“This game changed my life.”

Online stories of ‘emersion’ about playing video games during difficult times in life.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to explore the video game medium in depth, to relate it to the stories found on Internet communities about users’ gameplay experiences during burdensome moments in life. To achieve that, the phenomena is explored through the lenses of Uses & Gratifications theory by means of a netnography on the ‘/Persona 5’ official subReddit; interpreting, coding and analyzing all narratives that fit the criteria with the help of a proposed ‘USE’ system. The model is in charge of classifying the information into explicit displays of ‘Dissatisfaction’, ‘Motivation’, ‘Immersion’ and ‘Emersion’. The resulting codification enabled the creation of eight different types of reports among a sample of one-hundred threads, all in correlation with the varied aspects of the game that act as categories. The data derived from the conclusions of this study shows that players are not motivated to use the video game for any other purposes than mere entertainment. Yet, the immersive potential of the virtual world addressed their dissatisfactions and made them emerge back to reality with, mostly, not-sought gratifications. Still, not all players were able to control their video game uses to regulate their emotions, further implying the importance to continue researching cases of media immersion to establish guidelines of ethical design and appropriate production and consumption practices.

- Keywords: video games, personal crises, difficult times, immersion, netnography, stories, uses and gratifications, Reddit, Persona 5.
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0. Preface

I wholeheartedly thank my advisor, Erin Cory, for her invaluable support during this process. Not only did she guide me in the right direction when I was lost in the wide scope of possible topics, Erin gave me a safe space to discuss, as well, all non-academic variables affecting the development of the thesis. I would have never imagined feeling encouraged and motivated in spite of the stress, and it is all thanks to her. I really appreciated her feedback and considered as much as I could.

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1. Introduction

Video games have been revolutionary to traditional media art in the 21st century, as cinema was in the 20th. Yet, they suffered a bad reputation stemming from their consideration as non-productive (Roig et al. 2009), violent (Reid, 2012) and not morally appropriate (Schrier, 2017). Regardless of their fame, the industry around them has promptly grown over the years, to the degree of becoming the highest-grossing entertainment market to date (Divers, 2023).

As stated by Roig et al. (2009), this lack of legitimization may ignore the social dimensions that incur in the act of playing, namely: the adoption of symbolic roles from which players learn, produce and reproduce actions in controlled environments; the construction of communitarian feelings and values through shared experiences of play, and the gathering and erection of shared meanings (Bowman, 2022). Together with the engaging properties of video games provided by skilled designers, this medium has specialized in immersing its consumers in virtual worlds, to make them use in-game resources to work towards seeking outcomes, fulfilling objectives and gaining gratifications from their use (Granic, Lobel & Engels, 2014).

In some cases, however, said gratification is not sought nor derives from the entertainment original motivation. The phenomena of using media as accompaniment for relief and distress from difficult times in life is, unfortunately, nothing new. Despite that, little research to date has explored the behavioral uses and gratifications of gaming during these personal crises (Caro & Popovac, 2021); at least in the field of media and communication studies, receiving a bit more attention in disciplines of the likes of psychology or human-computer interactions.

My personal experience of playing a game during the pandemic lockdown of 2020 motivates me to contribute to the cause and discover testimonies of other players using the game to overcome undesired situations. Having experienced the immersion in the digital environment of the offline single-player game ‘Persona 5: Royal’ myself, I have decided to focus on this one as I am already familiar with it. In order to do that, I am exploring a conceptualization of what games consist of, their intricacies on production-consumption cycles, what makes them appealing and their potential for people who seek in them other uses than the ones conceived in the first place. I withstand this research by carrying out a netnography on the stories shared in a specific Internet community: classifying and codifying the information for its interpretation to create new and valuable ‘thick data’ for our discipline.
With this in mind, the objective that my thesis pursues is twofold. On one hand, to understand what the members of an online community commented on their uses of the game during their personal life crises; and on the other hand, to explore the role of these online narratives in providing testimonies about the gratifications of playing during or after life struggles.

Markham (2012) advises constructing the research questions focusing so the phenomena is the object of study, rather than the people part of the research process. Accordingly, Kozinets (2010) argues that a qualitative inquiry should be carried by broad research questions starting with the words ‘what’ or ‘how’ to convey the emergent and open-ended nature of a research design rooted in virtual ethnographic approaches (Bowler Jr. 2010). And therefore, I ask:

- **RQ1.** How is ‘Persona 5’ being used by players, who self-report the contribution of the game, to address ‘difficult moments’ in their lives? What aspects of the game support this relationship?
- **RQ2.** What do these online stories shared in Reddit tell us about the potential to obtain gratifications when 'emerging' from playing a video game?

## 2. Background Chapter

Video game players around the world were expected to reach the 3.07 billion mark by 2023 (Clement, 2021; from Boldi, Rapp & Tirassa, 2022) given the rise of streaming platforms and their uses during the COVID-19 pandemic (Boldi & Rapp, 2022). Nowadays, the estimation proved to be humble, hitting approximately 3.34 billion gamers (Stojanovic, 2023). Here, in Spain, the remastered version of ‘Persona 5’ released right before the start of the lockdown: a perfect opportunity to try it due to its length -an average of 100 hours- and the original game being released in the past exclusively in English, which probably alienated many consumers.

The game follows the story of the Phantom Thieves, a group of teenage misfits granted with a power that allows them to enter a world called the Metaverse. This space represents the world according to a target’s cognition, meaning that what the characters see in that world is a portrayal of how each person imagines reality. People with distorted wishes create ‘palaces’, the dungeons of the game, where the protagonists confront ‘shadows’, the manifestation of a ‘palace ruler’s corruption. The end goal is to steal a hidden ‘treasure’, which is the source of someone’s distorted wish, to rehabilitate them: making them regret and confess their actions.
The themes of rehabilitation, abuses of power, freedom, societal corruption and found family flood the game with blatant statements and visual metaphors: like the ‘shadows’ being based on Jungian psychology by representing repressed aspects of the personality, and the chance to befriend them after a battle to transform them in your ‘Personas’ -the masks that we all wear that, in the game, reveals one’s true nature-. Yet, there is way more to it than just battles.

Persona 5 is both a console RPG -Role Playing Game- and Life Simulator non-online single-player video game. The first genre situates an avatar, the representation of the player within the digital environment (Fraser et al. 2023), in fantastic worlds -for the most part- to adopt the roles provided by the story of the game to achieve certain goals, freely choosing how to do it among the game’s possibilities (Costikyan, 2003). A simulation, in turn, tries to represent a factor of physical or social systems (Mlimperos et al. 2013) with engaging gameplay that makes tasks enjoyable and consistent with reality.

When the ‘Persona 5’ players are not in the Metaverse, the game consists of a normal high-school life in an extremely realistic portrayal of Tokyo: going to the gym, meeting characters, raising social stats -guts, kindness, charm…-, studying, visiting new places, etc. The only limit is an in-game calendar restricting the number of actions that can be performed per day. Thus, the gameplay structured in routines, allows the gamification of day-to-day life.

A search on Google is enough to find countless content produced by ‘Persona 5’ fans. However, among the posts praising the video game or asking questions, there are narratives of people overcoming difficulties in life such as anxiety, loneliness, suicidal thoughts, trauma and personal crises like breaking up, losing a job or being a soldier at war. A preliminary inquiry allowed me to find several testimonials in blogs and online newsletters, which served as my first contact with stories of people who played the game and felt like something changed in them or in their life after playing it. Some examples:

“Bereft of my workplace, my immediate friends, my routines, and my social structures, Persona 5: The Royal covered all of those fronts. It reminded me of the need for social change in times of corruption and abuses of power. It kept me accountable to myself and reminded me that there may be a sense of normal at the end of this pandemic.” - Merigold (2020)

"The sense of routine that Persona 5 Royal offers is something that I’ve found soothing when my real life has been so radically altered in the middle of the pandemic." - Meitzler (2020)
“I want to share just how important Persona 5 is to me and how it rescued me from the isolation of people’s indifference to disability” - Bunting (2022)

“I decided to try the game out on a whim in the beginning months of my brother's cancer treatment and the worst part of my depressive episode. Put simply, the game saved my life. It introduced me to [...] a character who taught me how to love myself after months of not, and more characters who helped fill the void my ex-friends had left ” - Espiritu (2020)

Previous research suggest that some of the most positive and emotional experiences trigger in gameplay contexts (McGonigal, 2011; from Granic, Lobel & Engels, 2014): especially when using them to address difficult times in life, to promote prevention (Kowal et al. 2021) and to cope with collective crises (Boldi, Rapp & Tirassa, 2022). The intensity of these experiences could be even greater considering that fans of ‘Persona 5’ can be Otakus: a profile attributed with a hyper-fixation to japanese media. Azuma (2009) highlights their marginal introverted nature, although they became a global influential phenomenon that now disposes the negative connotation of the term (Bowman, 2022). Even Jenkins saw the Otaku movement as a key for liberating young consumers from the conformity of a narrow American culture (ibid).

There are precedents of professionals using Commercial-Off-The-Shelf games for therapy (Boldi & Rapp, 2022) and them studying the effects of gameplay on mental health related issues (Caro & Popocav, 2021). But what about players stating their own uses of the game to ultimately confront their adversities through play? This thesis aims to explore this topic.
3. Literature Review

3.1. The Japanese Video Game in the Media Sphere

3.1.1. The Meaning of ‘Game’ and what it means to play it.

Playing is well-known for constituting one of the most basic activities to achieve meaning in life (Fraser et al. 2023). People who play immerse themselves in pleasurable activities where they simulate social experiences, having an opportunity to reproduce real-life conflicts, reflect and emerge from the play context with resolution (Granic, Lobel & Engels, 2014).

Attempting to define what a ‘game’ is has proven to be a gargantuan task, as demonstrated in Juul’s (2010) exploration of the concept. Frome (2019), in light of Juul’s findings, states that a game is “a constructed system that motivates players to take actions according to [fixed] rules, to achieve a goal” (p.861). This attempt to unify various perspectives among ‘Game Studies’, shares many traits with Huizinga’s (1955) definition of ‘play’: whose work Homo Ludens is considered the most influential exploration of the topic (Raessens, 2010).

“Play is ‘a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary life’ as being ‘not meant’, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings’” - Huizinga (1955; from Raessens 2010, p.10).

Namely, a ‘constructed system’ aligns with Huizinga’s notion of a game ‘standing consciously outside ordinary life’, the ‘motivation’ aspect collides with players being ‘absorbed intensely’ by the game, and the fixed rules do explicitly appear. However, the components of freedom, and the promotion of social groupings are still too relevant to not consider them, and the ‘no profit can be gained’ part seems to contradict Frome’s (2019) achievement of goals, although it appears he refers to in-game goals while Huizinga(1955) implies ulterior external motives.

The transmedial nature of games as a medium becomes evident when seeing people playing card games in their phones, or console games are versioned into board games, making the format issue irrelevant to Juul (2010) and not even being mentioned in Huizinga’s exploration.
The video game’s format not only fits the definitions explored, but these games also enhance the experience by letting the computer automate, uphold and enforce the rules; increasing the possibilities for more complex games and liberating the players from monitoring tasks (ibid). So, video games are not any different, just a paradigm shift in how we conceive them as media entertainment (Roig et al. 2009).

Stating this ‘gameplay’ function becomes relevant at unraveling what makes it different from traditional media (Shaw, 2012), since interactive media have existed before (Frome, 2019). The gameplay aspect allows players to set goals and decide over their experience depending on the outcome they wish to achieve (Mlimperos et al. 2013), while interactivity can also encompass fixed limited participation aimed to include consumers in the artwork. As there is not “one” correct answer (Carstens & Beck, 2005), players can choose not only to participate, but also how: whether it is obtaining new digital outfits or choosing a path to win the game.

In light of Apter (1993), players frame these gameplay experiences under their individuality and context. These frames are premises that define mental models (Mlimperos et al. 2013), which are hypothesized to be a source of the complexity behind the varying uses and ‘affects’ of video games (Frome, 2019). They serve the purpose of fitting oneself in the fictional world to attempt explaining how that space works, predict future events and decide how to act (Craik, 1943; from Tamborini & Bowman, 2010). For instance, playing from narrative frames makes players appraise different criteria than playing the same game to relax from busy life.

Yet, even if everybody uses a game with equal motives, their models could remain different. These models are dynamic intentions of play that can change -or be changed by the game- at any moment, even without conscious awareness (Klimmt et al. 2010; Poppelaars et al. 2018).

In other words, personal motivations lead to the search for gratifications in the shape of game outcomes (Fritz & Stöckl, 2023), reached by utilizing the game’s resources and information in unique and personal ways (Baranowski et al. 2008). Their individual mental models frame their experiences beyond the creators’ intentions, albeit the affordances provided by designers do condition possibilities of play (Kim, 2014). Hence, players ‘follow the mental trajectory of the media designer’ (Manovich 2001, p.74) while negotiating meanings (Roig et al. 2009).
3.1.2. Game design, the ‘sculpting of desire’

Video games’ quality of telling stories in an interactive fashion (Klimmt et al. 2010) resides in their ability to tackle different ‘imaginaries’: either dealing with thematic content, full-on narratives, or raw gameplay lacking intrinsic storytelling elements (Boldi & Rapp, 2022). That said, given the amount of technological affordances, one cannot fall in considering this medium just another storytelling channel (Jenkins, 2004). [x] Due to narratives being linear, the more fixed they become, the less freedom the game provides (Costikyan, 2003); hence why they are often just used as interactive drivers for players’ agency in tackling in-game objectives (Lee & Chen, 2023) to choose satisfying courses of action (Cassidy, 2011).

These narratives give context to the fixed rules and cosmologies that characterize the diegesis and enables the representation of a fiction that, rather than trying to faithfully mimic the real (Jensen & Vistisen, 2017); references the ‘ordinary-world’ while working with its own logic (Elvery, 2022). Thus, designing fiction involves abstracting reality (Juul, 2007) to suspend a player’s disbelief (Klimmt et al. 2009) [x] as far as resource constraints allow it. Since the quality of the representation cannot ensure realism (Kim, 2014), the game designers take into account their limitations and decide which elements shall be kept in the game and which will be discarded (Squire, 2006). Succeeding in this task, besides considering the possible mental models of players, is what makes possible the creation of discursive virtual spaces ruled by a logic similar enough to be transferable to our real-life ontology (Ronald Shaw & Warf, 2009).

As a result, the representations found in said virtual space become more real and embodied; therefore altering players’ immersion and affection levels (ibid). The interaction between the technological affordances and in-game storytelling create the stimuli necessary to simulate a social experience and motivate players to live it (Borman & Greitemeyer, 2015). Incentives and provided feedback can enhance said experience thanks to new behavioral developments in NPCs (Ochs et al. 2010; Kavli, 2012; Baranowski et al. 2008). This technological progress, nevertheless, renders the relevance of producing ‘ethically notable games’ (Zagal, 2009; from Schrier, 2017) [x] that allow players to reflect on their moral choices (Formosa et al. 2022).

In light of Schrier’s design principles categories for morally designed games (2017), it can be stated that ‘ATLUS’ developed ‘Persona 5’ complying with all the criteria instead of dictating players how to act.
3.1.3. Cultural Production for a ‘Glocalized’ Audience

Regardless of the foregoing, companies are way more profit-oriented than vocation-driven, which may seem counterintuitive when remembering Huizinga’s (1955; from Raessens 2010) conceptualization of play as an activity not performed by material interests. Since consumers are the ones playing, this profit-focus perspective results in processes of macro-production where video games are designed to fit in standards that can reach wider audiences: following conventions, archetypes and tested formulas of specific genres (Juul, 2007; Klimt et al. 2010)

Thus, this reputation of games as thoughtful experiences comes mainly from viability costs past the designers desires (Baranowski et al. 2008): focusing on making players care for the game’s elements to introduce them in its transmedial consumption cycle. To accomplish this, the industry may use strategies like representing marketable minorities (Shaw, 2012) or select males as lead characters (Haggis, 2016) since, as Cohen (2014) comments: female players are less affected by the avatar’s gender when deciding to play a game or buy one of its products.

No game can be understood in isolation, but as part of conglomerates of cultural interests and products distributed through diverse consumption channels through which companies find ways to commodify their return through the consumers’ media entertainment. In the case of the Japanese industry, the circulation of these analog media forms is known as anime media mix (Ito, 2008; Steinberg, 2012): where characters and artifacts are created considering their convergence across media formats, such as manga -Japanese comic books-, anime -Japanese cartoons-, toys, cards, plushies, etc. (Ganzón, 2019).

Figure 1. List of ‘Design Principles Categories’ provided by Shrier (2017, p.319)

1. Support problem-solving activities
2. Enable appropriate choices and consequences
3. Provide appropriate constraints and rewards
4. Support social interactions, community, and communication
5. Provide opportunities for personalization and expression
6. Enable teaching and training
7. Support accessibility and authenticity
8. Provide appropriate story, dramatic, and narrative elements
9. Ensure accuracy and validity
10. Be morally conscious and critical
In many cases, this business model of diversifying successful assets into different content forms (Oóhagan, 2007) is fueled as well by transmedia storytelling, where each item contributes to a larger narrative economy (Jenkins, 2004) and missing a piece affects the gathering of meanings (Bowman, 2022). This is worrisome considering that not all goods make it out of Japan as it happened initially with the ‘Persona’ saga, given that the popularity of later installments made passionate gamers want to know the origin of its representations.

Nakamura (2006) throws implications of games being mostly localized from Japan instead of into Japanese, as the eastern country is still considered the second largest video game market worldwide (Oóhagan, 2007). This obliges a consideration of the ‘glocal’ (Robertson, 1995) to shape the game and its development for its worldwide distribution, which often results in the portrayal of cultural blends (Consalvo, 206). All these intricacies lead consumers to build stories out of scattered/blurry information (Bormann & Greitmeyer, 2015) to validate and create meanings (Ötsuka, 2010). Mittell (2015) called them ‘forensic fans’ (Bowman, 2022).

Provided that “an individual reader’s interpretation will necessarily be shaped by his/her own cultural biases, assumptions and life experience” (Cassidy 2011, p. 295), the possibility of players to ‘control’ these meanings evidences that what people do with media involves more than just consumption, and that gaming is related to other media practices (Roig et al. 2009).

### 3.2. The Central Role of the Immersion Phenomenon

#### 3.2.1. Classifying Game[r]s: Motivation, Reputation and Consumption

The great majority of people play video games regularly whether on console, PC or phone apps, but not everyone considers themself a ‘gamer’ (Shaw, 2012). This recognition depends on every person self-image, but some authors theorized that this matter depends of a plethora of variable like a game’s genre, the players’ motivation to play, the frequency and time of the activity, or the stigma that the video games’ medium drags as a whole (Hirst, 2011; Granic, Lobel & Engels, 2014; Peracchia, Presaghi & Curcio, 2019; Fritz & Stöckl, 2023).

This bad reputation has been well documented to date, where games are viewed due to the possible moral impacts they may carry by allowing the player to perform anti-social and even violent actions and feel gratifications from it without facing any consequences (Reid, 2012; Mlimperos et al. 2013; Shrier, 2017). Knowing that players frame their experiences according to their context and individuality, this could result in the fostering of hostile mental models.
The audiences have often ignored these ideological effects of consuming media entertainment (Kim, 2014) as a ‘just for fun’ motto shapes a culture where games and their representations are deemed uninfluential. By stating that nothing that happens in the game matters owing to it being fictional, players avert their gaze from moral and diversity issues, like the stereotypical representations of gender found in many virtual spaces (Shaw, 2012; Haggis, 2016).

Although ‘Persona 5’ is a console offline single player game, it remains crucial to remember that effects attributed to computer online games can be manifested too, just in different ways or contexts (Romic, 2023; personal communication). Situations like peer-pressure on in-game bullying are central problems in online game spaces, but these can also appear in instances of the offline game having a negative general reputation -for instance, being childish- or it being linked to the already battered Otaku circle (Bowman, 2022). What both online and offline do share is the danger of addiction due to over-involvement in the game (Deleuze et al. 2019), a condition so concerning that it has even been recognized by the World Health Organization with the name of Gaming Disorder (Fraser et al. 2023).

Yet, all these effects have not been empirically nor statistically demonstrated successfully to date (Mlimperos et al. 2013). For example, Lee & LaRose (2007) do state the hyperbole of naming these problematic media uses by terms like ‘addiction’, as many people “overcome the symptoms of media addiction without clinical intervention” (Hall & Parsons, 2001; from Lee & LaRose 2007, p.632). The controversy over this topic comes mainly from a possibility of the gameplay-behavior correlation representing a backwards causation, meaning that video games with content generally deemed aggressive or disruptive are more attractive to already aggressive or disruptive people, and not the other way around (Ronald Shaw & Warf, 2009).

Tamborini & Bowman (2010) comment on how these negative assumptions often negate the games’ potential for learning new prosocial models, and Shrier (2017) adds that the games’ contribution to moral/ethical decision-making and self-reflection cannot be overlooked, by neither ‘hardcore gamers’ or ‘casual gaming fans’ (Consalvo 2009; from Shaw, 2012). This distinction between heavy and light gamers is an intent of creating a player typology, but both Juul (2010) and Consalvo (2009) agreed on how much more useful is to classify players’ uses of video games instead (Peracchia, Presaghi & Curcio, 2019); as all gamers play for fun, but what people find entertaining is not clear nor the same for everyone (Baranowski et al. 2008).
Yee (2006; from Reid, 2012) found three typologies of play, in compliance with video games’ uses and drives of intrinsic motivation: 1) playing for achievements and power, 2) to immerse oneself in the virtual, and 3) for the possibility of social interaction. Even a single-player game like ‘Persona 5’ can benefit from these later socially immersive gratifications, provided that gamers are able and eager to build parasocial relationships with in-game elements and characters (Frome, 2019). This is relevant because it means that just playing alone in a room can fulfill many satisfactions such as the needs for coping, dissociation, exploration, grieving, leadership, role-playing, relief, escapism or even killing time (Fritz & Stockl, 2023).

### 3.2.2. Feeling present: Parasocial Experiences of Identification

There are varying ways to feel present in a video game. For instance, spatial presence refers to the conformation of the subjective experiences of players in digital geographies (Klimmt et al. 2009; Tamborini & Bowman, 2010) whereas a sensory media awareness of ‘embodied others’ with whom players can connect and interact (Mlimperos et al. 2013; Cohen, 2014) is known as social presence (Tamborini & Bowman, 2010). The believability of NPCs owing to their masterful composition of personality, relation models and expression of emotions (Ochs et al. 2010; Elvery, 2022) allows players to take ownership of these characters, ensuring that they no longer belong solely to the original creators (Jenkins, 1992; from Bowman, 2022).

The bond resulting from an unidirectional mediated interplay with an in-game element during media consumption might generate PSIs -parasocial interactions- (Elvery, 2022), whereas its repetition over time can make it evolve into a PSR -parasocial relationship- (Cohen, 2014). A PSR with fictional characters is compatible with ordinary relationships with physical people, provided that the intensity of the former does not endanger the latter (Cohen, 2014).

When parasociality is experienced by players relating to their avatar as their representation in the game -rather than commanding a character already established by the story (Kavli, 2012)- is when players can enter in self-preservation states by processes of identification (Tamborini & Bowman, 2010), considering themselves social entities in the virtual geography by adopting in-game roles and, thus, adapting their identity (Vorderer, 2000; from Klimmt et al. 2009). So, in what Squire (2006) conceptualizes as becoming a hybrid version of oneself, ‘identification’ has been defined as a temporary shift in players’ self-perceptions (Klimmt et al. 2010).
Identification is enhanced when the player’s attitudes coincide with the game’s goals, thereby resulting in positive game outcomes (ibid). Conversely, personal traits that are irrelevant or detrimental for the game’s objectives could be ignored while self-reflecting (Cohen, 2014). Ergo, identification is unstable because gamers may sometimes differentiate themselves as beings ‘immersed’ in the game, from characters that already live there (Klimmt et al. 2009).

3.2.3. Immersion & the Therapeutic Potential of Video Games

The success of any video game relies heavily on how it facilitates the feeling of immersion (Ochs et al. 2010): a ‘digital swimming’ defined by placing all attention and perception in the virtual world, to the brink of even disregarding notions of space and time (Kim, 2014). Be it gameplay or story, immersed players experience extreme focus and intrinsic rewards when immersed (Boldi & Rapp, 2022); perceiving chances for meaningful choices and relations and affecting their cognition (Tamborini & Bowman, 2010; Bormann & Greitemeyer, 2015).

Csikszentmihalyi’s (1991) flow theory has been proposed to explain video game consumption (Sherry, 2004; from Lee & LaRose, 2007) inasmuch immersion can only be reached while performing an activity with optimal involvement (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2021), whose hyper-focused state can lead to players losing control over their self-regulatory drives and reflectivity (Lee & LaRose, 2007). Counterintuitively, flow has also been linked to improving mood on players and decreasing their anxiety levels, proving effective to tackle mental health related issues (Hirst, 2021). This later author shows, in her work about the ludic recovery of US military veterans, how video games were used for rehabilitation purposes, dealing with PTSD, suicide prevention, therapeutic relief or healing from emotional distress; items already explored by other authors like Boldi & Rapp (2022) or Barr & Copeland-Stewart (2021).

If we assume self-determination theory, which argues that an individual’s intrinsic motivation arises when playing for fun with no other external push than satisfying needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness (Ryan et al. 2006; from Poppeliers et al. 2018); video games can be regarded as effective bearers of physical, social and cognitive benefits (Kowal et al. 2021). This theory works in the video games’ medium due to matching with Huizinga’s (1955) conceptualization of play as an activity free from material interests. The satisfaction of these three needs can be enhanced by narrative elements since, given the games’ safe milieu (Carstens & Beck, 2005), the feedback to the players’ actions allows the transfer of lessons learned there to the ‘ordinary life’ (Formosa et al. 2022). As Boldi & Rapp (2022) summarize:
“Digital games give people the opportunity to gradually experience themselves in a protected and structured environment: [...] they offer the opportunity to interact in a space that has clear rules [where] individuals can face challenges similar to those that they encounter in real life, but in more manageable and rewarding ways.” - Boldi & Rapp (2022, p. 2663)

Hirst (2011) states that this potential referred by Boldi & Rapp (2022) can be used as possible and temporary proxies for therapy in cases where people lack time, resources or a motivation of undergoing counseling; probably due to being an always available, effective and preferred source of stress-relief (Tamborini & Bowman, 2012). Either way, professionals already work with video games in therapy, mainly to start a dialogue about traumatic experiences (Dini, 2012) by using the game’s geography and content as metaphors to express untold feelings through gameplay and characters to identify with (Boldi & Rapp, 2022).

Some examples of the many benefits that Kowal et al. (2021) mentioned comes from video games being able to boost creativity, motivation, prosociality, problem-solving management skills, spatial sensoriality, emotional agency and psychomotor functions (Granic, Lobel & Engels, 2014; Boldi & Rapp, 2022; Boldi, Rapp & Tirassa, 2022) The parasociality in fantasy RPGs, for instance, was alluded to assist people with depression and help them cope with loneliness (Kowal et al. 2021; Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2021), as people engaging in mediated relationships can avoid the fear of rejection (Elvery, 2022).

3.3. The Online Spread of Cathartic Offline Stories

3.3.1. Escapism: The Player during Personal Crisis

The self-presence state in video games reached via processes of identification, immersion and a focus on (para)social interaction (Tamborini & Skalski, 2016), as mentioned before, do help simulate the challenges of ‘ordinary life’, which enables the internalization of an individual’s personal struggles and allow them to escape from day-to-day representations (Ronald Shaw & Warf, 2009; Klimmt et al. 2009). Visiting these ‘other worlds’ is as instant as running a program (Dini, 2012), which makes escaping to ‘the virtual’ an easy solution to detach from dissatisfactions or avert thinking on current burdens (Deleuze et al. 2019; Fraser et al. 2023). Since games can aid in combating symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress, players do use them for emotional management (Boldi, Rapp & Terrassa, 2022) and to offset weak senses of connectedness or belonging, fighting feelings of loneliness and isolation (Kowal et al. 2021).
Difficult moments and personal crises threaten the predictability of everyday life by making people feel unprotected and disconnected between each other. This may disrupt the sensations of normality and consistency by cracking the regularity and continuity of people’s routines, thereby exposing them to a deprivation of stimuli, precarity, danger, boredom, meaning loss (Boldi, Rapp & Tirassa, 2022). Going through these moments do change the ways people use media (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2021), which reconfigures the motives, habits and ways of playing. Instead than for fun, now players may boot the game to cope with their emotional distress by escaping to worlds with fixed rules and controlled variables (Klimmt et al. 2009).

This is why researchers have observed the phenomenon of ‘escapism’ as players preferring virtual worlds over the physical (Deleuze et al. 2019), a process that operates regardless of game genre (Fraser et al. 2023) and can be considered both maladaptive or non-damaging: all depending on each individual’s personal use of the game. While it may seem obvious at first glance, playing for coping or for mood management (Tamborini & Bowman, 2010) does not eliminate problematic media uses (Deleuze et al. 2019). Therefore, one cannot assume that an outcome is always non-damaging due to the possibility of being accompanied by other items like excessive play time or procrastination (Lee & Chen, 2023).

A clear example of this comes with the concept of wishful identification: the urge to be like the character in front of you (Klimmt et al. 2009). While it may seem that admired portrayals could motivate players to immerse in the game to find ways of compensating for deficiencies (Fraser et al. 2023), it also may make them feel shameful and guilty at perceiving the distance from the representation of what -or how- they want to be (Klimmt et al. 2009).

Despite the inability to know whether they are truly non-damaging, escapist behaviors are useful to prevent overthinking about fears or feelings of insecurity, to serve as a call for action (Caro & Popovac, 2021) and to recover senses of structure that might have been lost during a crisis, by finding the time spent inside the game something relaxing and meaningful (Deleuze et al. 2019). Thus, “whether the effects are positive or negative depends on whether the player uses it as a source to regain self-determination or as an escape.” (Lee & Chen 2023, p.352); being just a matter of what outweighs what in the player's stories of ‘emersion’.
3.3.2. Emerging Stories about Cathartic Video Games’ Uses

“What happens after you play? Frequently, you make up a story about what happened. Play is how we learn; stories are how we integrate what we've learned” - Costikyan (2003, p.7)

Costikyan (2003) calls ‘gaming’ a democratic art-form inasmuch interacting with a game is, in itself, an act of ‘real-time’ narration. This renders the importance of games being designed as a means for players’ collaboration in creating their own stories through play (Kim, 2014). In compliance with Davis, Waycott & Zhou (2015), the creation of personal narratives is beneficial when experiencing undesirable circumstances, as players reflect on the gameplay experience by relating to their everyday life and difficulties (Boldi, Rapp & Tirassa, 2022).

The aforementioned article from Hirst (2021) exemplifies this phenomena, where veterans of the military found out that how to use games for rehabilitation by playing things related to traumatic memories in the warzone; getting the chance to perform introspection with full safety and control and getting to feel support from their peers and the civilians:

“[Choosing a wargame] almost helped them calm down to the extent that they said it was less stressful spending the day getting shot at if they could hear the sounds, they could do other situations later on that night in the privacy of a bunker with friends where they knew it wasn’t life-threatening. To an extent almost it took the edge off for them.” - Hirst, 2021 (p.495)

This ‘appropriation’ of video games to use them for emergent needs rather than for what they were conceived for (Boldi, Rapp & Tirassa, 2022) grants several possibilities for personal growth due to how salient playing can be during decisive moments (Tamborini & Bowman, 2010). So, according to their current mental models, players can find a plethora of unexplored possibilities from which to gather new understandings of both themselves and the world they might have escaped from (Roig et al. 2009). This inevitable reconfiguration (Costikyan, 2003) upon exiting the virtual world is what I decided to call ‘emersion’, a process happening in the reflective interplay amidst the represented and the experienced (Ronald Shaw & Warf, 2009).

The cathartic release consisting in recapping difficult or traumatic times does assist those writing them in reaching emotional proficiency by putting all their thoughts together (Granic, Lobel & Engels, 2014), and comforting the readers by not only making them feel connected and understood; but also alerted about the possibility of unconscious self-harming behaviors (Veer, Ozanne & Hall, 2016). Coming back again to Hirst’s (2011) work, one testimonial exemplified clearly how sharing a story through play did help in a case of suicidal thoughts:
“After playing these games, we finally got down that the guy was having depressive episodes, he was suicidal, [...] His literal words I think to me were, ‘I had all these really bad thoughts and I just ignored them but they were still there’. That allowed him to hear from someone [...] ‘you’re not alone, don’t feel ashamed, don’t feel bad about that’. He ended up seeing a psychiatrist for the first time since he deployed and he is actually doing wonderful now. He actually helps out with a suicide prevention group.” - Hirst (2011, p.497-498)

3.3.3. Building Oneself: Metacommunication and Sharing Narratives in Online Found Communities

The internet as a socially disruptive technology (Bowman, 2022) offers great affordances to generate, disseminate and discuss information about crises on social media and online forums (Boldi, Rapp & Tirassa, 2022). This makes it ideal as a connector of people in processes of grieving and resilience, owing to facilitating processes of reflection and introspection (Veer, Ozanne & Hall, 2016) that could lead to obtain help from others, as well as for the bereaved to aid others too (Sian Lee, 2011). Veer, Ozane & Hall (2016) state that little research to date has investigated this impact of online-sharing a constructive recounting of destructive events.

This affordance of the internet helped people suffering from social exclusion, due to crises or difficulties in their lives, to find ways to participate in the ‘cultural systems’ of their society (Davis, Waycott & Zhou, 2015); because creating and sharing content online served people to experience a catharsis by sharing their experiences in Internet communities to grow stronger and socialize, which cannot be generalized as attention seeking (Veer, Ozanne & Hall, 2016).

This fostered the irruption of the ‘prosumer’ (Sian Lee, 2011), a figure that did blur the boundaries between the spheres of production and consumption (Roig et al. 2009). In the case of players, the resulting exchanges of stories related to games in online forums did accelerate and increased affective fan engagement of games with intricate narratives (Bowman, 2022), making way to a ‘democratization of participation’ characterized by players producing their own texts, meanings, communities and artifacts (Kim, 2014).

Provided that online communication involves sharing personal information, awareness about the treatment and access of said stories through metadata is necessary to avoid exploitation from third-parties or malicious users (Jensen, 2018). The sheer quantity of intense stories available online makes this matter just as relevant as how being exposed to so many of these might lead to desensitizing the readers (Bachen, Hernandez-Ramos & Raphael, 2012).
Still, many people find group discussions a meaningful and pleasurable experience (Bereswill & Morgenroth, 2010): as places where they can feel like they are not alone, relax and speak openly ((Davis, Waycott & Zhou, 2015; Boldi & Rapp, 2022). Just the emotional expression alone can contribute to shaping oneself and one’s social circles (Sian Lee, 2011) which, in turn, is making online creators interested in using games as an adequate media to address the complexity of certain themes; thus suggesting its importance and potential as a medium for personal, social and cultural expression (Haggis, 2016).

Although many prefer single-player games to be fully in control of the achievement of goals and play conditions (Lee & Chen, 2023), solitary games like ‘Persona 5’ can carry meaning and capacity for growth and understanding too (Dini, 2012). Even ignoring parasociality, rare is the player who ‘games’ alone, because even these games propel people to tell stories and engage in conversations online (Squire, 2006). These online interactions play a crucial role despite their exclusive media presence (Cohen, 2014), since they provide a judgment-free space where they meet supportive and connection-related needs (Caro & Popovac, 2021) by talking about similar stories of how they have used this game they hold dear (Hirst, 2021).
4. Theoretical Framework

Broad is the range of theories that researchers have employed to explain phenomena related to video games and its media usage and consumption, and most of the knowledge compiled in this document required assuming their current viability and trustworthiness. Among the authors appearing in this document, studies based on psychological premises took part of the spotlight: with Self-Determination theory addressing the source of intrinsic motivation, while Zillman’s Mood Management and Csikszentmihalyi’s Flow theories attempt to explain the concepts of emotional self-regulation and media immersion, respectively (Reid, 2012).

Although not the focus of this research, they are a necessary premise to take into account, just like the sociological contributions of Horton and Wohl with the much mentioned Parasocial Interaction Paradigm (Banks & Bowman, 2014) or Bandura’s social cognitive theory; which seeks how users “learn modeled behaviors through interacting with mediated content” (Mlimperos et al. 2013, p.353). These theories are relevant because they bring the study of mass media together with the study of interpersonal communication (Cohen, 2014).

Media System Dependency theory has been used in Sian Lee’s (2011) exploration of emotion in YouTube, but I decided not to use it for my investigation because my case does not revolve around how mandatory are the games or online spaces for the satisfaction of users’ needs; but rather how players use both forms of media to satisfy needs they may not be even aware of at first glance. Henceforth, Uses & Gratifications theory complies with my study’s requisites.

Jensen (2018) approaches this theory by reorienting the question ‘what media do to people’ to ‘what people do with media’, thereby highlighting the audiences’ as being active and having agency over their uses of media. The interest here is not to deduct generalizable effects but to produce, instead; ‘thick data’ on the purpose of what users are doing, or could do, in relation to media (Roig et al. 2009). According to Sherry et al. (2006), the gratification sought can be motivated by extrinsic reasons such as utility, or simply by intrinsic satisfactions; depending on the basic needs of the person, current situation, and its individuality. A key aspect of U&G theory worth mentioning is that not every sought gratification is obtained, and those obtained do not always match the ones initially sought (Lin, 1999; Krcmar & Strizhakova, 2009).
As already mentioned in the literature review, players who find themselves in difficult times might reconfigure the motives and ways of using games in what several researchers call an ‘appropriation’ of the medium for its use beyond their original purpose. Given that this theory of Uses & Gratifications has provided insights into how different forms of mass media could be adopted by the audience (Weyan, 2015), it results in a good option to support this analysis. Lin (1999) brags about how this one is among the few theories that the field of media and communication studies can really call its own, and offers a helpful summary of the matter.

“[Uses & Gratifications theory] aims to explain the psychological needs that help shape why people use the media and that motivate people to engage in media use behaviors to derive gratifications to fulfill those intrinsic needs within the confines of a particular socio-cultural environment. [It also] recognizes that individuals differ along several psychological dimensions which, in turn, prompt them to make different choices about which media to patronize, and even individuals exposed to the same media content will respond to it in different ways depending on their characteristics.” - Lin (1999, p.200)

The fact that this thesis works so hand in hand with many psychological concepts, such as the processes of identification, immersion or parasocial relationships; and the explicit mention of ‘needs’ makes it already suitable for this analysis, since the centrality of intrinsic needs has been already brought to the table thanks to self-determination theory.

Back to Lin’s (1999) definition, U&G theory requests the research to be located ‘within the confines of a particular socio-cultural environment’, besides recognizing that the ‘individuals differ along several psychological dimensions’ and that those ‘exposed to the same media content will respond to it in different ways depending on their characteristics’. As this investigation aims to generate ‘thick data’ about a specific online community and has already explored the concept of players’ mental models framing their gaming experiences, this theory seems to fit the criteria to support my research.

Relevant to this matter about online communities is the already cited ‘prosumer’, since the way that this figure blurred the boundaries of consumption and production (Roig et al. 2009) together with characteristics of the Internet like its interactivity, asynchronicity -meaning that communication can be deferred over time- or how it fostered processes of demassification; has made the research of audiences’ U&G experience a renaissance (Weylan, 2015)
During the process of creating my literature review, I detected that U&G has been explicitly mentioned by Granic, Lobel & Engels (2014) and Lee & LaRosse (2007), while assumed by Squire (2006) in the author expressing how we can only understand games by comprehending what players do with them and the meanings they build through their actions. Besides, U&G is fully implemented in Sherry et al. (2006) and Fritz & Stöckl’s (2023) works to analyze the dominant dimensions of video game use, on behalf of the former; and to synthesize typologies of video games uses and motivations on behalf of the latter. Yet, both papers did focus on general uses instead of considering how difficult times and personal burdens can affect these.

Caro & Popovac (2021) do comment on how few studies have investigated these specific affairs of the use of video games during personal and collective crises, and while models to investigate this phenomena have been created in the realms of psychology -like the authors’ scale of Gaming in Difficult Life Situations, or the Gaming Motivation Scale from Peracchia, Presaghi & Curcio (2019)-, these have not consider the premises of Uses & Gratifications theory despite the similarities they share. Jr. Merrill et al. (2022) provide the necessary notion of few studies looking at U&G theory to research similarly concerning matters in other forms of media, such as their exploration of uses and gratifications of music during bereavement.

Thus, and accordingly, these later authors defend the importance of exploring the phenomena from a perspective of U&G, given that the therapeutic potential of media like music or video games cannot lead to assume that they only serve this purpose during burdensome processes. For that reason, among the two basic psychological needs featured in the U&G tradition, the focus of this research will mainly remain on the deficiency needs, which are those that derive from an internal dissatisfaction (Lin, 1999). However, non-deficiency needs that just act as a self-actualization will also be taken into account if necessary.

Granted, U&G has received a fair amount of critics stating the limitations of its application. Krcmar & Struzhakova (2009) list some of them, like the lack of clarity around the meanings of the concepts constructed or how it is possible to know if a gratification was really obtained, to which several researchers have argued that the example of ‘obtained gratifications’ is used more often to measure outcomes like enjoyment or satisfaction rather than seeking what did actually happen. This resulted in another critique, in which academics question whether users are conscious enough to recognize their gratifications, their needs or the fulfillment of these.
Weylan (2015) adds, as well, that the traditional U&G paradigm should be revised to fit new emergent forms of media since, otherwise, the liberties over interpretations and choosings of new media would make research too individualistic and non-hegemonic (Ruggiero, 2000). All this said, most U&G theorists have embraced their applications of concepts due to embracing them from more established disciplines and adding to this in-constant-evolution theory (ibid), like Lin (1999) calling U&G an axiomatic theory owing to the general acceptance of its basic principles and its wide range of possible applications. Even the very Ruggiero argued that ‘any attempt to speculate on the future direction of mass communication theory must seriously include the Uses & Gratifications approach’ (2000, p.3; from Weylan, 2015).
5. Methodology

My research comprises abductive logic, an idealistic ontological perspective, a constructionist epistemological assumption and the contemporary hermeneutics paradigm. This means I aim to uncover the depths of this case through providing concepts out of the data to explain the phenomena by embracing the shared interpretations of the social actors that belong to the subject of study (Blaikie & Priest, 2017). The hermeneutical tradition is approached from the perspective of ‘double hermeneutics’, because it involves the interpretation of realities that have been already interpreted by audiences (Jensen, 2018). As no researcher can be free from preconceptions (Bereswill & Morgenroth, 2010), using ‘depth hermeneutics’ for selecting the data will support the already established framework and provide conceptual foundations too (Burles & Bally, 2018). Markham (2012) exposes very clearly why this is necessary

“Data include not only activities and artifacts observed or found in the field, but also those negotiated understandings derived from the researcher’s own participation and presence [...] Each logistical and methodological decision constitutes a choice with consequences: Each move influences the range of vision, the shape of the phenomenon, and the type and form of data through which a description or explanation is developed.” - Markham (2012, p.341)

The spirit of an investigation approached from these foundations asks for an equally effective qualitative methodology. With the objective of choosing a rationale that narrows the research down to a relevant area of study, I have decided to focus on how the video game text has been interpreted and what is the context behind the uses that led to such readings. In light of Rose’s (2016) criteria for interpretive methods, an ethnographic methodology seems appropriate to fit in the nature of this inquiry, embedded in the site of ‘audiencing’ within a social modality.

Among the specific methods, netnography strives to follow traditional ethnographic standards and values by pointing to form ‘thick descriptions’ in naturalistic settings through observation and, sometimes, participation in the community; to reach deep understanding of the meanings exhibited and their ‘behind-the-scenes’ (Markham, 2012). This should be achieved through a profound immersion in the cultural practices of the online environment (Kozinets 2010; from Bowler Jr, 2010), very akin to the explored ‘flow theory’ resulting from playing video games.

Netnography distinguishes itself from other ethnographies by approaching online instead of offline communities, and differs from other investigative Internet research as content analysis by collecting meanings rather than concluding them (Costello McDermott & Wallace, 2017).
5.1. Netnography

According to Kozinets’ recommendations to follow accurate procedures (2010), netnography consists on 1) gaining access -the ‘entrée’- to the online community most suitable for the research questions formulated, 2) a data collection phase that comprises observing the site’s activities, interactions and generated meanings; and 3) an interpretative analysis that involves the classification and codification of notes taken (Burles & Bally, 2018). Since representations are partial, partisan and problematic, no research can represent ‘reality’ as a whole (Markham 2012). Reality being far too complex is the reason that the abstraction process present in the abductive logic of inquiry serves the purpose to generate meanings (Blaikie & Priest, 2017).

One of the main controversies on so-called ‘netnographic studies’ is the dichotomy between participant and non-participant observation. Coming from the ethnographic field, the authors that actively participated in their research process criticize those avoiding or passively lurking an already established online setting (Kozinets 2010; from Bowler Jr. 2010). Supposedly, relying on just monitoring the information available misses the dynamics of integration to the community, the adaptation cycle and the deep involvement of the researcher. So, being part of the fan culture is necessary (Philips, 2011; from Costello, McDermott & Wallace, 2017).

Yet, an active participation is not always appropriate inasmuch this study deals with sensitive personal stories, and the explicit presence of outsiders may hinder the trust that users attribute to their safe online shelters (ibid). Furthermore, passive observance is safe from reaction bias (Burles & Bally, 2018). Then, how could one keep the closeness to the community without taking part in interacting with their members? One way could be by using autoethnographic approaches to frame meanings. By reflecting on personal emotions, the relatedness to the topic can mediate the interpretation of the text (Costello, McDermott & Wallace, 2017).

As stated in the introduction, this thesis exists due to how ‘Persona 5’ helped me overcome a difficult situation, and how moved I was when discovering others’ gratifications originated from their use of this game. This can make me feel connected to the object of study and proficient on specific terminologies only understandable by those who played them. Although a step in the right direction, I am not planning to make this an autoethnographic study. The main reason is that I find two methodological approaches too much for a thesis aiming to narrow down the topic within a limited wordcount, but my reluctance comes, as well; from a fear of not being able to rely on my memories from years ago to create personal field notes.
Nevertheless, non-participant observation can be advantageous due to not altering the present cosmos in the community; provided that a researcher does not influence the environment and thus, users can post their personal accounts without hesitations (Veer, Ozanne & Hall, 2016). Although this makes it tough to check reliable they are, seems like a suitable exchange for the capacity to acquire insights on usage behaviors, motivations and gratifications thanks to an unobtrusive research nature; even more owing to sensitive topics being discussed through the facilitating role of anonymous communication (Costello, McDermott & Wallace, 2017). Burles & Bally (2018) synthesize the positives that the limitation of not participating could confer.

“These unsolicited narratives provide access to authentic, immediate portrayals of life under specific circumstances that have the potential to generate in-depth understanding and inform health and supportive care. Furthermore, because online accounts are not produced for research purposes, they offer insight into aspects of experience prioritized by the authors (O’Brien & Clark, 2012; Seale, Charteris-Black, MacFarlane, & McPherson, 2010), as well as the narrative structures that they find meaningful.” - Burles & Bally (2018, p.2)

5.2. Data Collection

Kozinets (2015) emphasized how most of the data collected originates and manifests from the very information shared on the net (Costelli, McDermott & Wallace 2017), typifying them as: the direct data collected by the researcher, the meanings generated by grasping the interaction between the members, and the information arisen from the investigator’s field notes (Bowler Jr. 2010). Web-based data collection exceeds in matters like convenience, accessibility, and a capacity to work with sensitive subjects thanks to the net’s anonymity (Burles & Bally, 2018).

5.2.1. Reddit as Data Source

The community chosen for this endeavor is the /Persona5 subReddit, one of the many public online forums pertaining to Reddit; a giant in terms of web traffic on par with behemoths like YouTube, Facebook or even Google itself (Marantz, 2018; from Maurer, 2020). How it works is akin to the traditional formula of theme-specific forums that were popular before the rise of social media networks and its access through smartphones: the members of the subReddit can create threads, post comments in other users’ threads and vote on content they like or dislike. When starting a thread, members are able to assign categories -or ‘flairs’- that serve as filters in the realm of the subReddit, which gives them certain agency by self-coding their own posts (Veer, Ozanne & Hall, 2016); though this does not have to match my data coding as an author
People who sign up in Reddit have to choose a nickname that will serve as their ‘alter-ego’ in the forum. Making useful contributions to the community is rewarded with upvotes which, apart from improving the chances of the thread containing the upvotes to appear in the main page, recognizes the member’s input by increasing their ‘karma’ score (Maurer, 2020). Many subRedds revolve around geek interests or fandoms, and some of them are private; needing the approval from moderators that intercede each time their presence is required (ibid).

In compliance with my tutor, Reddit has not been too explored by media researchers, but this year some of us master students have chosen topics involving the site. Whether it is or not a case of growing interest, the precedent set by previous great works is certainly undeniable.

Personally, I used Jason Maurer’s (2020) research on gender representations of dark fictional characters as a role model for mine, mostly due to how it tackles contemporary hermeneutics on fictional characters, as well as addressing similar methodological approaches. That being said, the contrasting nature of our subjects seems to have made our experiences with Reddit differ considerably; since Maurer comments on how the ease of entry, anonymity and bizarre culture of the website may not secure stable and safe spaces. While those attributions are true, the many supportive comments I have found in the posts and their elevated karma ratio seems to indicate, again; the agency of the members to use their community to obtain gratifications.

5.2.2. Scope of the sample

Created in 2012, the /persona5 subReddit has, as of October 2023, 410,000 joined members; situating the community in the 1% amongst the whole website. Consequently, it is expected that the amount of threads available is gargantuan. As I knew this would be the case from the start, I already narrowed down the type of post I would use as my sample to those involving a personal story about the uses and gratifications sought or obtained from the game, rather than analyzing the first posts I could come across and then extract a percentage of narratives found

I decided to perform a non-probability purposive sampling to select the stories, whose criteria consists of reports including what they have used from the game -or how-, and a gratification emerging from the needs they wanted to fulfill before the gameplay experience. These stories are not limited to written reports: if the interpretation of a video, picture of a meme can easily offer information on the aforementioned regards, they can also be included.
To do so, I wrote in a black paper what I considered the most central words that appeared in the four stories shared in the background chapter of this thesis: the self-reports from Merigold (2020), Meitzler (2020), Bunting (2022) and Espiritu (2020). Given the qualitative character of the study, the selection did not consider how many times said keywords appeared, rather how relevant they were for the logic of the story. So, these words did not have to necessarily be the most repeated, and I chose them by trying to erase them from the report and check if it could still maintain its intended meaning.

Once written, I grouped them in three different categories: verbs that referenced gratifications -like ‘helped’, ‘saved’, ‘changed’...-, elements or characters of the video game -like ‘Maruki’, ‘confidant’ or ‘calendar’- and concepts common in the mental health discourse -like ‘trauma’, ‘real life’ or ‘cope’. Once done, I used them for queries in both Google and the subReddits’s inbuilt search widget, in order from which ones I considered had the most potential. A list of the words used is available on Appendix 2.

Keywords would be used either alone or together with the help of quotation marks, as an indication for the search engine to search word combinations, instead of them independently. Based on the amount of keywords and a few preliminary mock drills, I did reduce my sample to the first 100 threads that fit the criteria; clear statements of personal stories about uses and gratifications, sought or obtained, through playing. The comments amounted to 1718 posts.

5.2.3. The ‘USE’ Model for Data Classification

Originally, I planned to focus my research on narratives about one specific crisis: the COVID pandemic. Since the game’s remastered edition was released for the first time in my country just right before the start of the lockdown, my rationale was to study how people used P5R to cope with it. However, I found a lot of posts unrelated to the current conflict; many relating to when the original game was released and onward -2016 in Japan and 2017 worldwide-. By appreciating the similarities between these posts, I resolved that all kinds of stories should be included; to not invisibilize the diversity of factors and contexts that could cause the usage, and to give voice to all storytellers.

To classify the information and dissect the data under my observations on how narratives online all followed a structured cycle, I created what I call the ‘User’s Stories of Emergence’ model -or USE-, rooted in the U&G paradigm and the literature review displayed.
Figure 2. Explanatory diagram of the ‘USE’ system.

As seen in the diagram above, the information present in all narratives found in the subReddit can be extracted in an either perceived or explicitly stated ‘Dissatisfaction’, succeeded by a ‘Motivation’ to boot the video game, the elements that granted the players’ ‘Immersion’ into the virtual environment, and the perceptions shift’ coming from the ‘Emersion’ to real life following the gameplay experience. This approach can be regarded as an adaptation from the traditional model of Uses & Gratifications, inasmuch the ‘Dissatisfaction’ comes from a non-fulfilled deficiency need (Lin, 1999), the uses of the players’ activities performed in the game are enclosed in their ‘Immersion’, and ‘Emersion’ can include -or not- obtained gratifications.

This visual outline of the Uses and Gratifications paradigm helps in showing the similarities, while on the next page I provide an example of a note taken by employing the USE model. For anonymity reasons, this is all I can provide to show the gist of this system.
5.3. Data Analysis

Under Kozinets (2010), the process of analysis requires the classification of data in categories for its codification with a view to contextualize and interpret the information. Carrying out this endeavor requires an active effort on minimizing researcher bias and possible mistakes, to record the process in field notes and the focus of answering the research questions (Bowler Jr. 2010). Since the information available was unsolicited, it is possible to avoid concerns like users altering their responses for being subjected to research purposes (Burles & Bally, 2018).

5.3.1. Coding and interpretation

Since almost all posts are broad personal stories, I had to look for shared characteristics to separate and filter them. Through the use of keywords to search the corresponding threads, I detected fluctuations in the intensity of the stories. According to my observations, the stakes of the personal narratives were generally higher or lower depending on the words they used in the title; although sometimes it has been necessary to revise the text. Some authors do not speak English as their first language, so it is possible to find misleading or ambiguous titles.

### Figure 4. Example of a field note taken by employing the USE system.

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**Reddit Persona 5 “Makes me/my-made me/my” / -> 13/07**

79. *P5R made me want to be a better friend and person* by gertiesme [328 upvotes | 28 comments - 2y]
- **Category:** Realization
- **Format:** Written
- **Dissatisfaction:** Had an argument with their former best friend and it is too late to regain trust. Also, a chilean rebellion going on at the moment
- **Motivation:** The user watched a streamer playing the game and looked interesting.
- **Immersion:** The game themes about rising your own voice -PLOT- and being able to organize your time, make you think about your decisions and their consequences while befriending characters -MECHANICS-
- **Emersion:** It makes them contemplate the bonds they has in their life, raises their voice and be a better friend in the future. Hopeful comments about time healing and recovering broken social links.
- **Quote:** “Persona 5 helped me understand this: life is about being someone better (is so good the dynamic of the skills you have to develop to continue your social links). You have to grow up too, for yourself and the people you love.”
As shown in the table in Appendix 3, I categorized each type of story depending on the ‘Emersion’ aspect: namely, the conclusions the users come up with. The categories ended up being ‘Salvation’, ‘Resurgence’, ‘Relatedness’, ‘Realization’, ‘Appreciation’, ‘Coping’, ‘Venting’ and ‘Spiraling’; and I exemplify each one with a post example. I fully recommend to have a look at their definitions and keep the table close when reading the analysis.

For a correct interpretation of the data, I will respect the ‘hermeneutic circle’ (Blaikie & Priest, 2017), which consist in going back and forth from the specific to the whole -and vice versa- to gather sub-interpretations and join them in an interpretation pattern (Maurer, 2020). I will also draw specific techniques from methods exerted by other researchers, like analyzing the stories from the view of the storytellers with a narrative approach (Veer, Ozanne & Hall, 2016) and identifying recurrent themes via thematic analysis (Boldi, Rapp & Tirassa, 2012).

5.3.2. Analytical Process

From here onward, bearing in mind Blaikie & Priest’s (2017) stages of interpretative research as well as Kozinets’ steps to conduct a netnography (Costello, McDermott & Wallace, 2017), the procedure to continue with my research will follow the subsequent steps:

1. Establishing the researcher’s position and ethical considerations.
2. Presenting the results obtained from the posts -Appendix 1- and analyzing them.
3. Data collection by exerting the ‘USE’ model.
4. Choosing the area I will be focusing on to give answers to the research questions.
5. Discussing the resulting aspects from said area by linking it to the literature review, theoretical framework and my methodological standpoints.
6. Draw conclusions and comment about future research agendas.
6. Ethics and Limitations

Although Markham & Buchanan (2012) suggest basic principles like considering the possible harms to authors through exposure and being transparent upon the collection or management of data -like using tools, third party apps or fieldnotes-: the authors conclude the importance of ethical-decision making processes to design the best suited rulesets based on the nature of each study (Costello, McDermott & Wallace, 2017). Yet, certain matters -data access, bias, anonymity...- do require consideration in varying situated cases (Burles & Bally, 2018).

In regards to interpreting the texts, this process inevitably relies on the assumption that users can report their experiences accurately (Sherry et al. 2006), “the researcher must take seriously the role of cultural interpreter, and gain interpretative authority through rigorous and constant practice” (Markham 2012, p.348). Personally, I conceived Elvery’s (2022) work for this matter: planning to use academic articles to discuss the results as well as codified fragments from the narratives analyzed.

Since the subReddit is public and the information completely accessible, I do not consider the need to alter any data by means of the conscious use of account fabrication (Markham, 2012), which aims the construct a representation of the meanings underlying the stories; nor ask for explicit consent due to how impossible is asking all the members involved (Barker, 2008; from Burles & Bally, 2018). In spite of not being conceived for research purposes, personal stories fall under a copyright’s ‘Fair Use’ clause and, according to the authors, considerations about confidentiality can be slightly more loose when dealing with online forums; because a big number of participants makes it more difficult to connect the ideas with specific users.

This issue of users’ consent may even be unnecessary from a traditional ethnographic point of view, like the unobtrusive observations in real open settings (ibid). Besides, Robinson (2001) deems it admissible inasmuch the community is not private nor targeted to specific audiences. While de-identifying by altering the nicknames is an adequate solution to address the privacy of the members, the fact that this thesis needs to be graded asks for the source material to be available for corroboration purposes. Burles & Bally (2018) comment on how authors choose whether to restrict access to their information or delete it, as well as their likely awareness that everything they share can be read and used by others. Notwithstanding, I will preferably use already codified information and avoid referencing the authors when quoting excerpts.
7. Analysis of Results

After reading and analyzing the 100 sampled threads, I categorize the online stories depending on the ‘Emersion’ factor of the USE system. The ‘Motivation’ component was missing in almost half the narratives selected, and ‘Dissatisfactions’ were too varied to use them for classification purposes. The ‘Immersion’ item ended up being way more consistent, since many of the comments around what sold them into the game did highlight areas discussed already in the literature review: ‘Plot’ reasons like themes and story, ‘Characters’, gameplay ‘Mechanics’, the ‘Art’ or a combination of them. Some users did ‘Not specify’ which immersive element(s) they used, while others either touched all four in their stories or outright exposed why ‘Everything’ mattered. The complexity of some posts required assigning two ‘Emersion’ categories -like realization and coping, mechanics and plot, spiraling and identification, etc-, which explains how the total number of posts in the table surpasses the 100 mark.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>100 REDDIT POSTS</th>
<th>Characters</th>
<th>Plot</th>
<th>Mechanics</th>
<th>Art</th>
<th>Everything</th>
<th>Not specified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>36</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realization</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resurgence</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiraling</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatedness</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvation</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venting</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Compilation of posts by category and game aspect.
7.1. Presentation of Findings

Before dissecting the data from Table 2, I urge to glance at ‘Appendix 1’ for the first insights: necessary for its correct interpretation. As mentioned previously, the percentage of upvotes shows a positive reception of the threads, displaying a majority acceptance with many threads surpassing the 90%. Commenters used their ability to reply in four main intentions: to send messages of support, for self-reflection and expression, to have fun with ingenious comments and for discussing the topic exposed. This correlates with Sian Lee’s (2011) view on how safe communication sites enable feelings of connectedness between ‘communities-in-mourning’ (Brennan, 2008) and the bereaved (Jr. Merrill, 2022); interacting both to reach introspection.

Looking at raw numbers, threads’ bulk remains humble regarding the number of the karma scores and comments with notable exceptions, consisting mainly of memes and images like photographs and screenshots. Another way to tell if the post is text-based or not is by looking at its title: as most users posting other formats will condense all the information there. So, the longer the title, the more likely said post will not contain (almost any) written reports.

Several of these above-mentioned posts lacked, at first, enough context to be assigned with a category. Yet, these posts were still considered because they imply stories behind the scenes that just require a creative interpretation of the meme, report or titles containing a keyword like ‘changed’, ‘made’, 'helped’ or ‘saved’. Aiming to remain objective and avoid putting my bias on the center of these meanings, I created the ‘Appreciation’ category to compile them.

Half of the threads belonging to this category are pictures taken to the screen with a save file completed of the game, and all of them shared significantly the quality of gratitude. This trait allowed me to classify other text-based threads I was initially iffy on due to how they would only relate the events happening of the game with not much more substance. As the main traits of those were an emotional overflow and gratefulness, I managed to classify them there.

USE-E11 | “Thank you ATLUS, P5R has changed me so much, more than any other game.”

7.1.1. General Overview

Overall, the findings of the stories themselves include many users feeling shame of writing very viscerally about the game and what it did for them, making them acknowledge a sense of guilty pleasure (Shaw, 2012). Some of these portrayals involve sentences of the likes of:
I.e. “Feel free to cringe or laugh at the title” (USE-21), “It may seem weird to some people” (USE-52), “I apologize for how stupid might sound” (USE-97), “This is gonna sound corny” (USE-51), “This seems dumb (USE-62), “It sounds pathetic” (USE-5), etc.

Not many players mentioned the ‘Motivation’ that led them to boot the game. Among those, the reasons oscillated from seeing the game played on stream by content creators (USE-m52), being on sale (USE-m58), noting its high scores in reviews (USE-m36) or the main character appearing in the video game ‘SmashBrosUltimate’ (USE-m42). This reveals a vast proportion of users not playing to seek solutions, but rather just entertainment (Baranowski et al. 2008). This aligns with what self-determination theory already established (Poppelaars et al. 2018) and indicates that the ‘Motivation’ to start playing is not linked here with the personal crisis.

USE-88 | “I really didn’t think this game would affect me as much as it did.”

The range of explicit ‘Dissatisfactions’ present before or during gameplay is undue wide, and it did not correlate enough with how players immersed themselves in the ‘Persona 5’ universe nor how they emerged from it. Tamborini & Bowman’s (2009) notion of mental models could explain the discrepancy: as each player framed its experiences according to its individuality and context, different people would attempt to manage, differently, the same difficulty.

These ‘Dissatisfactions’, correlating with users meeting new psychological needs (Lin, 1999), range from vague statements about going through turbulent times and mental health issues, to blunt testimonies about depression (USE-d70), anxiety (USE-d42), loneliness (USE-d32), burnout (USE-d51), abuse (USE-d3), guilt (USE-d14), bullying (USE-d4), unemployment (USE-d28), coming out (USE-d50); coping with lockdown (USE-d93), disorders (USE-d69), a disability (USE-d97), or suicidal thoughts (USE-d81). Necessary to mention the anomaly of finding four posts relating the loss of relatives to cancer (USE-d38) in such a small sample.

Although I previously stated I would not engage in using autoethnographic approaches nor in their methods, I feel the need of sharing one report I felt quite identified with for the sake of transparency and to reaffirm my effort to remain close to the community. Relating as much to one of these stories is what reaffirmed my decision of creating the category of ‘Relatedness’.

“Two weeks ago, something happened that caused me to relive a traumatic event in my life from 3 years ago.” (USE-55).
7.1.2. The Paths of Healing

‘Relatedness’ reports identification with aspects of the game. Under Klimmt et al. (2009), this occurs by associating attributes of the game understood as emotional simulation, to oneself. This connection may call upon people’s experiences by strengthening their commonality with the subject. When identification happens with an avatar, players can perceive themselves as a social agent inside the game (Banks & Bowman, 2014), whose dramatic agency (Lee & Chen, 2023) can lead to developing parasocial relationships through immersion (Cohen, 2014).

USE-e97 | “I fully stepped into my role. It's one thing for a character to say "I'm counting on you", or "I love you", but it's another thing entirely to see your own name at the end of those sentences. It did wonders for making me feel like the hero of my own story.”

This category was mostly linked to the dimension of ‘Characters’, probably due to an ease to identify more with human figures compared to non-embodied themes. Finding this ‘someone’ seemed to allow the players to feel included and understood, to face their own situations and to give a sense of normalcy to their beliefs and the situations they relate to (USE-72).

USE-e21 | “I especially related deeply to everyone of the female protagonists in this game. The traumas they went through, the social stigmas they faced, the need to find where you "belonged" in this world.”

This topic is actually common in a great part of the threads here analyzed, but only posts that mightily highlighted the identification while not mentioning other uses or gratifications, were considered for this category, as practically all posts were about immersion and identification. For instance, many users reported finding ways of using the game as ‘Coping’ mechanisms to heal emotional wounds, endure scars or escape momentarily to another world (Fritz & Stöckl, 2023). Yet again, this category presents an elevated number of threads under the ‘Characters’ umbrella, which can be Bar & Copeland-Stewart (2021) linked to difficulties in socialization.

USE-e93 | “This game has not only given me something to look forward to doing everyday. But it has helped me cope with my loneliness and helped me get over my past relationship…”

People sensing few social support around them may play games after stressful experiences to slightly recover from them and feel relief (Lee & Chen, 2023). The chance to play roles in the game made users report the ability to experience ‘possible selves’ (Markus & Nurius, 1986; from Klimmt et al. 2009) and escape to ‘emotional worlds’ (Boldi, Rapp & Tirassa, 2022).
One member, for example, stated that sometimes playing the game consisted in going to an in-game coffee shop called ‘LeBlanc’ to catch up with the characters in his/her life (USE-i1) despite the characters being bots (Kim, 2014). Another recites dating a character in-game to cope with giving up on finding someone special for him/her (USE-e23). Cases like these may show that escapist behaviors can, indeed, have positive outcomes when emerging from digital worlds with clear obtained gratifications to carry on with life (Fraser et al. 2023), although it can not be assessed if said escapism is maladaptive or non-damaging just with self-reports.

USE-e1 | “When I finally left, it felt like I'd found a sense of peace I didn't know could even exist. [...] they added some light into one of the darkest parts of my life.”

However, some stories do leave traces that may hint maladaptive or problematic gaming uses (Deleuze et al. 2019), notably in a long game like ‘Persona 5’ where feeling the notion of time played is crucial to avoid states of dependency (Boldi, Rapp & Tirassa, 2022) that may lead to careless consumerism from the anime media mix (Oóhagan, 2007; Ganzón, 2019).

USE-i55 | “I was totally immersed for the next 7 hours straight and only extreme need to urinate broke me out of the game. Since that time I have put in at least 4 hours a night into the game (a lot more on the weekend) and it never fails to give me the escape I need.”

USE-e34 | “P5 didn’t help my isolation either, it probably worsened it because I got addicted”

7.1.3. The Trails to Ordeal

Though media consumption has the capacity to influence emotional responses to a perceived dissatisfaction (Sian Lee, 2011) by escaping to a virtual fiction where to recover feelings of normality and excitement believed to be lost in the ‘ordinary life’ (Boldi, Rapp & Tirassa, 2022), some seemed to be unable of fully immerse and put aside their conception of self.

USE-e10 | “I know it's just a game and we can't compare that to real life because games are made specifically to experience things you don't in real life [...] This game makes you feel things. It simply proves that it's great.”

For instance, a user mentions choosing an alternative ending to the game’s main intended one because (s)he felt deserving of a happy ending (USE-e30). By picking that route, ‘Persona 5’ rolls credits and unlocks a completion insignia: meaning that designers did not impose how things should be, allowing to engage in transgressive play (Aarseth, 2007; from Hirst, 2021).
This ‘Venting’ is interpreted to transpire when the in-game objectives differ from the players’ needs and beliefs, or when representations feel ‘too good to be true’. In other words, when a gratification is not obtained or does not match with the one sought. Notwithstanding, Shrier (2017) believes that this can be positive, provided that the release of frustrations rewards self-reflection via ethical designs aiming to incentivize emerging instead of staying in the game.

USE-e95 | “These characters feel more like friends than I’ve ever had. And I can only hope in my 25 years in life going forward that I even meet one person I have a bond in this way with. Sure, I can play the game a third time, but [it] feels like the true experience is over.”

Nevertheless, this may worsen the situation of players in cases where negative outcomes can make them start ‘Spiraling’ out of control, with observed depictions that serve as parameters of anhedonia, high insecurity levels, insufficient self-regulation mechanisms or scarce access to professional help to handle personal issues like lacking meaning in life (Fraser et al. 2023).

USE-e24 | “You exit the game and you're a friendless loser who has never been on a date.”

The same way identification puts players in a character’s role allowing them to live ‘possible selves’, it can also make them re-live stress, anger and anxiety; by means of empathy when playing anything triggering or when players notice the discrepancy between themselves and the role they are playing, obtaining non-transferable outcomes (Klimmt et al. 2009). Namely, instead of a gratification, players may emerge with worse outlooks on life or themselves.

USE-e86 | “Watching the protagonist hang out with all his amazing friends [...] just makes me realize how… empty my life is.”

In cases such where disorders like OCD (USE-62) may affect the gaming experience (Kowal et al. 2021) or when the parasocial relationship with the medium is so heartfelt that people do wish to break through the barriers between digital and physical world (Elvery, 2022), seeking professional aid shall be priority, albeit some have stated that therapy did not work (USE-56).

Neither ‘Venting’ nor ‘Spiraling’ got any ‘Not specified’ threads, and left the ‘Everything’ box empty. Looking at how evenly distributed the spiraling posts were across categories, it can be evaluated that members were affected in personal, specific non-generalizable ways, observing how many others did feel gratifications from the same factors. As mentioned in the comments’ section of USE-62: “It seems like pre-existing issues were triggered by the game. However, I doubt it's "the game's fault", so to speak.”.
A possible contrasting silver lining is bestowed in the not very numerous yet very impactful ‘Salvation’ section, with long and heavy narratives of regaining hope. Moyer-Gusé & Nabi (2010) proved that identification also serves to increase perceptions of vulnerability, making risky behaviors less appealing (Cohen, 2014). This was, allegedly, the case of a user stating having thoughts of ‘pulling a Shiho’ (USE-e5); serving as a euphemism due to ‘Shiho’ being a character inside the game who, to put it lightly, attempted against herself. The user, like the other ‘salvation’ posts, mentions how ‘Persona 5’ managed to change these tough situations.

USE-e52 | “To stand up for myself and others even if it seems impossible to handle, and to always remember to never give up on life ever again. I also started seeing a therapist who helped me make tremendous improvements on my mental scars.”

These messages might lead to believe that game worlds can indeed be used therapeutically to encourage players to face their fears (Boldi & Rapp, 2022), although the lack of structure and anonymity of the net can actually make them go unnoticed (Berewsill & Morgenroth, 2010).

7.1.4. The Roads for Transformation

Not all stories using ‘saved’ ended up representing ‘Salvation’ narratives. In some cases, the word was a synonym of ‘changed’ to address a turning point. Still, many members concluded that ‘Persona’ saved them, instead of thinking that they made the change themselves via play.

USE-e45 | “If I’d gone on like that for much longer, I would’ve probably turned into a doormat and lived a life of doing everything everyone else told me to, hence the "saved my life" part.”

Contrary to the medium’s reputation (Reid, 2012; Mlimperos et al. 2013), ‘Persona 5’ has proven to be regarded by the community members as a catalyst for their ‘Resurgence’, mainly through its ‘Plot’ and ‘Mechanics’. Under Carstens & Beck (2005), this could be owed to the game showing the competitiveness of the world or how standing still will lead nowhere. Yet, the manifestation in-game of lessons, themes and possible actions does appear to inspire them to follow the structures or habits that made the ‘P5’ characters achieve their in-game goals.

USE-e14 | “After I finished the game I felt like a different person. I cleaned myself and saw the good in me. I was ready to go out and stop blaming myself and my depression to work on me as a human being, and just make new friends I can be genuine with. Two years later I can say that I now have a really loyal friend circle while being loyal and honest with myself. Everything is working out again. Myself, my friends, my music career and my mental health.”
These transformations have been observed to be accompanied by ‘Realizations’ that act like a call to action, coming either as explicit lessons (Cohen, 2014) or self-reflections befallen by playing the game; making gamers learn about their experiences of play (Squire, 2006). These threads represent a quarter from all the posts, which speaks of their modest positive impact.

USE-e97 | “I’ve heard people say this game "changed their lives", and while I'm not ready to make that call just yet, P5 has certainly helped me gain a healthier outlook on my life.”

As play contexts act as simulations of social situations where to experiment and gain insight about the consequences of the actions chosen by the players (Granic, Lobel & Engels, 2014), all those revelations can be transformed into resolutions transferable out of the play setting.

USE-e42 | “If I do not make a change now, then when? When am I gonna take my life seriously? Pursue my passion? Gain a purpose? Get out of a slump? Help others? Help me? Or even take responsibility? When am I gonna find the truth within me? I would’ve never imagined a video game could make me realize so much.”

7.2. Discussion on the Uses and Gratifications of ‘Persona 5’

7.2.1. Themes and Plot

‘Persona 5’ introduces its symbolic elements in simple ways and with clear purposes (Klimmmt et al. 2009), like the masks that the characters throw away to symbolize standing against their oppressors (USE-i97). Accepting oneself by spreading the ‘wings of rebellion’ to come out and be free is the thematic lesson that most users claim to have taken from the plot: the fact that being a hero means questioning traditional systems of authority (Carstens & Beck, 2005).

USE-e9 | “I live in Chile, where we are experiencing a lot of social changes that began due to our own rebellion, just normal people demanding a better life and the end of selfishness and ambition from the politicians and the wealthier classes. The game is about raising your voice against things like these! It was so meaningful. I am happy for the path we took as a country.”

This inspiration is quite clear until the arrival of the expanded narrative brought by the game’s ‘Royal’ edition. Among the new content, there is the introduction of Maruki: a counselor that arrives at the highschool of the main cast to help them cope with their crises. His presence and explicit messages of taking care of oneself (Poppelaars et al. 2018) proved to resonate with the members of the subReddit:
USE-i42 | “Altus did a wonderful job developing this character. I never felt that interested in psychology or therapy until his “hangout seshes [= sessions]”

By the end of the game, Maruki earns divine powers that allow him to form an ‘alternative reality’ that he uses to, on one hand, erase the painful memories of the characters and, on the other hand; fulfill everyone’s frustrated dreams for the world to be happy and conformist. The cast confronts him in order to recover their agency, stating the importance of living with the pain that made them learn in order to keep carrying on with life.

Since I already carried an hermeneutical visual analysis over the meanings of the elements of the original game (Abuin, 2023) I know that the nuances of this situation are far too complex to discuss them here, as it would involve analyzing the philosophical implications of both standpoints, but the main point here is that the players are able to decide, through their actions, if the game will conclude with an ending that agrees with the perspective of the counselor or the one that respects the determination of the cast.

With the thematic tools provided by the game, the players co-create their own stories under their values and what they resonated with (Kim, 2014). Apart from ‘transgressive play’, there is the need to feel responsible for the actions that will affect characters the players hold dear and identify with (Mlimperos et al. 2013), which could have made the players decide against a wish to escape the pain and, in turn, made them emerge renovated from the gameworld.

USE-i23 | “Atlus gave me a reality where I could live a lie but be happy, but just like the decision I made in game, I have to take the risk and even with all the suffering and bad things in my life I gotta fight for what I believe and a future that I truly earn.”

7.2.2. Characters Relationships

The characters of the game received the most attention from part of the Rediters, mostly due to how similar it is to engage in a parasocial relationship with hanging out in real life (Cohen, 2014). Despite ‘Characters’ being the aspect most highlighted in the posts, the sole categories surpassing ‘Mechanics’ or ‘Plot’ are ‘Coping’, ‘Venting’ and ‘Relatedness’: being surpassed by the former two in ‘Resurgence’, ‘Realization’ and ‘Salvation’. This could indicate that the depth of this one-sided bond resulting from the experiences lived with the characters in-game made them feel more embodied and familiar (Elvery, 2022), to the point of reaching anxious attachment levels that led players to vent or spiral out of control via identification processes.
The reason why I grew so attached to these characters was probably because I had no one to connect with in my current circumstances, so my heart searched for other people to fill the void, even if they weren't real. [...] It truly is a weird feeling to have, but I felt as if these people really cared about me, and I cared about them, too.”

The feeling above is documented by Klimmt et al. (2009): the gratification of participating in the dynamics of the media characters is also a mechanism to overcome loneliness, and this is only achieved through an immersion provided with a myriad of believable and well-designed virtual characters to relate to and identify with (Ochs et al. 2010).

“...It just is pretty cool to see a Japanese game developer make some comments about mental illness when it is a major problem in Japan that everyone turns a blind eye to.”

“The characters feel real and remind me of people I could actually meet in real life.”

Among the threads, the characters mentioned the most were Yusuke, an artist gaslighted by his parental figure that takes advantage from him by plagiarizing his paintings (USE-3); Futaba, a ‘shut-in’ teenager blaming herself for the death of her mother and suffering social anxiety, PTSD and hallucinations (USE-56); and Akechi, an antagonistic detective mirroring how the protagonist would have ended if he had not had the right companions (USE-70).

Despite the negative focus of this section, Cohen (2014) does gather that developing a PSR with these kinds of complex characters may help decrease the prejudice of players to people feeling or being in these previously complicated states, highlighting the positive effects of a respectful and accurate representation of a reality that many individuals have to live with.

“I liked Makoto 'cause she's a very responsible student, with good notes and always heading in the right direction, something I've always struggled to do and I like how the game forces you to study and raise your knowledge to be with her. On the other hand, I like that instead she wants to learn the opposite of her life: wasting time, playing games, hanging out. Something I can relate to. So I was very immersed when I had dates with her.”
7.2.3. Mechanics of Gameplay

Sometimes, mechanics are difficult to grasp because they are not detectable at first glance, but they actually are one of the game’s stronger assets. From going to highschool, cleaning the room, hanging out with confidants or working out or studying for exams: the simulation of an ordinary life (Kim, 2014) through routine loops (USE-97) made for a highly immersive game. The gratification of learning how to optimize these cycles seems to not only include a player's in-game outcomes, but a methodology they can try to implement offline as well.

USE-e84 | “Persona 5 made me someone who schedules and doesn’t procrastinate [...] The game makes you plan ahead, and budget your time, which became a part of my personality.”

Although the gamification of morality through meters has been criticized for the simplification of nuanced decisions (Formosa et al. 2022), the correlations that ‘P5’ do between the actions performed and the personal trait they raise; seem to be right enough to support healthy habits.

USE-e41 | “I was never that interested in reading as a pastime, but decided to try it out after seeing the main character getting all those “stats” from books. Now I’m totally hooked into a lot of amazing short novels, both classic and contemporary.”

7.2.4. Artistic Direction

Just the high-fidelity representation of real-life Tokyo is enough to praise the developers for enacting exploration: in desired worlds for those who wish to visit new places, and in safe spaces with controlled variables and dashes of fantasy for those looking for escapes (Bachen, Hernández-Ramos & Raphael, 2012). As expressed by Squire (2006), the game’s graphics are way more than just aesthetic; they are symbols that players must learn how to interpret:

USE-i3 | “When you first visit Madarame’s palace it just shows this massive wall of paintings of all his old students. By the time I hit the 10th, his abuse really struck me in my heart.”

The immersion and identification conceded by the music, whose lyrics, composition and title mirrors the themes of the game; are part of what the members cherished the most due to the chances of reviving their feelings and memories felt playing when listening to a game’s song.

USE-81 | “While I sat in my bed contemplating unalivement, a song started to play in my head. “I believe” by Lyn, started playing. I was flooded with memories of playing royal and how the characters never gave into their abuse. If they didn’t, why the hell should I? This game gave me the strength I needed to stay alive. I'll always be grateful for that.”
8. Conclusions

From the ontological exploration of what a game is, to the subjective meanings attributed by a community that use it in daily life to address situations in their lives: the circulation of video games and their reputation have brought concerns about their morality content, ethical design, and the players’ appropriation of the medium to use it for their own needs and satisfactions. Engaging in parasocial relationships through a feeling of identification, intensified by states of immersive flow, has been proved to engage players in escapist practices in order to cope with their immediate context, according to the self reports of the community members. Whether their use is maladaptive or non-damaging, these stories of ‘emersion’ can offer us insights about their uses and gratifications in difficult times in life.

The /persona5 subreddit ended up being full of threads expressing realizations, insecurities, reports of salvation, calls of actions for change, frustrations and appreciations in a myriad of fashions and formats (Veer, Ozanen & Hall, 2016). Regardless, every narrative provided the gain of new understandings about the scope of situations where people would feel inspired to play the game, and how their elements could contribute -or not- to their current state.

USE-12 | “I escaped in this beautiful world where friends stand by you, where you can fight against the cruelty of the world, and where relationships give you power to overcome every challenge. This game spoke to me so deeply.”

So, referring directly to the research questions formulated in this paper: How is ‘Persona 5’ specifically being used by players, who self-report the contribution of the game, to address ‘difficult moments’ in their lives? What aspects of the game support this relationship?

My research has shown me that the members of the community have mainly used the game to cope with their difficulties and realize things that they might have overlooked. While some did not get the gratification they had expected, many users conveyed how they profited from the momentum given by the game to start a change in their lives, fostered by relating deeply to characters and themes.

USE-6 | “When I play this game I feel control, order and I honestly feel like I can do things. So, after investing over 600 hours of my life into Persona 5 and P5R, I've decided to live the life I love to play.”
The instrumental aspects of ‘Persona 5’ were explored too and, based on the commenters’ contributions; the most notable ones were the game’s rebellious themes, relatable welcoming characters, mechanics of making the best out of life, metaphorically appealing art, and plots of seeking help and facing fears. Therefore, in regard to the second research question: *What do these online stories shared in Reddit tell us about the potentials of playing in obtaining gratifications when ‘emerging’ from the video game?*

These self-reports speak of how the experience of gameplay talked to the writers’ current needs and dissatisfactions, despite those not being the origin behind the motivation of booting the game in the first place. Thanks to entering a state of immersion, the expression of positive ‘emersions’ from the virtual world took a great portion of the sample. However, the spiraling narratives of the game not being enough to treat or cope with the suffering of some players are indeed concerning and shall never be understated; which is a reason why undesirable effects cannot be overlooked and using games as substitutes from therapy is contraindicated.

*USE-78 | “I honestly think that the game has helped me work through my problems. My therapist even agrees with me on that. The game has almost taught me how to live and be happier. I learned lessons from this game that are actually usable in real life.”*

This does not mean, though, that video games cannot be used along with therapy, as it seems that the same conclusion brought by Dini (2012) and Hirst (2021) applies on the case above (USE-78): that video games are accessible tools that can be useful for introspective purposes through a camouflage of a ‘fun adventure’, and that one does not have to be alone and could count with the help of a therapist in this process of emotional release, through the comparison with the happenings in game and modes of play to, then, write a cathartic story out of it.

The dichotomy between both types of story is easily grasped when these contrasting reports can be put together, like I did below and on the next page. However, it is relevant to highlight that very few stories were totally positive nor negative, which asked for a more meticulous analysis on the topic and made the categorization of the posts a needed simplification.

*USE-97 | “I believe P5's biggest strength is how complete and utterly it immerses you in its world. Somehow, this game just makes you forget that what you're playing isn't real, which is the biggest compliment a game can receive. I could forget about myself, live another life.”*
“I also spend a lot of time agonizing over dialogue options but if it’s making it harder to have fun/enjoy the game, I’d honestly suggest getting professional help. It’s extremely easy to overthink things. I don’t think a stranger over the internet can really help with something like that.”

This realization of posts, even those overly excited or gloomy, having gray areas; and the need to reduce posts filled with valuable information to strict categories, is one of the clear limitations of this thesis, together with how much I had to narrow down the work due to format constraints. That said, I firmly consider these findings valuable ‘thick data’ for the scarcely explored realm of research in uses and gratifications in context of personal and/or collective crises. Thanks to the few studies I found treating this subject, even if they were from other forms of media like music (Jr. Merrill, 2022) I was able to triangulate information and support its legitimization.

This leads me to believe that the further knowledge we obtained from more communities and forms of media, the more we will be able to grasp patterns that could allow us to move, from concrete studies following abductive logics of inquiry, to investigations with enough available data to find patterns and possible generalizable effects via retroductive paradigms. Finding a repetition of gameplay aspects is, in the case of my research, what could lead to a series of indicators that game developers would need to consider to undertake an ethical design in the creation of future video games; games conceived to consider the possible needs that players seek to satisfy, and how to ensure a player’s gratifications while reducing negative outcomes.

“A very common question when discussing video games (and, in broader terms, fictional media as a whole) is: "what fictional world would you choose to live in, should you be given the choice?"

This quote from a member of the subReddit could be a great starting point for possible routes for further research. Conducting interviews to the players by asking a question like this and ascertaining the meanings interpreted could complement this research, but it also could be its own one by determining how the opinion of the users can change over time with respect to the moment they posted their threads, or how they feel about having their testimonial easily and publicly available online. These approaches could help solidify the information gathered with this thesis, but there are other angles worth exploring for future research.
Davis, Waycott & Zhou (2015) wrote an article about displaying stories describing difficult situations in life on YouTube in a local community event. This had the purpose of helping housebound people to feel connected again to their cultural community, and to study both their responses and the audiences’ to the screening of the video-stories. This gave me ideas for future lines of research, on how important and enlightening it could be to bring together the members of the online community studied in this netnography and learn from observing their interactions, behaviors and responses to a planned event on behalf of their stories of immersion and ‘emersion’: something of the likes of a game convention.

Whatever the upcoming investigation would be, they would have to consider the current framework of Uses & Gratifications theory and its consistent development. Broader reconceptualizations are needed owing to the appearance of new forms of media (Krcmar & Strizhakova, 2009) and the Internet as an interactive demassification agent (Weylan, 2015). The former authors actually argue that studying specific emergent media is relevant, but that researchers should aim to connect these to general media use motives in order to make the discipline more inclusive and consistent.

Thus, comparative research around the same topic and following the same methodology across different forms of media would be rewarding to our area of study altogether. Having used Jr. Merrill’s (2022) article about music in times of bereavement, I can confirm its utility and potential. Personally however, I will always advocate to keep exploring the world of the video games’ medium, because:

USE-e27 | “Where music can remind you of a special moment or place or create emotion even, and TV and film can make you get attached to characters and stories similarly; videogames have you in control. You get to get attached as you go and make memories. It’s your experience. This guy right here? Is you. And just like him, you can do anything.”
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## APPENDIX 1. Table of Threads

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of the thread</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Number of Comments</th>
<th>Score (% upvoted)</th>
<th>Post Date (July 3rd, 2023 reference)</th>
<th>Category of the Post</th>
<th>Game Aspect Highlighted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USE-1</td>
<td>‘Persona 5 Helped Me Cope With My Father’s Death’</td>
<td>WxaihBrynger</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>26 (79%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Coping-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-2</td>
<td>‘Finishing P5 has really changed my view of relationships’</td>
<td>[deleted]</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>44 (91%)</td>
<td>6 years ago</td>
<td>-Realization-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-3</td>
<td>‘Yusuke’s story hit way too hard for me’</td>
<td>Trojan_Origami</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15 (95%)</td>
<td>3 years ago</td>
<td>-Relatedness-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-4</td>
<td>‘It’s probably been about a year now’</td>
<td>Speedygenix</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16 (74%)</td>
<td>4 months ago</td>
<td>-Resurgence-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-5</td>
<td>‘This game saved my life’</td>
<td>throwaiakount</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>70 (92%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Salvation-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-6</td>
<td>‘How To Live a Persona 5 Life’</td>
<td>Kia2804</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>37 (91%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Resurgence-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-7</td>
<td>‘Thank u for persona atlus, it saved my life’</td>
<td>bxdm</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>41 (87%)</td>
<td>3 years ago</td>
<td>-Appreciation-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-8</td>
<td>‘[possible spoilers] Futaba and mental health?’</td>
<td>sploogink</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16 (88%)</td>
<td>4 years ago</td>
<td>-Relatedness-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-9</td>
<td>‘P5R made me want to be a better friend and person’</td>
<td>gertiesme</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>328 (97%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Realization-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-10</td>
<td>‘[No Spoilers] I need to say it’</td>
<td>Immortan_Bolton</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>28 (89%)</td>
<td>5 years ago</td>
<td>-Venting-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-11</td>
<td>‘Persona 5 Royals effect on me (LONG read, third semester spoilers after 1st paragraph)’</td>
<td>Slow_ker</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30 (97%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Appreciation-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-12</td>
<td>‘How Persona 5 changed my life’</td>
<td>Holdfasthope87</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>515 (90%)</td>
<td>6 years ago</td>
<td>-Realization-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-13</td>
<td>‘I’ve plated persona 5 it saved me from being lonely and it cured my drug and alcohol addiction’</td>
<td>Outrageous_Map6 641</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>26 (96%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Salvation-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-14</td>
<td>‘Playing this game was the point where I changed my life drastically’</td>
<td>{deleted}</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>28 (92%)</td>
<td>3 years ago</td>
<td>-Resurgence-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-15</td>
<td>‘I’m feeling void after finishing Persona 5’</td>
<td>keibatsuonegai</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16 (94%)</td>
<td>1 month ago</td>
<td>-Spiraling-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-16</td>
<td>‘We don’t talk about this enough, what are you doing to change the world?’</td>
<td>thelemithwannabe</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>72 (94%)</td>
<td>2 months ago</td>
<td>-Resurgence-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-17</td>
<td>‘I used to hate persona this game has changed my fucking life’</td>
<td>roku_shadowbane</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>34 (92%)</td>
<td>4 years ago</td>
<td>-Appreciation-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-18</td>
<td>‘Persona 5 saved my life’</td>
<td>samzdrawz</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>102 (96%)</td>
<td>4 months ago</td>
<td>-Salvation-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-19</td>
<td>This game is really getting me through a tough period in my life</td>
<td>-5IN-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>31 (92%)</td>
<td>11 days ago</td>
<td>-Coping-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-20</td>
<td>‘Persona 5 Royal Changed my life’</td>
<td>Guarantee_- Imaginary_</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>41 (86%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Realization-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-21</td>
<td>‘Did this game heal anyone else’s inner teenager?’</td>
<td>TheRustiestLevel</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>333 (97%)</td>
<td>5 months ago</td>
<td>-Realization/Relatedness-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-22</td>
<td>‘forever grateful’</td>
<td>thanatos16116</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>7,5k (98%)</td>
<td>3 years ago</td>
<td>-Appreciation-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-23</td>
<td>‘How Persona 5 changed my life’</td>
<td>Myke_Alpha</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21 (89%)</td>
<td>8 months ago</td>
<td>-Coping/Realization-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-24</td>
<td>‘Persona 5 is brutal when you’re a loser IRL’</td>
<td>mewbestpokeman</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>97 (86%)</td>
<td>3 months ago</td>
<td>-Spiraling-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-25</td>
<td>‘Does Persona 5 mean something to you?’</td>
<td>{deleted}</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>47 (97%)</td>
<td>5 years ago</td>
<td>-Coping-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-26</td>
<td>'Playing Persona 5 has changed my life by becoming insanely productive.'</td>
<td>Shala-lala</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23 (92%)</td>
<td>6 years ago</td>
<td>-Resurgence-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-27</td>
<td>'I posted my first ever video essay on YouTube yesterday about P5 &amp; how it changed my outlook on life. It explores topics like friendship, romance, and existentialism! The video does contain spoilers, so I left timestamps in said video. It took 2 years to buckle down &amp; finish it so I hope you enjoy!!'</td>
<td>danno_the_artist</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13 (93%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Realization-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-28</td>
<td>'This game changed my life'</td>
<td>whosBrady</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22 (93%)</td>
<td>5 years ago</td>
<td>-Coping-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-29</td>
<td>'Persona 5 Royal is saving my mind'</td>
<td>DivisionMV</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5 (100%)</td>
<td>3 years ago</td>
<td>-Coping-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-30</td>
<td>'I got the alternate ending to Royale and do not regret it.(P5R ending spoilers)'</td>
<td>CLN_7567</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0 (35%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Venting-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-31</td>
<td>'This game broke me!'</td>
<td>sir_combo</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4 (83%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Realization-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-32</td>
<td>'Thank you persona 5 for fixing my life in the best and worst ways.'</td>
<td>samzotos</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12 (77%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Coping-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-33</td>
<td>'I finally beat p5r and my god it was amazing and changed my life'</td>
<td>A_Sharknado</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21 (100%)</td>
<td>27 days ago</td>
<td>-Appreciation-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-34</td>
<td>'The Days When My Mother Was There'</td>
<td>SolitarySquall</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>55 (96%)</td>
<td>5 years ago</td>
<td>-Salvation/Spiraling-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-35</td>
<td>'This game saved me'</td>
<td>[deleted]</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14 (80%)</td>
<td>8 months ago</td>
<td>-Salvation-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-36</td>
<td>'A Not So Brief Report on How Persona 5 Changed my life'</td>
<td>Abyssman77</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3 (72%)</td>
<td>3 years ago</td>
<td>-Realization-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-37</td>
<td>‘This game helped me’</td>
<td>GuitarGuru666</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14 (81%)</td>
<td>3 years ago</td>
<td>-Resurgence-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-38</td>
<td>‘Our Light broke me’</td>
<td>Morning_Carlos</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>700 (100%)</td>
<td>3 years ago</td>
<td>-Appreciation-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-39</td>
<td>‘This game makes me want to change myself’</td>
<td>DEWDEM</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>183 (97%)</td>
<td>2 months ago</td>
<td>-Venting-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-40</td>
<td>‘When you just finished Persona 5 and you realize that in real life you don’t have any Phantom Thieves’ friends to hang out with to discuss who your next target gonna be’</td>
<td>middlefinger22</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>2k (98%)</td>
<td>6 years ago</td>
<td>-Venting-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-41</td>
<td>Any real-life habits that you got from playing Persona</td>
<td>GoFUself-Tony889</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>31 (100%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Resurgence-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-42</td>
<td>‘How Persona 5 Changed My Life’</td>
<td>Mabeombei</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>70 (97%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Realization-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-43</td>
<td>‘Futaba hitting too close to home… me irl’</td>
<td>xavine</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>608 (99%)</td>
<td>6 years ago</td>
<td>-Relatedness-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-44</td>
<td>‘Best fucking journey of my life. This game has actually changed my life for the better and I am forever grateful. May this game live on forever’</td>
<td>Deoxysribonucleic Cow</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>339 (99%)</td>
<td>4 years ago</td>
<td>-Appreciation-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-45</td>
<td>‘Persona 5 Stole my Heart (and possibly saved my life)’</td>
<td>DudeFrom2002</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50 (97%)</td>
<td>4 years ago</td>
<td>-Resurgence-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-46</td>
<td>‘Persona 5 helped me cope with trauma’</td>
<td>liebestot</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>280 (96%)</td>
<td>5 years ago</td>
<td>-Coping/Relatedness-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-47</td>
<td>‘Thank you Reddit’</td>
<td>Zurdo_yke</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>38 (95%)</td>
<td>6 years ago</td>
<td>-Spiraling-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-48</td>
<td>‘Persona 5 is in a very small category of games that changed my life’</td>
<td>Lewbomb</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>423 (97%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Appreciation-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-49</td>
<td>‘This game broke me’</td>
<td>Hyperleaks</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23 (93%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Coping-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-50</td>
<td>“How Persona 5 literally saved my life”</td>
<td>JeezyBreezy12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23 (80%)</td>
<td>1 year ago</td>
<td>-Salvation/Resurgence-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-51</td>
<td>‘Shoutout Persona for helping me escape and weirdly saving my life’</td>
<td>mustynig</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12 (97%)</td>
<td>4 months ago</td>
<td>-Coping-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-52</td>
<td>‘How Persona 5 changed my heart for the better’</td>
<td>KaiskePull</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>155 (97%)</td>
<td>5 years ago</td>
<td>-Salvation-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-53</td>
<td>‘P5/P5R got me emotionally strung out’</td>
<td>forrealpancakes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30 (96%)</td>
<td>3 years ago</td>
<td>-Relatedness-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-54</td>
<td>‘Curious: Has Persona 5 helped you learn, or improve, your iri time management skills?’</td>
<td>keich12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7 (89%)</td>
<td>3 years ago</td>
<td>-Realization-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-55</td>
<td>‘Thank you Persona 5’</td>
<td>ChrisDeg87-2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>49 (93%)</td>
<td>6 years ago</td>
<td>-Coping-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-56</td>
<td>‘This game made me realize some things about myself...’</td>
<td>futabasakurathrow</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>77 (92%)</td>
<td>6 years ago</td>
<td>-Spiraling/Relatedness-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-57</td>
<td>‘How the Persona Franchise, Made me have a change of heart!! &lt;3’</td>
<td>Xander_77</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10 (73%)</td>
<td>4 months ago</td>
<td>-Resurgence-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-58</td>
<td>‘Persona saved my life’</td>
<td>TheFeralFaux</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22 (91%)</td>
<td>6 months ago</td>
<td>-Realization-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-59</td>
<td>‘I just finished the game today. What an amazing emotional experience, I now know post P5 depression’</td>
<td>out_of_exile23</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21 (100%)</td>
<td>3 years ago</td>
<td>-Coping-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-60</td>
<td>‘How Persona 5 emotionally helped me and broke me’</td>
<td>[deleted]</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15 (95%)</td>
<td>3 years ago</td>
<td>-Realization/Spiraling-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-61</td>
<td>‘Friends are just social links change my mind’</td>
<td>weeb_with_gumdis_ease</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>386 (92%)</td>
<td>5 months ago</td>
<td>-Realization-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-62</td>
<td>‘Does anyone else find themselves riddled with anxiety playing this game?’</td>
<td>AgentApollo</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7 (77%)</td>
<td>3 years ago</td>
<td>-Spiraling-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-63</td>
<td>‘Wish i was this popular irl’</td>
<td>Huey738</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>389 (98%)</td>
<td>5 years ago</td>
<td>-Spiraling-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-64</td>
<td>‘Thank you’</td>
<td>gameovernate</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>557 (98%)</td>
<td>5 months ago</td>
<td>-Appreciation-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-65</td>
<td>‘Persona 5 was a little bit of a life changing experience and after some months embracing the potential of the trickster, I decided to get off my ass and work towards what I hold in my heart as right. I know this is silly, but this is my calling card to the world. Wake up’</td>
<td>Willachunian</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>80 (83%)</td>
<td>4 years ago</td>
<td>-Resurgence-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-66</td>
<td>‘I love this game because it makes me feel like I have friends...’</td>
<td>GirlInAPainting</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>190 (98%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Coping/ Spiraling-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-67</td>
<td>‘Persona 5 changed my life!’</td>
<td>Andrew-Keegan</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23 (94%)</td>
<td>4 years ago</td>
<td>-Resurgence-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-68</td>
<td>‘Did persona 5 change your world view?’</td>
<td>infinitysaga</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21 (96%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Realization-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-69</td>
<td>‘Finished Persona 5 and Strikers, and it has definitely had a positive impact in my life’</td>
<td>Zeleaned</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>466 (98%)</td>
<td>1 year ago</td>
<td>-Realization-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-70</td>
<td>‘Goro Akechi helped me with Depression and mental health issues’</td>
<td>RyanPuffs</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>29 (89%)</td>
<td>3 years ago</td>
<td>-Salvation-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-71</td>
<td>‘This game just hits me hard emotionally’</td>
<td>mesiveloni007</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22 (97%)</td>
<td>3 years ago</td>
<td>-Appreciation-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-72</td>
<td>‘As someone who was once a transfer student and had false rumors spread about me making it tough to make friends it’s why Persona 5 is my fav game. It gave me comfort knowing I wasn’t the only one who experienced that in school. Thank you P5’</td>
<td>Sora1992</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>67 (95%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Relatedness-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-73</td>
<td>‘Hats off to Atlus again’</td>
<td>[deleted]</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15 (91%)</td>
<td>3 years ago</td>
<td>-Relatedness-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-74</td>
<td>‘Today is the 3 year anniversary I bought Persona 5 and it forever changed my life’</td>
<td>the_loz3r</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>43 (90%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Appreciation-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-75</td>
<td>‘Persona 5 Changed My Life (Spoilers)’</td>
<td>[deleted]</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>38 (93%)</td>
<td>4 years ago</td>
<td>-Resurgence-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-76</td>
<td>‘I’ve done it’</td>
<td>KokoChanell21</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17 (88%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Salvation-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-77</td>
<td>‘Help me, HELP ME’</td>
<td>Edwar_GarciaF</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4 (83%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Realization-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-78</td>
<td>‘First Persona Game’</td>
<td>ZoraDomainTaken</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>49 (100%)</td>
<td>3 years ago</td>
<td>-Coping/Realization-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-79</td>
<td>‘Playing through P5R makes me wish I had friends in real life’</td>
<td>TedKaczynsky2024</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>1.3k (98%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Venting-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-80</td>
<td>‘Awe you guys. This subreddit means so much to me and this game changed my life &lt;3’</td>
<td>Blondi99</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11 (75%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Appreciation-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-81</td>
<td>‘How persona 5 changed my life’</td>
<td>No_peach1672</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6 (64%)</td>
<td>6 months ago</td>
<td>-Salvation-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-82</td>
<td>‘P5 really helped me’</td>
<td>Lanciferkun</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>44 (92%)</td>
<td>5 years ago</td>
<td>-Coping-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-83</td>
<td>‘I just completed Persona 5 and I wanna share how this game changed me’</td>
<td>Earl_Ply</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22 (97%)</td>
<td>3 years ago</td>
<td>-Realization-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-84</td>
<td>‘How Persona 5 changed me.’</td>
<td>Kaboio</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10 (92%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Resurgence-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-85</td>
<td>‘This game changed my life I love it so damn much, thank you Atlus for changing my life and just, thank you’</td>
<td>Alclips</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>34 (87%)</td>
<td>4 years ago</td>
<td>-Appreciation-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-86</td>
<td>‘Am I the only person who is getting like super depressed playing this game?’</td>
<td>noctise736</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>72 (94%)</td>
<td>5 years ago</td>
<td>-Spiraling-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-87</td>
<td><em>This game broke me in a way I never thought it could have happened</em></td>
<td>[deleted]</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8 (79%)</td>
<td>1 year ago</td>
<td>-Realization-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-88</td>
<td><em>Has Persona affected you in a profound way?</em></td>
<td>[deleted]</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22 (93%)</td>
<td>4 years ago</td>
<td>-Realization-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-89</td>
<td><em>Futabae makes me jealous</em></td>
<td>tmunoz168</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>29 (90%)</td>
<td>6 years ago</td>
<td>-Venting-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-90</td>
<td><em>How the Music of Persona 5 changed me. (Be sure you’ve finished Strikers)</em></td>
<td>GuitarHero6896</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17 (100%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Realization-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-91</td>
<td><em>How Persona changed my life</em></td>
<td>abe_924</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>58 (98%)</td>
<td>5 years ago</td>
<td>-Resurgence-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-92</td>
<td><em>My first time not trolling: Persona 5 kind of changed my life (kinda?)</em></td>
<td>plantzombieboss 12899</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1 (54%)</td>
<td>1 year ago</td>
<td>-Realization-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-93</td>
<td><em>P5R is helping my mental health</em></td>
<td>Lyle_Joslyn</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>70 (94%)</td>
<td>3 years ago</td>
<td>-Coping-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-94</td>
<td><em>currently sobbing, this game changed my views on a lot of things and i think overall made me a better person. Thank you Atlus.</em></td>
<td>soappu</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>310 (96%)</td>
<td>3 years ago</td>
<td>-Appreciation-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-95</td>
<td><em>Just finished Persona 5 Royal and have so many feels</em></td>
<td>pappyswordsman8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5 (73%)</td>
<td>5 years ago</td>
<td>-Venting-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-96</td>
<td><em>Persona 5 Helped me Make Up With My Girlfriend</em></td>
<td>ayatoujohime</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2 (55%)</td>
<td>6 years ago</td>
<td>-Realization-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-97</td>
<td><em>Why Persona 5 is my favourite fictional work of all time. (Disclaimer: A very long-winded and disorganized rambling)</em></td>
<td>TheTarkonator</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>44 (94%)</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
<td>-Realization/ Relatedness-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE-98</td>
<td><em>Four years ago to this day, 7 kids and 1 cat entered my life and changed who I was forever. And I still can’t stop talking about them</em></td>
<td>Either_Imagination9</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>1,7k (99%)</td>
<td>3 years ago</td>
<td>-Appreciation-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 2: Keywords Used in Queries for Sampling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbs referencing gratifications</th>
<th>Elements and Characters of the Game</th>
<th>Miscellaneous concepts of mental health discourses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● “Saved me/my life”</td>
<td>● Time</td>
<td>● Life/ “real life”/ IRL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● “Gave me”</td>
<td>● Schedule</td>
<td>● Structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● “Changed/change me/my”</td>
<td>● Calendar</td>
<td>● Cope/coping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● “Broke me”</td>
<td>● Confidants</td>
<td>● “Mental health”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● “Makes me-made me/my”</td>
<td>● Structure</td>
<td>● Alone/lonely/loneliness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● “Helped (me)”</td>
<td>● Characters</td>
<td>● Depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Lived</td>
<td>● Maruki</td>
<td>● Anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● “Did (it)”</td>
<td>● Futaba</td>
<td>● Addiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Finish/finished</td>
<td>● Yusuke</td>
<td>● (Covid-19) Pandemic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Play/played</td>
<td>● Themes</td>
<td>● Morality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX 3: Categorization of the Sample based on the ‘Emersion’ factor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Stories</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Salvation</td>
<td>Narratives of surviving a difficult situation in life by using the game. Important to note that not all posts containing ‘saved’, or other similar words, do qualify here. The text has been reviewed to ensure meanings.</td>
<td>‘I’ve done it’ by KokoChanell21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resurgence</td>
<td>These involve, predominantly, a purposeful change effectuated already by the author in its life. A complete shift of perspectives. The transfer of lessons learned online.</td>
<td>‘Playing Persona 5 has changed my life by becoming insanely productive’ by Shala-lala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatedness</td>
<td>Refers to the process of identifying heavily with a character or theme, often transferring their offline situation to the fictional context</td>
<td>‘Yusuke’s story hit way to hard for me’ by Trojan_Origami</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realization</td>
<td>Characterized by the reflection and personal enlightenment of the user. The discoveries usually motivate the authors to take action in their lives, but either they have not acted yet or have just started recently.</td>
<td>‘P5R made me want to be a better friend and person’ by gertiesme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appreciation</strong></td>
<td>The authors express having felt a lot of emotions and claim that playing the game had effects on them, but these are not explored fully enough. The highlight of these is the gratitude for newly found things to cherish.</td>
<td>‘Persona 5 Royals effect on me (LONG read, third semester spoilers after 1st paragraph)’ by Slow_ker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coping</strong></td>
<td>Most stories in other categories use the game to cope with crises. The ones listed here focus on how the users dealt with the problem, much more than how they emerge from it.</td>
<td>‘Persona 5 Helped Me Cope With My Father’s Death’ by WxaithBrynger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Venting</strong></td>
<td>Complaints and/or partial discontent with the game, or using the game as means to alleviate personal burdens. They still like the game and appreciate what it brings to the table.</td>
<td>‘I got the alternate ending to Royale and do not regret it.(P5R ending spoilers)’ by CLN_7567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spiraling</strong></td>
<td>Desperate desire for the fiction to be real, implying wishful thinking through the deployment of negative emotions like sadness or loneliness.</td>
<td>‘Does anyone else find themselves riddled with anxiety playing this game?’ by AgentApollo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>