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A New Look at the Relationship Between the Gamer and the Game Character: An Exploratory Study of Internal Dialogical Activity

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Abstract

The present study explores internal dialogues between gamers and game characters as a form of extended gaming engagement linking direct (in-game) and indirect (post-game) involvement. Drawing on Dialogical Self Theory, we conceptualize game characters as potential internal interlocutors that may remain psychologically active beyond gameplay. The analysis was based on interview data collected from 69 gamers, who collectively reported playing 132 games and described experiences involving internal dialogues with 158 game characters. A qualitative analysis examined the contexts in which such dialogues occur, their emotional dynamics, perceived importance, underlying motivations, and associated benefits. The findings indicate that internal dialogues occur predominantly outside gameplay, are often initiated in the context of negative affect and followed by regulatory outcomes, and are perceived as meaningful by a substantial proportion of participants. Two primary functional orientations of dialoguing were identified: personal development and game experience enhancement. To further interpret these patterns, a complementary quantitative analysis examined the relationship between dialogue context and motivational categories. The results reveal the role of internal dialogues with game characters in making the boundaries between real and virtual worlds more permeable, and provide a valuable incentive for investigating the processes related to self-reflection and meaning-making in digital environments.

Keywords: gaming; gaming engagement; game characters; in-game interlocutors; internal dialogue; dialogical self

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Introduction

The global gaming market is rapidly expanding, with the number of gamers projected to exceed 3 billion by 2029 (Statista, 2024). Modern games feature advanced graphics, dynamic gameplay, and immersive environments that engage gamers interactively. A significant segment of this landscape includes games where gamers create or control characters, such as Role-Playing Games (RPGs), Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMOs), and life simulators. Within these environments, game characters—whether avatars controlled by gamers or narrative-driven non-gamer characters—play a central role in structuring the gaming experience (Schröter & Thon, 2014). They serve not only as functional elements of gameplay, but also as meaningful points of reference through which gamers interpret events, make decisions, and explore moral dilemmas, as illustrated by narrative-driven games

such as *The Witcher* series, based on Andrzej Sapkowski's novels. As a result, engagement with games often involves not only interaction with systems, but also the development of psychologically significant relationships with game characters.

A growing body of research indicates that gaming engagement extends beyond the time spent playing. In addition to direct engagement during gameplay, gamers frequently experience forms of involvement that occur outside the game itself, including reflecting on in-game events, imagining alternative scenarios, or mentally revisiting interactions with characters. This broader phenomenon has been conceptualized as indirect gaming involvement (P. Strojny et al., 2023), referring to game-related cognitive and social activity that takes place beyond active play. Complementarily, the concept of post-gaming return (A. Strojny & P. Strojny, 2025), grounded in Goal Systems Theory (Kruglanski, 2023), emphasizes the dynamic process of disengaging from virtual environments and re-engaging with offline reality. Empirical findings suggest that the quality of these transitions is associated with well-being outcomes, including greater vitality, higher life satisfaction, and lower levels of gaming disorder symptoms. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the psychological impact of gaming is not confined to gameplay itself, but unfolds across a broader temporal and experiential continuum integrating both direct and indirect forms of engagement.

Within this extended framework of gaming involvement, the relationship between gamers and game characters can be conceptualized as a key mechanism linking gameplay-related and post-game forms of involvement. During gameplay, gamers interact with characters through processes such as control, identification, and narrative participation, often negotiating between their own intentions and those of the character (Bowman & Andreas, 2018). This dual positioning—simultaneously acting as oneself and as a character—has been described as a form of "double consciousness" or aesthetic doubling, supported by cognitive processes such as Theory of Mind and experience-taking, enabling gamers to adopt the perspectives, emotions, and goals of fictional entities (Bowman & Andreas, 2018; Szolin et al., 2023a). Prior research indicates that avatars may function as extensions of the self, representations of idealized or alternative identities, or distinct social entities (Banks, 2015; Bessière et al., 2007; Bowman & Schrier, 2018; Sibilla & Mancini, 2018; Vasalou & Joinson, 2009). Phenomena such as the Proteus Effect further illustrate how avatar characteristics can shape gamers' attitudes and behaviors during gameplay (Szolin et al., 2023b; Yee & Bailenson, 2007; Yee et al., 2009). Beyond in-game interaction, processes such as bleed-in (the transfer of gamers' real-life emotions, traits, or experiences into the character) and bleed-out (the transfer of in-game experiences, emotions, or identities into the gamer's real-life functioning) demonstrate that experiences may transfer between the gamer and the character across the boundary of the game (Bowman & Andreas, 2018).

Despite extensive research on identification, immersion, and avatar-related processes, existing frameworks do not explain how gamer–character relationships persist beyond gameplay as ongoing psychological processes, nor how they contribute to the continuity between direct and indirect engagement (e.g., Coesel et al., 2024). Against this background, analyzing the significance of gamer–character interaction for the strength of both direct and indirect engagement remains a theoretical and empirical challenge, requiring explanation at the level of underlying psychological processes. More broadly, addressing this gap is essential for understanding how experiences generated in digital environments may become integrated into aspects of self-related processing (Giardina et al., 2024), and how human–technology interaction contributes to psychological functioning and well-being (Fortuna, 2023; Riva et al., 2012).

The present study addresses this gap by conceptualizing internal dialogue with game characters as a mechanism linking direct and indirect gaming engagement. Rather than being confined to moments of gameplay, such dialogues may represent a continuation of the gamer–character relationship within the gamer's internal psychological space. In this sense, engagement with game characters does not terminate when the game ends, but may persist in the form of reflective, imaginative, or emotionally charged inner exchanges.

To conceptualize these processes, the present study draws on Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2018), which posits that the self consists of a dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-positions capable of engaging in internal dialogue. Rooted in James' (1890) distinction between the "I" (the active, perceiving self) and the "me" (the self as an object of reflection), this theory posits that the dialogical self consists of a multiplicity of dynamic I-positions representing different viewpoints available to a person. I-positions emerge within specific social contexts and, as a result, acquire a voice that represents that context (e.g., a culture, community, or social group). They can be divided into internal I-positions (experienced as aspects of one's own personality, e.g., "I as a child," "I as a student," or "I as a rebel") and external I-positions (experienced as elements of the external world,

e.g., “my parent,” “my teacher,” or “my opponent”). However, external I-positions are not faithful replicas of their real-world counterparts. They express not only what has already been said by the external figure, but also what could potentially have been said. In this sense, I-positions are described as relatively autonomous (Hermans, 2001, 2003, 2004). Moreover, possessing their own voice, each I-position can not only articulate its own standpoint but also enter into dialogue with any other I-position (internal or external), a process referred to as internal dialogue.

A given character, role, or aspect of personality may become an I-position when it gains personal significance—that is, when it is experienced as “mine.” Such significance is dynamic and may change over time depending on the individual’s experiences and context. In a similar manner, a game character may acquire personal significance and become an external I-position within the dialogical self. Two decades ago, Hermans (2004) anticipated that identification with avatars—external I-positions within the self—could catalyze profound changes in the organization of the self. As he noted, “The user identifies with the avatar as a new position in the external domain of the self and internalizes its attitudes, values, and interaction styles that may then lead to the transformation of the internal domain of the self, in this way expanding and innovating the existing position repertoire” (Hermans, 2004, p. 310). This suggests that avatar-related processes may actively contribute to the reorganization of the self, potentially through dialogical exchanges that extend beyond gameplay. Assuming that the self emerges from an ongoing exchange of meanings among I-positions (Hermans, 2003), game characters—when internalized as I-positions—may play an active role in ongoing self-development processes. Hermans’ insights thus underscore the significance of avatars not merely as tools for gameplay, but as psychological extensions capable of influencing the self and fostering personal development. However, the personal dialogical relationship between gamers and game characters remains underexplored empirically.

The present study aims to explore the phenomenon of internal dialogues between gamers and game characters within this dialogical framework. In doing so, it makes three contributions to the literature: (1) it conceptualizes internal dialogue as a mechanism linking direct and indirect gaming engagement, (2) it extends Dialogical Self Theory by introducing game characters as digitally mediated external I-positions, and (3) it identifies the regulatory and functional roles of such dialogues across contexts. Specifically, we address the following research questions:

RQ1: In which contexts do gamers engage in dialogue with a game character as an internal interlocutor?

RQ2: What emotions accompany dialogues with a game character, and what role do they play in initiating and regulating these dialogues?

RQ3: What significance do gamers attribute to dialoguing with a game character?

RQ4: What motivations underlie the attribution of I-position status to a game character, and what benefits do gamers derive from this practice?

Furthermore, given the various circumstances of dialogue with game characters, an exploratory comparison was also conducted between these circumstances and the identified themes associated with beliefs of dialoguing with a game character, motivation to engage in the dialogue and the importance of dialogues. The additional analysis was intended to provide a deeper understanding of the circumstances in which gamers engage in such dialogues. Given the exploratory nature of the study, no formal hypotheses were formulated.

Methods

Participants

All participants were Polish citizens and met the eligibility criteria of reporting engagement in dialogues with game characters in their everyday lives and being at least 18 years old. The sole exclusion criterion was the presence of symptoms indicative of Gaming Disorder, assessed using the Gaming Disorder Test (GDT; Cudo et al., 2024; Pontes et al., 2021). Participants were recruited through several channels, including Facebook gaming groups, Twitch chats, posters placed in university dormitories and on campus, and through snowball sampling. Based on this recruitment procedure, 69 gamers (22 women and 47 men) participated in the study. The sample primarily consisted of young adults (M_{age} = 24.20 years, SD_{age} = 4.60; range = 18–40 years). Collectively, participants reported playing 132 games (M = 1.91 games per participant, SD = 1.01), representing 71 unique titles. Across participants, a total of 158 distinct game characters were identified in the dialogical activity reports. Most respondents (95.6%) were either current university students or graduates of higher education institutions. Over half of the participants (53.62%) lived in cities with populations between 100,000 and 499,000 inhabitants. Regarding gaming activity, the

largest proportions of participants reported playing either 2–10 hours or 31–40 hours during a two-week period (23.19% in each category). Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to participation.

Procedure

The study procedure received approval from the Research Ethics Committee at the authors' university (approval no. KEBN_38/2024). The entire study was conducted online. Recruitment began with an initial survey consisting of 18 questions (13 closed-ended and 5 open-ended), designed to collect data on participants' gaming activities and experiences engaging in dialogues with game characters. This phase also included sociodemographic questions. A total of 244 individuals completed the survey, of whom 203 (83%) reported dialoguing with game characters.

Those who indicated experiences of dialogue with characters were invited to participate in the study. In the first stage, participants completed the Dialogical Activity Form (DAF; Puchalska-Wasyl, 2015), which encouraged them to reflect on their interactions with game characters. Out of the 203 eligible individuals, 69 participants completed the DAF and advanced to the next stage – a follow-up meeting, which were conducted as video interviews via Microsoft Teams. During these sessions, participants took part in a 10-question interview focused on the most significant game character they selected. They also completed a few questionnaires, however, the analysis associated with these additional questionnaires will be presented in a separate article (Puchalska-Wasyl et al., 2025). The main meeting via Microsoft Teams lasted an average of 30 minutes. For their participation respondents received 100 PLN (approximately 25 USD).

Measures

Dialogical Activity Form (DAF) by Puchalska-Wasyl (2015) allows to establish which figures (including game characters we are interested in) become a part in a participant's internal dialogical activity. DAF contains a list of example figures (e.g., my parent, my friend, a game character, etc.). Participants are requested to mark those that they recognize as their internal interlocutors and add their own ones to the list or provide examples within the category.

Structured interview focused on the game characters identified in the DAF (see Supplementary Materials). Participants most frequently mentioned characters from RPG games (45.6% of all selections), followed by adventure games (15.8%). Genres such as MMORPG, point-and-click, and visual novels were represented by only a few cases. The interview structure was designed to explore five key themes (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Key Themes and Interview Questions for Studying Gamer-Character Dialogues.*

Key themes	Questions
1. The situations of dialoguing with the in-game interlocutor	In what situations do you most often engage in dialogue with X? Could you describe such a situation, if possible?
2. The emotions accompanying dialoguing with the in-game interlocutor	Could you describe the emotions you experience while dialoguing with X?
3. The importance of dialoguing with the in-game interlocutor	How important is the experience of dialoguing with X to you?
4. The motivation of dialoguing with the in-game interlocutor	What does the experience of dialoguing with X offer you? What is it about engaging in dialogue with a game character that makes you want to return to it? How does dialoguing with X contribute to your real and virtual life?
5. Additional reflections	Is there anything else important you would like to add about dialoguing with X?

Qualitative Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts served as the primary dataset for analysis. The data were analyzed using Thomas' (2006) Model for Inductive Analysis, a framework designed to identify patterns and themes that emerge directly from the data without relying on preconceived theoretical constructs.

An inductive approach was adopted due to the scarcity of empirical research concerning the forms and functions of gamers' dialogue with game characters.

The procedure entailed multiple close readings of the interview transcripts to ensure immersion, followed by initial coding, where specific phenomena in participants' statements were identified and labeled (e.g., linking expressions of preparedness to a 'sense of security'). These codes were subsequently clustered into preliminary intuitive categories based on semantic similarity. In the final phase, the data was re-evaluated to synthesize and refine the classification system by merging overlapping themes, resulting in the definitive set of categories presented below.

All stages of analysis were conducted by an interviewer who was experienced in research and had a strong familiarity with computer games and game characters. All the game characters considered by the participants, along with the game's title and genre, as well as the disclosed sources of motivation to engage in the internal dialogue, are included in the Supplementary Materials.

Quantitative Data Analysis

To gain a deeper understanding of the qualitative study's findings, a quantitative analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the circumstances of dialogue with game characters and the identified themes associated with beliefs of dialoguing with a game character, motivation to engage in the dialogue and the importance of dialogues. In this context, Fisher–Freeman–Halton test (Freeman & Halton, 1951) was used to assess the differences between gamers distinguished according to circumstances they engage in dialogue with a game character vs. motivation to engage in the dialogue (personal development, experience improvement, mixed). In this context, three groups of gamers were identified: 1) engaged in dialogue with a game character outside the game (gamers-outside group; n = 46), 2) engaged in dialogue with a game character during gameplay (during-gameplay group; n = 14), and 3) engaged in dialogue with a game character outside the game and during gameplay (mixed group; n = 9). Additionally, pairwise comparisons were performed using the Fisher–Freeman–Halton test. The Bonferroni-adjusted p-value (.05/3 = .016) was used to minimise the type I error in the pairwise comparisons. Additionally, adjusted standardised residuals were employed to scrutinise differences more precisely, particularly when one variable had more than two categories (Agresti, 2007). In this context, absolute values of adjusted standardised residuals exceeding 1.96 indicated statistically significant results. The effect size was estimated using Cramér's V (Fritz et al., 2012). The same analysis method was used to test differences between gamer groups distinguished according to circumstances they engage in dialogue with a game character vs. the importance of dialogues (highly or moderate important, not important, didn't say) and the benefits of dialoguing with a game character (personal development, game experience improvement, mixed, didn't say). The SPSS 29 statistical software was used to statistical analysis.

Results

The results are presented in relation to the research questions. First, we report the findings of the qualitative analysis addressing RQ1–RQ4, followed by the results of the quantitative analysis. It should be noted that the quantitative analyses served to deepen the qualitative analyses.

Qualitative Analysis

The circumstances of dialogue with the in-game interlocutor (RQ1). Among the respondents, 46 gamers (66.67%) engaged in dialogue exclusively outside of gameplay (e.g., "Exactly, when I'm alone and bored. That's when it often starts replaying in my head, or when I'm going to sleep after a day of playing."), 14 participants (20.29%) only during gameplay (e.g., "I usually engage in this kind of activity only when I'm playing that game."), and 9 gamers (13.04%) described dialoguing in both situations.

The accompanying emotions (RQ2). The emotional experiences associated with dialoguing varied widely among participants, encompassing both positive and negative emotions. The majority of participants (N = 39, 56.52%) mentioned only positive emotions, such as calmness or joy, 6 participants (8.70%) reported exclusively negative emotions, such as frustration or anger, while 24 participants (34.78%) experienced both types of emotions. Notably, negative emotions were more frequently associated with motivations for initiating dialogue (e.g., "Most

of the time, I start dialoguing with him when I'm experiencing a lot of negative emotions."), whereas positive emotions were more often described as outcomes of the dialoguing process (e.g., "For example, when I'm frustrated or angry. And those emotions ease up and dissipate a little.").

The subjective importance (RQ3). For 35 participants (50.72%) dialoguing with the in-game interlocutor was highly or moderate important, 24 gamers (34.78%) found dialoguing as not important, and 10 participants (14.50%) did not explicitly address the importance of dialogue.

The sources of motivation (RQ4). Participants demonstrated two primary sources of motivation for engaging in dialogue with game characters. These could be classified as: (1) Personal development (*N* = 36; 52.18%) – driven by internal factors such as engaging in self-improvement, organizing one's thoughts (e.g., "I think, to a large extent, it's about wanting to become somewhat similar to the character in terms of personality."; "It's a bit of a need to process and organize my own thoughts through that kind of dialogue."), and regulating emotions (e.g., "First and foremost, it's a way to release emotions."), and (2) Game experience improvement (*N* = 17; 24.64%) – such as well-written characters or an engaging storyline that encouraged deeper exploration through dialogue (e.g., "Arthur is actually a simple man, but he has strong morals. I think that's probably the most important thing."; "I believe it's the curiosity about the story. Or rather, it's about the plot, and that later connects to the dialoguing."). Some participants revealed mixed sources of motivation (*N* = 16; 23.18%).

The benefits of dialoguing with the in-game interlocutor (RQ4). Participants identified several benefits derived from dialoguing with game characters, which were organized into two primary categories corresponding to the sources of motivation outlined above: Personal development and Game experience improvement. The first category encompasses benefits related to changes in gamers' functioning at the behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and relational levels, whereas the second refers to benefits that directly enhance the quality of the gaming experience, such as immersion and engagement with the game world. The specific benefits identified within the Personal development and Game experience improvement categories, along with their descriptions and illustrative quotes, are presented in Table 2.

Within the Personal development category, four types of benefits were identified: modeling, perspective-taking, bonding, and emotion regulation. These empirically derived categories can be meaningfully situated within established psychological constructs. Modeling, understood as the internalization of observed behaviors and values (Bandura, 1977), was reflected in participants' descriptions of treating characters as role models and adopting their traits or moral principles (e.g., "Geralt is… my role model"). Perspective-taking, defined as the ability to adopt another's point of view (Puchalska-Wasyl, 2010), was evident when participants described using dialogue to consider alternative perspectives or better understand emotions (e.g., "it builds in me the habit of putting myself in others' perspectives"). Emotion regulation, referring to processes by which individuals influence their emotional experiences (Gross, 1998), was present in accounts where dialoguing served to reduce tension or manage difficult emotions (e.g., "it helps me calm down and stay grounded"). Finally, bonding processes correspond to parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956) and were observed when participants described game characters as companions or sources of emotional support (e.g., "something more like an old friend").

In turn, the Game experience improvement category included two types of benefits: Adventure in other worlds and Immersion in the storyline. These reflect processes related to experiential engagement with the game environment and narrative. Participants described dialoguing as a way of extending their presence in the game world or deepening narrative involvement (e.g., "to immerse oneself and be in a different world"; "I can immerse myself more in the game's storyline"), suggesting that internal dialogue contributes not only to post-game reflection but also to the intensification of the gaming experience itself.

Table 2. *Benefits Identified Within Personal Development and Game Experience Improvement Categories: Frequencies, Descriptions, and Illustrative Quotes.*

Category	Benefit	Gamers	Description	Example quotes
Personal development	Modeling	*N* = 19; 29.54%	Perceiving game characters as role models, identifying with their traits and behaviors, which could potentially influence their real-life actions.	A bit more self-confidence would be necessary. Such a character, for example, has all of that... (gamer no. 2, game: Cyberpunk 2077, game character: Johnny Silverhand, genre: RPG, place: Outside the game); Honestly, Geralt is somewhat, in some respects, my, what's it called, role model. Like, his kind of virtue under certain principles, especially when it comes to morality. (gamer no. 4, The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, Geralt, RPG, Outside the game); If I want to say something grandiose, it's inspired by this character. (gamer no. 28, Napoleon: Total War, Michel Ney, RTS, Outside the game)
	Perspective-taking	*N* = 14; 20.29%	Dialoguing provides cognitive enhancement by adopting different perspectives, contributing to increased self-awareness, a better understanding of others' emotions, and the promotion of empathy.	It somehow builds in me the habit of putting myself in others' perspectives. (gamer no. 25, God of War, Kratos, RPG, Mixed); I think it makes it easier for me to understand the emotions of the people around me. (gamer no. 44, Stardew Valley, Sebastian, RPG, Outside the game); [Dialoguing] sensitizes me to someone's perspective, one I wouldn't otherwise consider. (gamer no. 14, Pathologic, Lara Ravel, Survival horror, During the gameplay)
	Bonding	*N* = 11; 15.94%	Perceived game characters as individuals they treat like colleagues or friends, offering emotional support and a sense of security.	Something more like an old friend, I'd say. (gamer no. 20, Minecraft, Steve, Survival Indie, Outside the game); You tend to treat such a figure as someone close to you, like a colleague or a friend, and you talk about everything with them. (gamer no. 58, The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, Geralt, RPG, During the gameplay); I could just sit down, turn on my Nintendo, and know that he would be there. And just like in a game, where you can always click and talk to him, right? Well, in real life, you can also have that kind of support, like having a friend there for you. (gamer no. 61, Animal Crossing, Twiggy, Simulator, Outside the game)
	Regulating emotions	*N* = 9; 13.04%	Dialoguing helps process and regulate emotions, providing relief from real-life stress.	As for my real life, as I just mentioned, it allows me to take a break from the hardships of life. When I'm having a bad day, it helps me calm down and stay grounded. (gamer no. 29, The Wolf Among Us, Wolf, Adventure, Outside the game); It gives me a sense of relief from frustration (gamer no. 6, League of Legends, Katarina, MOBA, Outside the game); Sometimes these sims behave like people in real life, so it can be a kind of tension release, because I also have control when I play. (gamer no. 59, The Sims, Sims, Simulator, During the gameplay)
Game experience improvement	Adventure in other world	*N* = 9; 13.04%	Desire to experience an adventure within the game universe or by an interest in the fictional setting, historical period, or cultural context from which the character originates.	Sometimes I think it would be nice to, let's say, find myself in such a world. (gamer no. 13, Minecraft, Steve, Survival Indie, Outside the game); Mainly, I feel like I experience things in my mind that I couldn't experience otherwise (gamer no. 43, Hogwarts Legacy, Gamer character, RPG, Outside the game); ...to immerse oneself and be in a different world than the one we live in. And to escape from some kind of reality. (gamer no. 31, Red Dead Redemption 2, Arthur Morgarn, Adventure, Mixed)
	Immersion in the storyline	*N* = 7; 10.14%	Highlighting the importance of dialogue with in-game interlocutors in enhancing immersion in the game's storyline and fostering a deeper understanding of the characters.	I think that because of this, I can immerse myself more in the game's storyline and better understand the characters. (gamer no. 22, The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, Ciri, RPG, Outside the game); In the virtual world, as I mentioned before, I think it's about having that sense of coherence. Like, feeling that sense—that I am, in a way, part of it. (gamer no. 10, Bayonetta, Bayonetta, Action game, During the gameplay); I think what I've always liked most in games is feeling like a part of that world and feeling immersed, so it's always much more enjoyable for me to play a game where I can do that [dialogue] and that's why I do it. (gamer no. 63, Different games, Gamers character, Different, During the gameplay)

Note. Each person was assigned to only one category, corresponding to the benefit that was most strongly articulated in the interview.

Table 3. *Comparison of Gamers Distinguished due to the Circumstances of Dialogue With Game Characters and Sources of Motivation to Engage.*

Source of motivation to engage	Place to engage in dialogues			Fisher–Freeman–Halton exact test	*p*	*V*
	Outside the game	During gameplay	Mixed			
	n (%)	*n (%)*	*n (%)*			
Personal development	29 (63.04%)	2 (14.29%)	5 (55.56%)			
Experience improvement	7 (15.22%)	9 (64.29%)	1 (11.11%)	15.02	.002	.347
Mixed	10 (21.74%)	3 (21.43%)	3 (33.33%)			
Pairwise comparisons						
Source of motivation to engage	Outside the game vs. during gameplay			Fisher–Freeman–Halton exact test	*p*	*V*
	Outside the game	During gameplay				
	n (%)	*n (%)*				
Personal development	29 (63.04%)	2 (14.29%)				
Experience improvement	7 (15.22%)	9 (64.29%)		13.77	.001	.494
Mixed	10 (21.74%)	3 (21.43%)				
Source of motivation to engage	Outside the game vs. mixed			Fisher–Freeman–Halton exact test	*p*	*V*
	Outside the game	Mixed				
	n (%)	*n (%)*				
Personal development	29 (63.04%)	5 (55.56%)				
Experience improvement	7 (15.22%)	1 (11.11%)		0.74	.868	.103
Mixed	10 (21.74%)	3 (33.33%)				
Source of motivation to engage	During gameplay vs. mixed			Fisher–Freeman–Halton exact test	*p*	*V*
	During gameplay	Mixed				
	n (%)	*n (%)*				
Personal development	2 (14.29%)	5 (55.56%)				
Experience improvement	9 (64.29%)	1 (11.11%)		6.83	.031	.549
Mixed	3 (21.43%)	3 (33.33%)				

Note. *V* = Crámer's *V*.

Quantitative Analysis

Given the identified themes, in qualitative analysis, associated with beliefs of dialoguing with a game character, motivation to engage in the dialogue and three gamer groups distinguished according to circumstances of dialogue with game characters, we found statistically significant differences among these groups in sources of motivation to engage in the dialogue (Fisher-Freeman-Halton test = 15.02, p = .002, Cramér's V = .347). The effect size was moderate. In order to verify the differences between these three groups more precisely, comparisons between each pair of gamer groups were carried out. The pairwise comparisons analysis showed the difference between gamers engaged in dialogues with game characters outside the game vs. gamers engaged in dialogues with game characters during gameplay (Fisher-Freeman-Halton test = 13.77, p < .001, Cramér's V = .494). Considering the adjusted standardised residual values, differences between these gamer groups were presented for personal development (z = 3.2; p = .001) and experience improvement (z = 3.6; p < .001). More precisely, gamers engaged in dialogues with game characters outside the gameplay more often presented personal development motive and rarely presented experience improvement motive in comparison to gamers engaged in dialogues with game characters during gameplay. Additionally, the pairwise comparisons analysis showed the difference between gamers engaged in such dialogues during gameplay and gamers engaged in dialogues in mixed circumstances (Fisher-Freeman-Halton test = 6.83, p = .031, Cramér's V = .549). However, p-value was above the Bonferroni-adjusted statistically significant level which was .016. The details are shown in the Table 3. There was no relation between gamer groups distinguished due to circumstances of dialogue with game characters and gamer groups with different importance of dialogues category (Fisher–Freeman–Halton test = 3.25, p = .525, Cramér's V = .154). There was also no relation between gamer groups distinguished due to circumstances of

dialogue with game characters and benefits of dialoguing with a game character (Fisher–Freeman–Halton test = 11.46, p = .107, Cramér's V = .311).

Discussion

The central contribution of this study lies in identifying internal dialogue as a mechanism of extended engagement, that links gameplay experiences with post-game cognitive and emotional processes. The findings demonstrate that internal dialogues with game characters occur predominantly outside gameplay (RQ1), are often initiated by negative emotional states and followed by regulatory outcomes (RQ2), are perceived as moderately to highly important by a substantial proportion of participants (RQ3), and serve two primary functions related to personal development and game experience enhancement (RQ4). Importantly, these findings suggest that dialogical engagement extends beyond the immediate context of gameplay for a substantial proportion of participants, particularly those who reported engaging in dialogue outside gameplay and may constitute a distinct form of indirect gaming involvement (P. Strojny et al., 2023). Specifically, gamers may mentally return to interactions with game characters, sustaining engagement through internally simulated dialogue, which can blur the boundaries between gamer and character (see Bowman & Andreas, 2018).

Beyond demonstrating that such dialogical engagement extends outside gameplay, the findings highlight dialogue with game characters as a mechanism through which gaming involvement is maintained, transformed, and functionally diversified across contexts. From this perspective, game characters can be understood as dialogical partners that remain psychologically active even in the absence of direct interaction, enabling continued engagement through imagination, reflection, and internal conversation. While this interpretation is consistent with the dialogical self framework (Hermans, 2001, 2004, 2018), the present results primarily underscore the functional role of dialogue itself rather than structural transformations of the self.

The data further indicate that the context in which dialogue occurs (inside vs. outside gameplay) is systematically related to its psychological function. Gamers who engage in dialogue outside gameplay are significantly more likely to associate it with personal development motives, whereas those engaging primarily during gameplay more often link dialogue to enhancing the immediate gaming experience. Importantly, the quantitative findings support and refine the qualitative categories, indicating that these patterns are systematic rather than incidental. Notably, a subset of participants reported engaging in dialogue exclusively during gameplay, suggesting that dialogical processes may also operate within the immediate gaming context without necessarily extending beyond it.

In this sense, dialogue with game characters may serve distinct regulatory and experiential functions. When enacted during gameplay, it appears to be primarily linked to hedonic processes, such as immersion, enjoyment, and experience enhancement. In contrast, when enacted outside gameplay, it is more closely associated with eudaimonic processes, including reflection, meaning-making, perspective-taking, and personal growth. These findings extend existing approaches to positive technology (Riva et al., 2012) by suggesting that the value of digital experiences—whether hedonic or eudaimonic—does not reside solely in the technology itself, but emerges from the mode of engagement enacted by the user. Taken together, this indicates that the distinction between the two categories may be functional rather than strictly separable, with experiential engagement potentially serving as a pathway to personal development.

In the Personal development category, dialoguing with a game character was associated with modeling, perspective-taking, bonding, and emotion regulation. Within the game experience improvement category, two benefits were emphasized: experiencing an adventure in other worlds and immersion in the storyline. Across these effects, five of the six typical functions of internal dialogical activity can be identified: fantasizing, testing, analyzing, self-knowing and bonding (Puchalska-Wasyl & Zarzycka, 2023). Fantasizing is particularly related to immersion in the game, which allows you to break away from everyday life. Escaping to the virtual world can also help relieve tension, so fantasizing may also be related to emotion regulation. In turn, imitating a model may be accompanied by a testing function, i.e., checking in advance in the imagination what effects repeating the model's behavior may bring. Perspective-taking increases the effectiveness of analyzing difficult situations, especially when seeking a solution by considering the situation from multiple sides/aspects. By contributing to increased self-awareness perspective-taking also promotes the function of self-knowing. Finally, treating a game character like a friend corresponds to the bonding function. The statements of our respondents do not indicate a ruminating function, which means that dialogues with game characters do not have a maladaptive nature that could reduce well-being.

The data reveal a consistent asymmetry in emotional dynamics: negative affect more frequently precedes dialogical engagement, whereas positive affect is more often reported as an outcome. This suggests that internal dialogue may function as a self-regulatory mechanism initiated under conditions of emotional tension. Notably, this interpretation is supported by the distribution of emotional reports, with 34.78% of participants describing mixed emotional experiences and a clear tendency to associate the initiation of dialogue with distress and its outcomes with relief or emotional stabilization. Interestingly, some participants described these interactions in ways resembling self-reflective or emotionally supportive processes. Several respondents referred to the dialogue as having a "therapeutic dimension" or as a "temporary therapeutic solution" used during moments of distress. One participant noted that reflecting on the character's emotions made them feel "like a psychologist for him," suggesting a form of self-reflection facilitated by the avatar. Others described the dialogue as helping them achieve "emotional stabilization" or referred to the character as "a kind of lifeline" during particularly difficult moments. Although these experiences should not be equated with formal therapeutic processes, they suggest that dialoguing with game characters may function as a form of self-guided emotional processing within the gamer's dialogical self.

The observed connections between internal dialogue, personal development, and the enhancement of the gaming experience find substantial support in the role-playing game studies literature. The personal development motivation identified in our study, encompassing behavior modeling and emotion regulation, aligns with Handelman's concept of "events that model", which aim to transform the participant's status or identity through lived experience (Handelman, 1998). This phenomenon also corresponds to the Avatar-as-Symbiote relationship, where the character serves as a tool for processing personality traits and testing an ideal self, as well as the Avatar-as-Other orientation, where the character is treated as a distinct social partner, mirroring our Bonding category (Banks, 2015). Conversely, the group utilizing dialogue for game experience improvement engages in what Handelman describes as "events that present or re-present fictional worlds", concepts that directly relate to immersion into environment and immersion into narrative (Bowman, 2018). In this framework, internal dialogue functions not merely as an extension of gameplay but as a psychological mechanism that, depending on the depth of the gamer-character connection, shifts the function of play from purely ludic entertainment toward a specific form of behavior that allows for safe self- or identity exploration.

The research has several limitations. First, only Polish gamers, mainly young adult males with a significant percentage of students and recent graduates, were studied. Thus, the sample was characterized by a high level of education and it was relatively small. Of the 244 people who were initially asked about engaging in dialogue with game characters, 203 responded affirmatively. However, only 69 people completed the DAF questionnaire on these dialogues and participated in the interviews. This small and rather specific sample may limit the generalizability of the results to other demographic groups. Consequently, while this group represents the young adult segment of the gaming community effectively, the findings should be generalized with caution to younger demographics or less educated populations. Due to the small sample size, the analyses did not include a categorization of the different types of preferred games. Additionally, analyses were conducted on very small groups, and the coding was conducted by a single researcher, which may increase the risk of subjective bias. Another weakness of the study was its time-consuming nature. In addition to participating in the interview, respondents also completed other measures that required time and reflection. Moreover, the selection process consisted of several stages, which was time-consuming for both researchers and respondents. Another limitation concerns the reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to retrospective bias. To replicate and expand our findings, future studies should take these limitations into account, for example by using more diverse and representative samples, more numerous subgroups representing different types of games, and more time-efficient ways of measuring.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Use of AI Services

The authors declare they have not used any AI services to generate or edit any part of the manuscript or data.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Authors' Contribution

Paweł Fortuna: conceptualization, methodology, writing—original draft, writing—review & editing, funding acquisition, supervision. **Małgorzata M. Puchalska-Wasyl:** conceptualization, methodology, theoretical framework, writing—original draft, writing—review & editing. **Łukasz Kaczmarczyk:** conceptualization, investigation, writing—original draft, writing—review & editing. **Andrzej Cudo:** conceptualization, methodology, software, formal analysis, writing—original draft, writing—review & editing.

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Appendix

Table A1. *Game Characters, Games, Genre and Sources of Motivation to Engage (Categories and Benefits).*

No.	Game Character	Game	Genre	Category	Benefit
1	Sebastian Sallow	Hogwarts Legacy	RPG	Personal development	Perspective-taking
2	Silverhand	Cyberpunk 2077	RPG	Personal development	Modeling
3	Alice	Alice Madness Returns	Adventure	Personal development	Regulating emotions
4	Geralt	The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt	RPG	Personal development	Modeling
5	Larry Laffer	Leisure Suit Larry	Point-and-click	Personal development	Bonding
6	Katarina	League of Legends	MOBA	Personal development	Regulating emotions
7	Henry	Kingdom Come: Deliverance	RPG	Personal development	Modeling
8	Ellie	The Last of Us	Survival horror	Game experience improvement	Immersion in the storyline
9	Asgore	Undertale	RPG	Personal development	Modeling
10	Bayonetta	Bayonetta	Action	Game experience improvement	Immersion in the storyline
11	Klopp	Football Manager	Simulator	Personal development	Modeling
12	Character from Baldur's Gate 3	Baldur's Gate 3	RPG	Game experience improvement	Adventure in other world
13	Steve	Minecraft	Indie survival	Game experience improvement	Adventure in other world
14	Lara Ravel	Pathologic	Survival horror	Personal development	Perspective-taking
15	Oliwia	I Wani Hug that Gator!	Visual novel	Personal development	Bonding
16	Nathan	Uncharted	Adventure	Personal development	Bonding
17	Geralt	The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt	RPG	Personal development	Bonding
18	Shepard	Mass Effect	RPG	Personal development	Modeling
19	Arthur	Red Dead Redemption 2	Adventure	Personal development	Perspective-taking
20	Steve	Minecraft	Indie survival	Personal development	Bonding
21	Gail	Baldur’s Gate 3	RPG	Personal development	Modeling
22	Ciri	The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt	RPG	Game experience improvement	Immersion in the storyline
23	Olimpia	A character created by the player	RPG	Personal development	Modeling
24	Brand	League of Legends	MOBA	Personal development	Bonding
25	Kratos	God of War	RPG	Personal development	Perspective-taking
26	Jinx	League of Legends	MOBA	Personal development	Bonding
27	Geralt	The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt	RPG	Personal development	Modeling
28	Michel	Napoleon: Total War	RTS	Personal development	Modeling
29	Wolf	The Wolf Among Us	Adventure	Personal development	Regulating emotions
30	Kao the Kangaroo	Kao the Kangaroo	Platform game	Personal development	Regulating emotions
31	Arthur	Red Dead Redemption 2	Adventure	Game experience improvement	Adventure in other world
32	Geralt	The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt	RPG	Personal development	Perspective-taking
33	Nameless hero	Gothic	RPG	Personal development	Regulating emotions
34	Lara Croft	Tomb Raider	Adventure	Game experience improvement	Immersion in the storyline
35	FPS character	Different games	Different	Game experience improvement	Immersion in the storyline
36	Kitana	Mortal Kombat	Fighting	Personal development	Modeling
37	Daniel	Amnesia: The Dark Descent	Survival horror	Personal development	Perspective-taking
38	The character of the player	Different games	Different	Personal development	Perspective-taking
39	Hwei	League of Legends	MOBA	Personal development	Modeling
40	Alexios	Assassin's Creed Odyssey	RPG	Personal development	Modeling
41	Jin	Ghost of Tsushima	RPG	Personal development	Modeling
42	Geralt	The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt	RPG	Game experience improvement	Adventure in other world
43	Player’s character	Hogwarts Legacy	RPG	Game experience improvement	Adventure in other world
44	Sebastian	Hogwarts Legacy	RPG	Personal development	Perspective-taking

45	The characters from games	Different games	Different	Game experience improvement	Immersion in the storyline
46	Silverhand	Cyberpunk 2077	RPG	Personal development	Modeling
47	Drake	Uncharted	Adventure	Game experience improvement	Adventure in other world
48	Pantheon	League of Legends	MOBA	Personal development	Modeling
49	The characters from games	Different games	Different	Personal development	Perspective-taking
50	Geralt	The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt	RPG	Game experience improvement	Adventure in other world
51	Simon	Call of Duty	FPS	Personal development	Regulating emotions
52	Guts	Sword of the Berserk: Guts' Rage	Action	Personal development	Perspective-taking
53	Ulfric	The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim	RPG	Personal development	Perspective-taking
54	Geralt	The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt	RPG	Game experience improvement	Adventure in other world
55	Arthas	World of Warcraft	RTS	Personal development	Modeling
56	NPCs	Different games	Different	Personal development	Perspective-taking
57	Kaveh	Genshin Impact	RPG	Personal development	Bonding
58	Geralt	The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt	RPG	Personal development	Bonding
59	Sims	The Sims	Simulator	Personal development	Regulating emotions
60	Kim Kitsuragi	Disco Elysium	Adventure	Personal development	Bonding
61	Twiggy	Animal Crossing	Simulator	Personal development	Bonding
62	Squirtl	Pokémon	Adventure	Game experience improvement	Adventure in other world
63	The character of the player	Different games	Different	Game experience improvement	Immersion in the storyline
64	Characters from Valoranta	Valorant	FPS	Personal development	Regulating emotions
65	Geralt	The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt	RPG	Personal development	Modeling
66	Geralt	The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt	RPG	Personal development	Modeling
67	Sims	The Sims	Simulator	Personal development	Regulating emotions
68	Sherlock Holmes	Series of games	Adventure	Personal development	Perspective-taking
69	Mr. House	The Fallout	RPG	Personal development	Perspective-taking

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