connect with other players, the theme of relationship and communication was more prominently found in the offline experiences of players. These experiences were gained from an emotional storyline and connection with other characters in the game and were generally experienced on a deeper level; players frequently describe how the story's narrative made them feel seen, supported, and included. Through the storyline, they find themselves reflected in the characters' struggles, which fosters a meaningful bond. One player experienced this by playing the game *Spiritfarer*: *"It was a soft, gentle place to land to process death and goodbyes... It was so very obviously made by people who had been on the same journey through grief I had, and it was so nice not to feel alone and in a space where people understood even if it was 'only a game'"* (C3) and another woman experienced this with playing *Night in the Woods*: *"Even though I didn't have exactly the same issues with mental health as the main character, I still felt incredibly seen"* (C17).

In addition to the feeling of connection, online gaming experiences also facilitated learning about relationships. Players gained introspection into how they approach people in real life, their ability to set boundaries, and the significance of fostering healthy connections: *"It helped me set boundaries for myself with people and made me yearn for connections that didn't harm me."* (C1), and *"I used to be a people pleaser (sometimes still am), wanting to be liked by everyone. RPG games made me realize you don't owe people anything..."* (C19)

These quotes highlight that the feeling of connection in gaming extends beyond mere multiplayer interactions. While online play facilitates socialization, the depth of emotional engagement, the sense of belonging, and introspection often stem from the rich narratives and character interactions found in the game's offline experiences. Through these interactions, players find a space where they are not only entertained but also understood, supported, and empowered to navigate the complexities of their own lives.

## Meaning and Purpose

The concept of meaning and purpose refers to feeling a sense of purpose and fulfillment in life, often arising from activities that contribute to something larger than themselves (McAdams & McLean, 2013). This element appeared four times in the comments. While this frequency may not seem notably high, the context in which meaning and purpose were related to games and well-being is particularly significant.

In the comments, this theme was only identified among women with severe mental health challenges such as depression and suicidal thoughts. A significant aspect of depression is the feeling of hopelessness and having a negative outlook on life and the future (Sarkohi, 2011). Video games gave these women a certain sense of meaning in their lives, not just through playing games. It was striking that in three instances, anticipating a new game gave them feelings described as follows: *“If existence feels very repetitive and mundane; I just think about videogames coming out”* (C2). *“And after months of just nothing but sadness I had something to look forward to,”* (C1), *“Gave me a ton of joy and I was always looking forward to it.”* (C18).

Anticipation gave these women hope, something to look forward to, and essentially to hold on to during difficult times. One individual described this as follows: *“One day, my therapist asked if there was anything, ANYTHING at all I was looking forward to, no matter how silly. And after thinking really hard, I said...it was Persona 5. She said to me, “can you imagine if you miss this game? .... Right now, if holding on to the idea of a videogame coming out is helping you hold on, lean on it”. So I did! And I recuperated many years before P5 came out”* (C2). The process of anticipation and looking forward to a positive experience, such as a game coming out, can trigger the brain’s reward system, boost positive emotions, and provide motivation, ultimately leading to improved well-being (Luo et al., 2018). This shows that anticipation can be a valuable coping strategy for these women dealing with mental health issues.

## Accomplishment and Agency

The concept of agency refers to how someone can shape their lives or impact others (McAdams & McLean, 2013). This is often achieved through showcasing skills, gaining confidence, accomplishing goals, or attaining social standing. Accomplishment and agency were identified in five of the twenty comments; this was mainly obtained by doing in-game activities such as helping others in a game and being productive, making them feel more competent. This was articulated in the following ways: *“Cooking in a game actually gives me more motivation to do that in real life. Like, hey... maybe I can do this”* (C13), which shows how the virtual experience of cooking within a game can translate into increased confidence and motivation in real-world cooking endeavors. Another individual described: *“With farming games like Stardew, I could back away at things and be productive about it”* (C12), which highlights how games can provide a sense of productivity and efficacy, which reinforces players' belief in their capacity to achieve goals and be productive.

These examples align with Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2001), which posits that humans have an innate psychological need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Feeling productive in a game can fulfill these needs by providing a sense of control, competence, and mastery. The element of accomplishment and agency was primarily found in SIM/Management type games. These genres of games often require players to make decisions, manage resources, and achieve objectives, providing ample opportunities for players to experience a sense of agency and control over their in-game experiences. Whether it is managing a virtual farm in *Stardew Valley* or overseeing a city in *SimCity*, players are empowered to make meaningful choices and see the direct impact of their actions, reinforcing their sense of competence and self-assurance.

## 4.2 Survey study

The survey study focused on identifying the psychological themes that emerge when women reflect on how games positively impact their lives during difficult life experiences. This chapter provides a thematic analysis of the survey responses, presenting the emerging prevalent themes. These themes represent the most common answers to how gaming has helped during difficult life experiences.

### 4.2.1 Overview survey responses

There were 97 responses from participants identifying as women, trans women, and non-binary. Notably, gaming during difficult life experiences was helpful for the vast majority of respondents, with the largest proportion indicating that gaming was very helpful (see Figure 3).

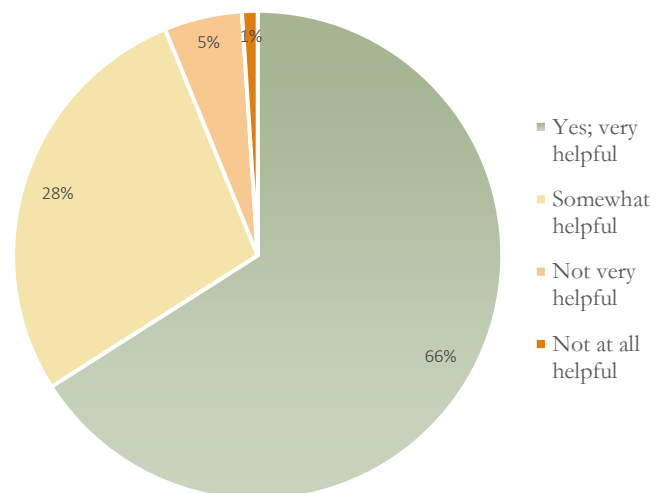


Figure 3 Outcomes helpful gaming women ( $n=97$ )

When participants indicated that gaming during difficult times was helpful, they were asked which elements of well-being were most improved and what game elements contributed to that positive experience. Participants could select multiple answers, and the results of these questions are presented in Figures 4 and 5 on the next page. These figures are referred to throughout the thematic analysis.

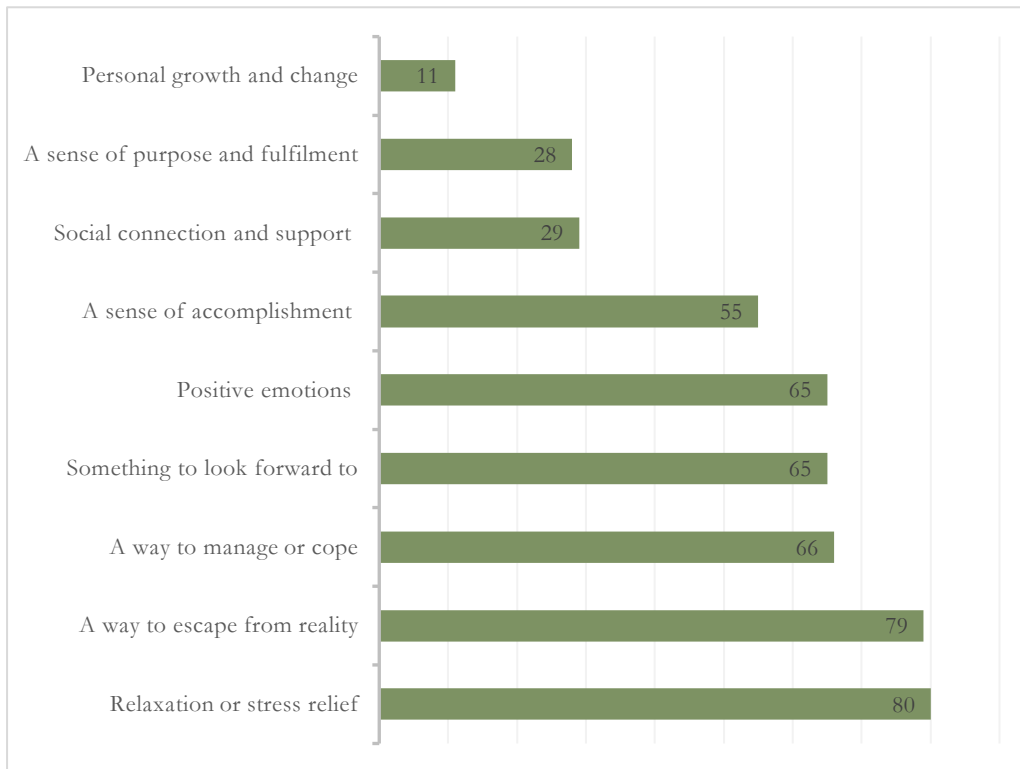


Figure 4 Well-Being elements linked to gaming (s=91)

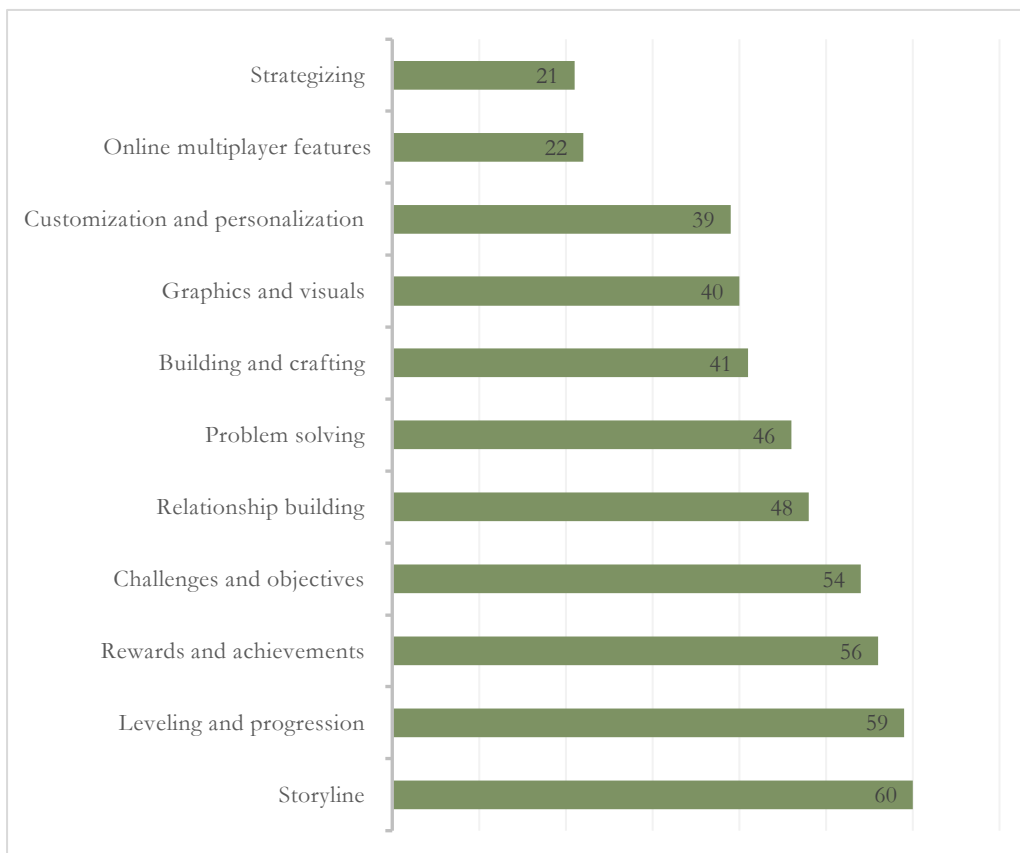


Figure 5 Game elements linked to positive experience (s=91)



#### 4.2.2 Thematic analysis

The thematic analysis revealed several themes that represent the most common ways games provide a positive impact on their lives during difficult experiences:

1. Respite and Relief
2. Emotional Fulfillment
3. Personal Growth and Change
4. Connecting and Belonging
5. Managing Emotions
6. Source of Happiness and Appreciation

These themes are not mutually exclusive; instead, they often overlap and complement each other. For instance, a participant describing personal growth and change through gaming may also experience emotional fulfillment. Below, each theme is explained with supporting quotes from the participants.

#### **Respite and Relief**

The first theme describes how, for a large group of participants, gaming during difficult life experiences served as a source of respite and relief by shifting their focus. Participants frequently mention escapism, distraction, or immersion to describe how gaming has helped them during difficult life experiences. Escapism, literally defined as avoiding the real, often carries a negative connotation due to its frequent association with problematic and excessive gaming (Kosa & Uysal, 2020). However, these results reveal that players find that immersing themselves in virtual worlds offers respite from the challenges and stressors of daily life. For many, gaming serves as a sanctuary, a space where they can momentarily set aside their worries and self-soothe. This aligns with the concept of 'active escapism,' which involves conscious engagement in fantasy and role-play within video games as a way of coping, contrasting with passive forms of escapism like watching TV (Kuo et al., 2016). The woman who said: *"It allows me to immerse myself in the virtual*

*world without thinking about problems and challenges in real life*" (P43), demonstrates this active engagement and how gaming can serve as a healthy form of escapism.

Others highlight how gaming helps them cope with mental health issues such as anxiety: *"I tend to get really invested in the games I play, which helps focus my energy away from anxious thoughts or other stressors outside my control. I like having something to pour that excess energy into"* (P91). For these participants, gaming serves as a way to regulate negative emotions, in this case anxiety, which ties into Zillmann's (1988) mood management theory, which suggests that consuming entertainment media can potentially help regulate negative emotions, bringing them back to a balanced state and ultimately increasing well-being.

This sentiment is not only reflected in the way participants describe how gaming has helped them through difficult life experiences, but it is also supported by quantitative data. The majority of respondents, namely 80 out of 91 participants, indicated that the aspect of their well-being most improved by gaming was relaxation and stress relief (see Figure 4). This underscores the significance of gaming as a medium to relieve stressors and enhance relaxation. The reprieve allows them to recharge emotionally and mentally, which could indirectly contribute to better handling of real-life issues when they return to them.

### **Emotional Fulfillment**

The second theme is about players describing how they use gaming to fill something that is missing in their current emotional or physical state of being. Participants often mentioned difficult life experiences such as self-esteem issues, work or school challenges, or mental health issues, which influenced their lives to the point where they felt unproductive or unable to experience a sense of achievement or competency.

For these players, gaming provided a sense of accomplishment and rewards that they were missing in their lives. One woman stated: *"I had a period of my life where I believed myself to be lazy/ dumb. Achieving things in games that my peers and many others struggled with helped alleviate some of these*

*feelings*” (P23). Others mentioned that gaming felt like a productive activity compared to more passive activities like watching TV: *“Back then, I played games as an escape and as a break in which I still felt productive (like I was actively doing something, instead of passively watching TV - I felt less guilty of not doing what I was supposed to be doing)”* (P73). This method of coping during difficult life experiences ties into meaning-focused coping, as identified by Folkman and Moskowitz (2004). Meaning-focused coping involves altering the meaning of a situation to align with one’s personal beliefs and goals. In this context, players use gaming to feel meaningful and significant, transforming their experiences of achievement and productivity into positive self-perceptions. By achieving goals in games, players can reshape their self-image and derive a sense of purpose and value, counteracting feelings of incompetency and unproductivity.

This sentiment is also reflected in the quantitative data. The game elements related to achievement and productiveness are ‘Leveling and progression’, ‘Rewards and achievements’, and ‘Challenges and objectives’. More than half of participants mentioned these elements as contributing to their positive gaming experiences (see Figure 5).

Another topic related to using games to fill something missing in the participants’ lives was the feeling of agency, which refers to how someone can shape their lives or impact others (McAdams & McLean, 2013). This often came up for people dealing with difficult life experiences such as mental health issues, loss, or trauma, which resulted in the sense of instability and even chaos in their current lives. For these participants, gaming provided ease, regularity, comfort, and accessibility—a stable factor in their lives. One woman described it as follows: *“Gaming has given me a sense of regularity. They’ve given me something I can come back to at the end of the day, which was challenging but very controlled. I was in control of the game; I did not have to grow or change much over the course of a session”* (P35). Because games evoked a certain ease and familiarity, some felt stabilized, as described as follows: *“I played games that were familiar and predictable in a way, to feel normal again”* (P44). These participants use games to manage their emotions during times of chaos or instability, seeking to experience more agency and control in their lives. This approach ties into

emotion-focused coping, which involves managing feelings related to a problem through distractions, relaxation, or communication (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

In these instances, gaming serves as a tool to help people feel more capable and autonomous during times when they experience negative feelings about themselves. According to the Self-Determination Theory, both competence and autonomy are fundamental psychological needs essential for intrinsic motivation and overall well-being.

### **Personal Growth and Change**

The third theme relates to participants describing gaming as a way of personal growth and change during difficult times. They found gaming to be a medium through which they learn more about themselves or the world, change perspectives, and are exposed to new viewpoints and insights that contribute to their personal growth. Ultimately, they take these lessons into their daily (physical) lives.

This closely aligns with the concept of 'appreciation,' as discussed in the literature, which stems from the eudaimonic perspective of well-being. According to Oliver et al. (2016), appreciation differs from enjoyment, which is a hedonic experience, because it involves feeling a greater sense of meaning, being emotionally involved, and feeling compelled to think deeper about an experience and ultimately learn from it. In gaming, appreciation is predominantly linked to storytelling elements and fulfilling the desire for relatedness and connection with others, particularly with in-game characters. This is also reflected in the data. For example, a participant who identified as a transgender woman found that role-playing and the relatedness and connection she experienced with in-game characters allowed her to explore their gender identity: *"I have played several games where I was playing a female character that helped me figure out my gender identity"* (P23). This aligns with Bowman (2014), underscoring that RPGs give players the opportunity to explore personal and social identities through the various roles they can play in-game.

The ability for players to connect with in-game characters and view them as significant to their own experiences has been suggested as a fundamental aspect of eudaimonic gaming experiences, facilitating personal growth and self-reflection (Possler et al., 2023).

Conversely, Oliver et al. (2016) noted that enjoyment, unlike appreciation, is often linked to gameplay elements and fulfilling the desire for competence and autonomy. Conversely, in my data, I also found that a feeling of appreciation could be linked to fulfilling the desire for competence, autonomy, and gameplay elements. For example, one woman described how the challenging gameplay of *Elden Ring* helped her learn to cope with failure: *“I’ve recently been playing Elden Ring. Having to refight bosses multiple times and get used to dying over and over before prevailing has helped me focus on being okay with failure and knowing I can always try again”* (P66). Through the game, she felt more competent, which helped her overcome in-game challenges and led to a deeper understanding of acceptance and failure in real life. This aligns with an experience of appreciation, blending elements of competence and deeper emotional engagement.

Additionally, rich narratives in games like *The Talos Principle*, which deal with philosophical themes about consciousness and the human condition, helped another woman adopt a new way of thinking: *“Gaming allowed me to shelve some of my more sad or cynical feelings and change my frame of reference a bit so that I was not so focused on what bad things might happen in the future”* (P83). This example shows how meaningful narratives can provide insights and reflections, leading to emotional stability and personal growth, supporting Bartsch and Oliver's (2017) statement that meaningful entertainment can strengthen individuals' ability to confront and cope with negative experiences.

### **Connecting and Belonging**

The fourth theme describes how for many participants, gaming served as a way to connect and belong. The connectedness and sense of belonging they experienced varied, and can be categorized into three distinct groups. Some participants found that gaming provided an opportunity to bond with people in their lives, such as family members and friends. Others felt a

deep connection with the narratives and characters within the games they played. Lastly, many participants were able to forge new friendships through gaming communities.

An example of how participants bonded with friends and family was expressed as follows: *“When the new Stardew Valley update came out recently, my (younger) siblings and I all started a farm together, which has been really fun and wholesome for us. One of my childhood friends who lives across the country will sometimes play video games with me as well, which is a great way for us to stay in touch long-distance”* (P61).

Gaming also offered a way to stay connected during difficult times, helping alleviate feelings of loneliness and social isolation. As one woman mentioned: *“It became a great way to socialize with people and participate in social activities without leaving my home, or even my bed on bad days”* (P53). Another woman shared a similar sentiment: *“I often play the same game as my sister-in-law. We will text each other about our progress and help each other with game tips. Having that connection through gaming helps with feelings of social isolation”* (P66).

In addition to real-life connections, in-game characters and storylines were a significant source of connection and belonging for many participants. They highlighted the deep relationships they felt with in-game characters as a way to cope with their feelings of loneliness. One woman stated: *“On the days that I felt really lonely and just wanted some peace inside of me, I played The Sims 3 and 4. It gave me a sense of creating a family that I knew I was not going to have due to my separation and eventual divorce”* (P40). Another woman noted how in-game characters made her feel like she had friends: *“Final Fantasy X, because I felt like I had friends (the party members have nice relationships)”* (P71).

Furthermore, many participants mentioned that playing games made them feel like they were part of a community, such as on Reddit or Discord. By playing the same games, they could join communities that enhanced their sense of belonging and connection. This highlights that gaming forms communities of practice where people connect through shared interests, build strong social connections, and offer social support. In these communities, members share not only their gaming experiences but also personal challenges and successes in life.

These instances tie into the literature on social capital, which is the value found in people's connections and trust (Reer & Krämer, 2014). They particularly bolster 'bonding' social capital, which involves close relationships that offer emotional and practical support, especially during difficult times of social isolation. According to the Self-Determination Theory, this bonding satisfies the fundamental psychological need for relatedness, defined as having meaningful connections with others (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The capacity of gaming to cultivate such meaningful relationships highlights its potential to enhance social well-being, thereby mitigating the negative effects of loneliness.

### **Managing Emotions**

The fifth theme describes how, for a large group of participants, gaming during difficult life experiences has served as a tool to manage their mental health challenges. For these women, gaming has a positive influence on their lives, not only as a coping mechanism but also as a means to improve and regain control over their situation. Several responses highlighted the different ways in which gaming helped manage their emotions. Some participants use games as a safe haven to express and process their emotions. One woman noted: *“Games allow for a healthy emotional outlet, similar to other dramatic media. I can be emotionally vulnerable to the stories without risk, and they can end the way I want rather than be unpredictable”* (P77). This ties into the theory of Kosa and Uysal (2020) on healthy escapism, in which they mention games to aid in regulating emotions. They mention, for instance, games that promote interoceptive awareness (the ability of a person to know their internal states) that can be helpful for the regulation of emotions (Lobel et al. 2014, as cited in Kosa and Uysal, 2020). In games, players are given the ability to express their emotions safely, which can ultimately help regulate them by enhancing or extending positive emotions. This is particularly true for games with emotional storytelling that address mental health issues that resonate with their personal situation, such as *Celeste*, which deals with depression, and

*Spiritfarer*, which addresses grief. This understanding can not only change perspectives but also help regulate their emotions.

Gaming can also serve as a tool to divert attention from overwhelming negative thoughts that impact an individual's functioning. One participant shared, *"In therapy, I identified my worries would increase in the evenings when I had nothing (such as work) to distract me. One suggestion in therapy was to try to occupy my mind, such as working on puzzles or playing board games, reading, and video gaming. Playing video games helped me to live 'in the present' and not get into a cycle of worrying and anxiety"* (P103).

In extreme cases where women experienced suicidal thoughts from severe depression, gaming provided a lifeline to distract from these thoughts, as described: *"They helped just to relax and to feel something besides suicidal thoughts, even forgetting those thoughts for the time I was playing"* (P78). Another woman used gaming to cope with depression and grief when she couldn't get out of bed. She explained: *"It distracted my mind and helped me focus on mental activity during a time when I couldn't bring myself to do anything physical. I didn't want to leave my bed, but playing the game made me feel mentally as though I was being productive and purposeful, which helped me not be so consumed by my grief"* (P124). This quote overlaps with the theme of gaming and emotional fulfillment by feeling more purposeful and productive. However, in this case, it is used to manage the overconsumption of grief this person is going through.

Both these examples demonstrate emotion-focused coping through gaming, which involves managing feelings related to a problem through distractions, relaxation, or communication (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). In these cases, individuals choose to play games to manage their feelings. This sentiment is not only reflected in the way participants describe how gaming has helped them through difficult life experiences but also in the quantitative data that supports it. 66 out of 91 participants indicated that gaming brought them a way to cope and manage what they were going through (see Figure 4).



## Source of Happiness and Appreciation

The sixth and final theme describes how gaming has been a source of happiness and appreciation for participants during difficult times. These women frequently express gratitude for the positive impact games have had, emphasizing their significance. Games were described as a way to empower, something to feel passionate about, a means to uplift, a source of beauty in their lives, something to look forward to or anticipate, and something that brought them joy, especially during the harder times of their lives. These positive emotions were often related to storylines, in-game characters, visuals, and exploration.

One woman expressed appreciation for a game because of its immersive story and world: *“This game intrigued me because of its beautiful open world, and I kind of wanted to dive into a new adventure. The story and world inspired me. I was so deeply immersed and impressed by this game; I feel a deep sense of appreciation and passion for it, an experience that I will always take with me”* (P1), which illustrated the profound impact of storylines and a visually stimulating world to leave a profound and lasting impact. Another participant highlighted the way they found something that they could still enjoy during difficult times in games: *“Gaming helped distract me from my emotions and was one of the few things I still enjoyed doing despite depression”* (P55). Another participant highlighted the importance of gaming as a way of self-expression: *“Gaming is so much to me. It's a community, it's therapeutic, it can be silly, meaningful, deep, distracting”* (P63).

For many, gaming is not just a hobby but a vital part of their lives that helps them navigate and find relief from their challenges. For these women, gaming provided a necessary distraction and a source of enjoyment amidst personal struggles. Games offer the ability to experience a 'state of flow,' where a person is fully immersed in a task, losing their sense of time and experiencing boundless energy (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). This state of flow through gaming can lead to mindfulness, helping individuals feel more relaxed, focused, and less stressed (Kelly, 2019). Moreover, gaming brings happiness and a sense of appreciation, fulfilling one of the eudaimonic needs in gaming. The appreciation for gaming goes beyond mere entertainment;

it is seen as a meaningful and enriching part of their existence, contributing to their overall happiness and well-being.

## Chapter 5 | Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, I will address how women perceive the positive impact of video games on their well-being during difficult life experiences. The survey results and narrative analysis indicate that playing video games can facilitate and promote all aspects contributing to well-being, as defined by Seligman's (2011) PERMA model—positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment.

The data demonstrates that games and gaming communities were used to reflect on and manage a range of difficult life experiences, such as stress, depression, grief, anxiety, and more. Video games can offer emotional fulfillment and management, respite and relief, personal growth and change, a sense of belonging, and a source of happiness and appreciation. It should be noted that the way women experienced these varied per player, difficult life experience, playstyle, and game.

Reflecting on Albert Einstein's quote from the introduction: "One of the most powerful motives that attracts people to science and art is the longing to escape everyday life." The longing to escape everyday life has been shown in the data to go much deeper than simply avoiding problems and refusing to engage with them, which is known as avoidance-focused coping, and often associated with gaming (Kosa & Uysal, 2020). Although instances of avoidance-focused coping were found, the vast majority of gaming experiences reflected emotion-focused coping. In this form, women did not entirely discard their problems, but managed feelings related to them by seeking connections, relief, and enjoyment. Women often chose games that fulfilled their emotional needs or resonated with their experiences, underscoring the importance of diversity in storytelling. Additionally, gaming was used for meaning-focused coping, where games served as a way to alter the meaning of the situation in women's lives, fostering feelings of accomplishment, competence, and excitement that often addressed emotional and physical voids. This was found to be the case not only with playing games but also with anticipating new games coming out, providing hope and a lifeline during severe distress.

Additionally, there were instances of problem-focused coping, referring to someone directly addressing the issue by taking action to solve it (Kosa & Uysal, 2020). Gaming communities hold the potential to facilitate such coping strategies, particularly for women. These spaces, such as r/GirlGamers, offer safety, inclusivity, and support. Women can connect, share, and reflect here, making these communities particularly valuable during difficult times. Additionally, role-playing games helped individuals dealing with identity confusion, such as their sexuality and gender, to understand and explore themselves. Although this form of coping was less frequently observed than the other forms, its presence in Reddit comments and surveys highlights its potential significance for women. The lower frequency of this type of coping might be attributed to several factors: male dominance within the gaming community, the persistent toxicity that often characterizes these spaces, and the lack of authentic representation in gaming. These challenges can discourage women from openly exploring and expressing their identities through gaming platforms, making this an important topic for further research to understand its influence on the well-being of female gamers. Beyond gender, it is essential to consider other intersecting identities, such as race, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status, and how they affect women's gaming experiences. This broader perspective can address issues of inclusivity and representation in the gaming industry and contribute to a broader understanding of how diverse groups use video games for well-being, specifically during times of difficulty.

The discussion of video games as a potential tool for enhancing well-being and coping with difficult life experiences ties into more extensive societal conversations about mental health awareness and support systems. Recognizing the positive effects of gaming can help society expand its mental health resources, promoting a more inclusive approach to well-being. However, there is a need for more research and education around this topic to understand how games can be beneficial and to customize their use to meet individual needs. This includes learning how to utilize games to contribute positively while safeguarding against potential adverse effects.

Further research is needed to understand how players interact with games, focusing on game mechanics, design, genres, and gameplay to comprehend how these elements can convey positive and empowering experiences. It is important to consider both the short-term and long-term benefits of gaming to enhance our understanding of games as supportive tools. Understanding the positive gaming experiences of women and other underrepresented groups can guide developers in creating games that support mental health and well-being. This includes designing games that promote positive social interactions and offer diversity in characters and stories that people can relate to. Additionally, this study highlights the importance of gaming communities for women, and game developers must continue to monitor and ensure these spaces are safe and inclusive for all players.

In real life, when things become too difficult—whether at work, school or in relationships—we cannot simply press pause and press play once we are ready; we must live through these experiences, even the unbearable moments. In games, we are self-determined, which gives us the power to control and change outcomes. I believe everyone can find something positive in a game; however, this is unique for everyone. Just as the meaning we give to life is unique, so is the meaning we assign to games. Players can choose to play a challenging game to feel a sense of accomplishment, a cozy game to relax, or a deeply immersive role-play game to connect with a story and the characters within.

While gaming can enrich our lives by offering solace and positive experiences, it should complement rather than substitute our real-world existence. As with any form of entertainment or consumption, it is crucial to approach gaming with moderation. This balance ensures that the benefits of gaming are integrated into our lives in a healthy and productive manner. By recognizing gaming's impact and nuances and fostering safe, inclusive, and supportive environments both in games and within gaming communities, we can better utilize the potential of gaming to positively impact women's lives.

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