

# “There are many powers in the world, for good or for evil. Some are greater than I am.”: The impact of morality and winning on identifying with fictional characters

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This experimental research investigated whether the good–evil status and win–lose outcome of a fictional protagonist in a hypertext fiction story–game impacts the strength of identification with that fictional character. Around 130 participants took part in the study. They were recruited through social media advertisements on platforms related to gaming and fantasy fiction. The participants were predominantly male and most had some level of college education. Many reported being very familiar with the fictional Middle Earth setting used in the study. Participants were randomly assigned to play one of four versions of an original hypertext fiction story featuring a protagonist who was either good or evil and either succeeded or failed in their quest. After reading the story, participants rated on two Likert–type scales how much they identified with the protagonist. These ratings were averaged to create a composite identification score. A two–way ANOVA was conducted with good–evil status and win–lose outcome as independent variables and identification as the dependent variable. Results showed a significant main effect for both factors. Participants identified more strongly with good characters compared to evil ones. They also identified more strongly with losing characters than winning ones. No interaction effect between good–evil status and win–lose outcome was found. In addition, most participants assumed the protagonist was male, even though no gender was specified. Exploratory analyses found no effects of demographic factors like age, gender, education, gaming experience, etc. on identification. However, participants' self–reported "creative agenda" when roleplaying did relate to identification. Overall, this study provides novel evidence that a character's morality and narrative outcome impact identification, which has practical implications for fiction creation. The online methodology enabled access to a large, diverse sample. Future research could further explore the gender perception finding and relationships between identification and enjoyment.

Keywords: hypertext fiction; identification; morality; narrative outcome; protagonists

Identification with another person was a topic of interest in early psychology, with early writing on this by Freud (2010, originally published 1923) and Anna Freud (1992, originally published 1936). Later, social identity theory (Tajfel, 1970) introduced an experimental approach to studying identification with a group, finding evidence of bias towards one's own group even in the case of arbitrary group.

A variant on this topic that was under-researched until recently is identification with a fictional character, such as those presented in written works and visual media, both passive and interactive. This is important to understand for practical purposes as a strong sense of identification with a fictional character can have far reaching impact. Igartua (2010) claims that it can increase the fiction's dramatic impact and the reader's cognitive elaboration and enjoyment, and also the impact of the fiction on the reader's attitudes and beliefs. According to Klimmt et al. (2009), the identification process changes self-perception, so that character attributes are seen by the reader as a part of their own selves.

A newly emerging strand of research has applied the experimental method to this topic of identification with a fictional character. Hook (2019) discovered that women but not men report stronger identification with a character of their own gender than otherwise. Hook & Morys-Carter (2000) found no evidence of stronger identification due to a shared religious faith with the character. Hook (2022b) found stronger identification with a richly defined character than a less defined character, while Hook (2022) found that greater agency over the character produces greater identification. Hook (2022) also found that both severe depression and severe anxiety on the part of the reader reduce the level of identification.

This strand of research poses the question of what other factors may influence identification with a fictional character. As well as seeking to understand the mechanisms of identification with a fictional character itself, such understanding may also generalise to other forms of identification which are more difficult to research experimentally.

One possible factor that may influence identification is the impact of the character's morality. Many works of popular fiction across media present a setting with objective good and evil, defined by the metaphysical powers of the setting (e.g., *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Star Wars*), as do the stories of major real world religions (Ogwuche et al., 2020). From an early psychological perspective this is reminiscent of Jungian concepts known as projection and splitting (Hollway et al., 2007). This early theory suggests a tendency for a person to binary split good and bad/evil attributes and project all the evil attributes onto an out-group as a psychological defence mechanism against the anxiety of recognising some negative attributes may apply to oneself and one's own group.

Experimental research on this topic is limited, and a full discussion of the matters of ethics in gaming more generally (rather than games that present literary characters) is beyond the scope of this paper. For a detailed discussion of ethics in both single player and multiplayer games see Sicart (2009). We might speculate people may tend to identify more strongly with a good protagonist, since most people consider themselves to be good and are familiar with being exposed to good protagonists. Alternatively, participants might identify more strongly with evil protagonists as a form of escapism, or a form of dark wish fulfilment.

One previous experiment did indirectly address this point. Hook (2019)'s experiment used as stimulus two *Star Wars* (a setting with objective morality) stories, one about a jedi (good) and about a sith (evil). All participants played both stories, essentially a built-in full replication except for using the same participants. It was observed that in all combinations of the conditions being researched in that experiment (player gender and character gender), players identified more strongly with the good character than the evil character. However, since these were completely different characters and stories it is possible the differences were due to other features such as a more compelling narrative, rather than the morality of the character. Nonetheless, this secondary finding by comparing across two replications is suggestive on this point, even if not formally a properly controlled experiment to make this comparison.

Another possible factor that may influence identification is the impact of winning or losing. Juul (2013) discusses failure by the player in gaming more generally, arguing that games offer the player a journey rather than a result, and that escaping losing by becoming more skilled is pleasurable.

Considering games as a form of narrative literature, games generally seem focused on heroic characters eventually winning. While not a formal comparison, in contrast other forms in literature seem to include greater representation of tragedy narratives, describe the downfall of a protagonist. We might speculate people will identify more strongly with a winning character rather than with a loser, out of a sense of wish fulfilment. Alternatively, people might reflect on aspects of their lives being less than their desired ideal, consider themselves losers, and so identify more with a losing character as like them. That however is based on the unproven assumption that a shared identity strengthens identification, which Hook (2022) did not find evidence for in the case of religious identity, and Hook (2019) found evidence applying to gender identity only in the case of women and not men.

These two factors are the topics of investigation for this experiment. This kind of design testing two different hypotheses relating to two different factors in the same experiment has the benefit for increasing the insight gained from running the experiment. It also has the benefit of being able to investigate any interaction effects that exist between them.

As already mentioned, previous work (Hook, 2019) found that women but not men identify more strongly with characters of their own gender. As a separate secondary point of investigation, for this experiment the gender of the protagonist character will not be mentioned in the story, and the participants are asked what gender they consider the protagonist to be. It may be for example that people will project their own gender onto a character of undefined gender.

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

Recruitment of participants was carried out by adverts on social media in Tolkien, gaming, and role-playing social media spaces. Post invited participants to take part in ‘a short psychology -game studies experiment’ and said that ‘It involves playing a short Lord of the Rings choose-your-own-adventure story and filling in a form afterwards; should take about 5 minutes’ with a link to follow. No compensation was offered.

The experiment ran online for around two weeks in June 2023. In total 129 responses were recorded, and all are included in this analysis.

In terms of gender, a majority (79%) of participants identified as male, 11% as female, 8% as “other/non-binary”, and 2% preferred not to say. In terms of geographical identity, 53% identified with North America, 41% with Europe and 6% with South America. A majority were (73%) were native English speakers.

In terms of education, 54% had completed some level of college or university education, with an additional 24% having a post-graduate degree as well. Of those with degrees, 47% had an arts/humanity degree, 40% had a science degree, and 13% had both.

A majority (77%) of the participants self-reported knowing wider details about the Middle-Earth setting, with 19% only knowing the main story. Around two-thirds (65%) had played more than ten interactive fiction games, and 74% had many years of experience with tabletop role-playing games. The participants then might be considered to have a broad fluency with games that involve identifying with a character.

A single question was also asked about what was most important to them when role-playing. Around two-thirds (65%) said “Experiencing a good story with strong narrative / drama”, while 29% said “Becoming the character, feeling their emotions and acting accurately for the character.” Only 3% said “Your character achieving their goals” / “winning”, with a further 3% selecting “None of these is important; something else is important to me.” These possible answers are broadly based on the creative agenda model presented by Boss (2008), a model for understanding different play styles.

### **Materials**

The stimulus used for this experiment was a short hypertext fiction (HF) story game, sometimes called a “choose your own adventure” game. In this format of game, the reader-player reads each page of text then selects one from a series of hyperlinks to decide what the protagonist chooses to do in the story.

Unlike traditional fiction, HFs are often written in the second person, addressing the protagonist controlled by the reader as “you”. To make sure participants had no prior exposure, a novel HF was written for use in this experiment; the researcher has an additional qualification in creative writing. For a general discussion of interactive fiction (of which hypertext fiction is a subtype), see Montfort (2005).

To research the impact of the character’s morality in this experiment, it is important for this experiment to use a setting with a clear and objective notion of good and evil. In addition, using a known popular setting attracts participants to take part and makes it easily relatable. It is also beneficial to use a fictional setting removed from everyday life to avoid participants sharing other identities with the character.

This story was based on the Middle-Earth setting, as depicted in the books of JRR Tolkien and related films and TV series. The setting has already been used by many mainstream computer games, board games, and multiple tabletop role play games; the quote in the title of this paper comes from *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1991, first published 1954).

The story-game opens with a description of the protagonist character, stating their quest and if they are working for the forces of good or evil. The story-game used for this experiment includes six binary choices for participants to make during the story about the protagonist's decisions. A reminder of their good-evil status was included on each of the pages that offered a binary choice. After the last choice, a page is shown indicting whether the character as won or lost their quest. Except for these minor changes in the text the story was the same for all participants.

The story-game describes a ranger character exploring the Dead Marshes to find and capture the creature Gollum, after his escape from Mordor. The full story-game is available for the author on request.

The story was written with the protagonist’s gender not specified; there were no references to their gender and a fantasy name appropriate to the setting. Previous research (Hook, 2019) suggested that character gender can have a significant impact on identification.

## Design

While extending a game studies into a humanities topic, this research was designed in the experimental psychology tradition (Price et al. 2017). For a discussion of inter-disciplinary research in game studies, see Mäyrä (2009). The experimental design used here follows the methodology used by Hook (2019), Hook & Morys-Carter (2020), Hook (2022), and Hook (2022b). Like those experiments it was coded using the Twine software for creating HF.

The participant’s identification with the character was the dependent variable in this experiment. Following the same design as Hook (2019) and other experiments, this was recorded by asking two seven-point Likert-type questions, with the answers each participant gave to the two questions averaged to reduce any impact of the particular wording of the question. The two questions were “How strongly did you identify with [character name]?” and “How strongly were you able to take on the role of [character name]?”.

This experiment has two independent variables, both based on random assignment of the participant by the system. One was morality, whether the character was working for the forces of good or evil. The other was whether the character won or lost their quest. While these are separate hypothesis being tested, using one experiment to explore both has the added benefit of being able to look at for interaction effects that might exist between them.

As an additional exploratory separate topic for study, participants were asked what gender they thought the character was, chosen from a set of options: male, female, other / non-binary, unknown / unsure. This is to be contrasted with the gender that the participant themselves identifies with, which was reported as a choice from the following options: male, female, other / non-binary, prefer not to say.

## Procedure

The story game was made available as a series of webpages presented online. Participants used their own devices (potentially any device capable of running a web browser) in their own everyday settings. While unconventional, this is consistent with Hook (2019) and other previous research in this tradition, giving a high level of ecological validity and enabling a diverse international mix of participants.

A link was provided at the end of the story to an online form for participants to submit data. Participants gave consent by completing the form and clicking the submit button. Data was stored securely. Potential participants could play the story game and not take part by not completing the form or not submitting; it is unknown if any did this. An email address was given for participants to use for future contact or to withdraw their data later. No one did this. According to the ethical review guidelines of author's university, research of this nature that do not expose participants to "exceptionally strong stimuli" do not undergo a full research ethical evaluation.

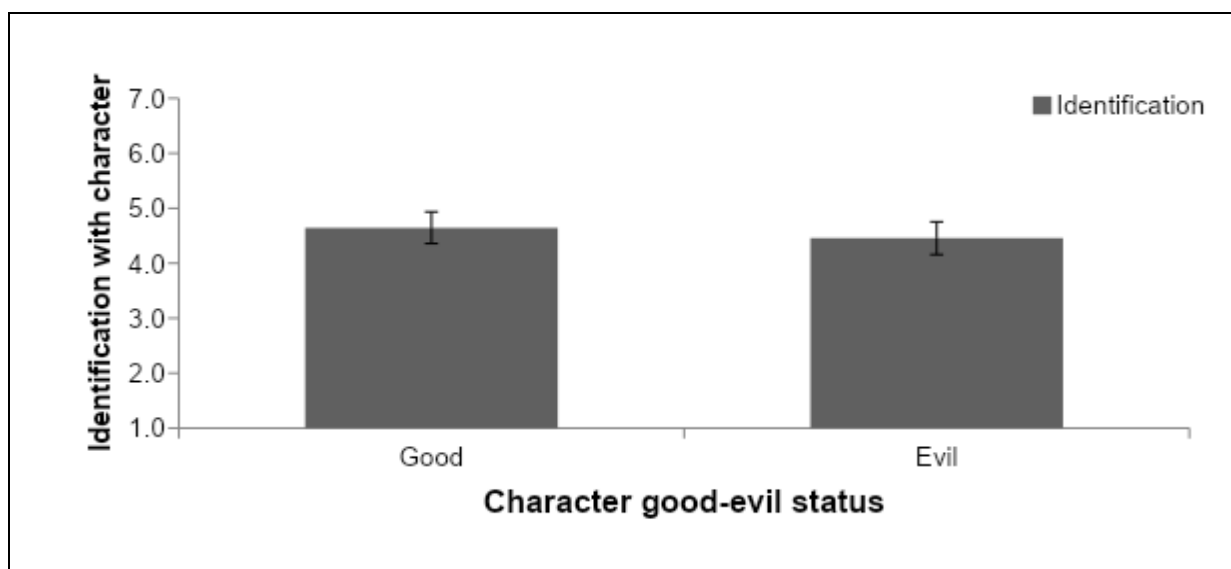
As well as the two identification questions and the character gender question noted above, participants were asked additional background questions like those of previous experiments in this tradition. This included their gender, broad geographic identity, education level, distractions while taking part, and middle-earth exposure. All data was anonymous as identifying data such as names were not requested.

## RESULTS

An independent ANOVA was used for the primary analysis, with good-evil, and win-lose as the independent variables and the average of the two identification questions as the dependent variable. All 129 participants were included.

Comparing mean scores, good status (mean = 4.65) produced higher identification than evil (mean = 4.46). The main effect of the character's good-evil status on identification was highly significant,  $F(1, 125) = 8.658, p = 0.004$ . Means are shown visually in Figure 1.

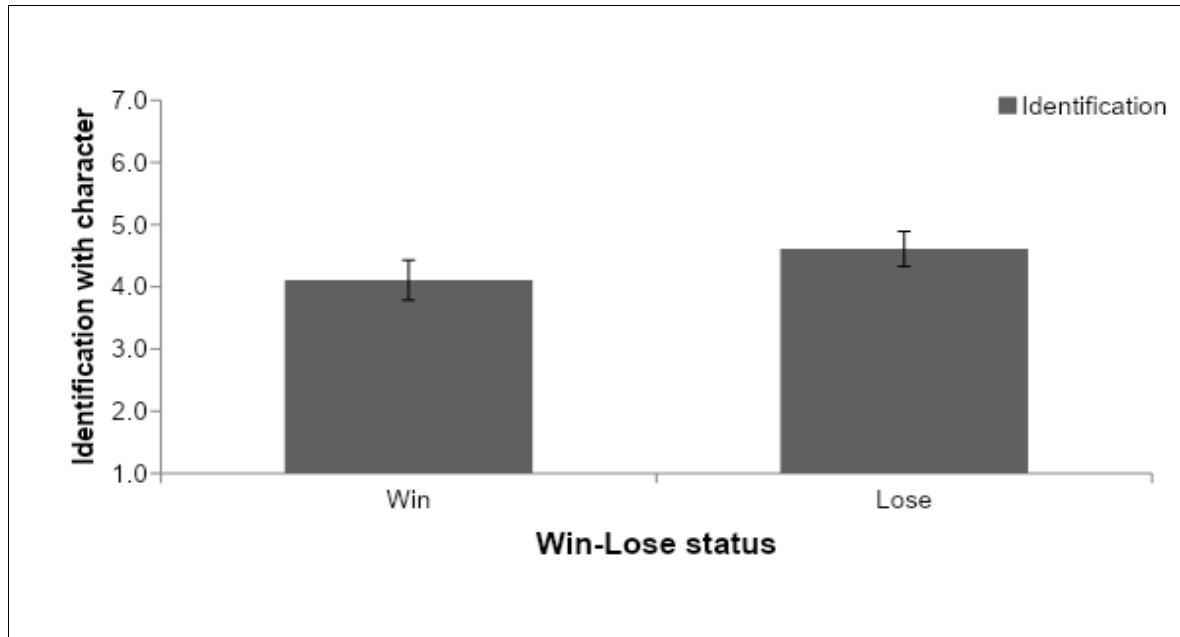
Figure 1  
The interaction of good-evil status on identification with character



The mean score for winning was much lower (mean = 4.11) than for losing (mean = 4.46). The main effect of win-lose status on identification was significant,  $F(1, 125) = 4.666, p = 0.033$ . Means are shown visually in Figure 2.

Looking at both statuses together, this data shows no evidence of an interaction effect between the Good-Evil status and the Win-Lose status ( $p = 0.730$ ).

Figure 2  
 The Interaction of win-lose status on identification with character



### Exploratory analysis

In relation to the side topic of which gender the players believe the protagonist character to be, the results split by player gender are shown in table 1. A single participant who left the question about their own gender blank has been included in the “prefer not to say” group.

Table 1  
 The presumed gender of the character, split by gender of the player

Player gender ( <i>n</i> )	Character gender				Mean identification ( <i>SD</i> )
	Male	Female	Other/ Non-binary	Unknown	
Male (102)	84%	1%	0%	15%	4.36 (1.25)
Female (14)	79%	0%	0%	21%	4.46 (1.12)
Other / non-binary (10)	60%	0%	0%	40%	4.70 (1.51)
Prefer not to say (3)	0%	33%	0%	67%	4.00 (1.32)

The data suggests that participants mostly presume the protagonist is male. A notable exception is the other / non-binary group, many of them (40%) are unknown / unsure about the protagonist’s gender, so this appears to be distinctive. Due to the sample numbers being small, no further statistical tests have not been carried out here on this data.

Table 1 also shows the mean identification split by the gender of the player. While suggestive at first glance no significant differences were found  $F(3,125) = 0.362, p = 0.781$ .

Additional tests were carried out based on answers to secondary questions asked of the participants.

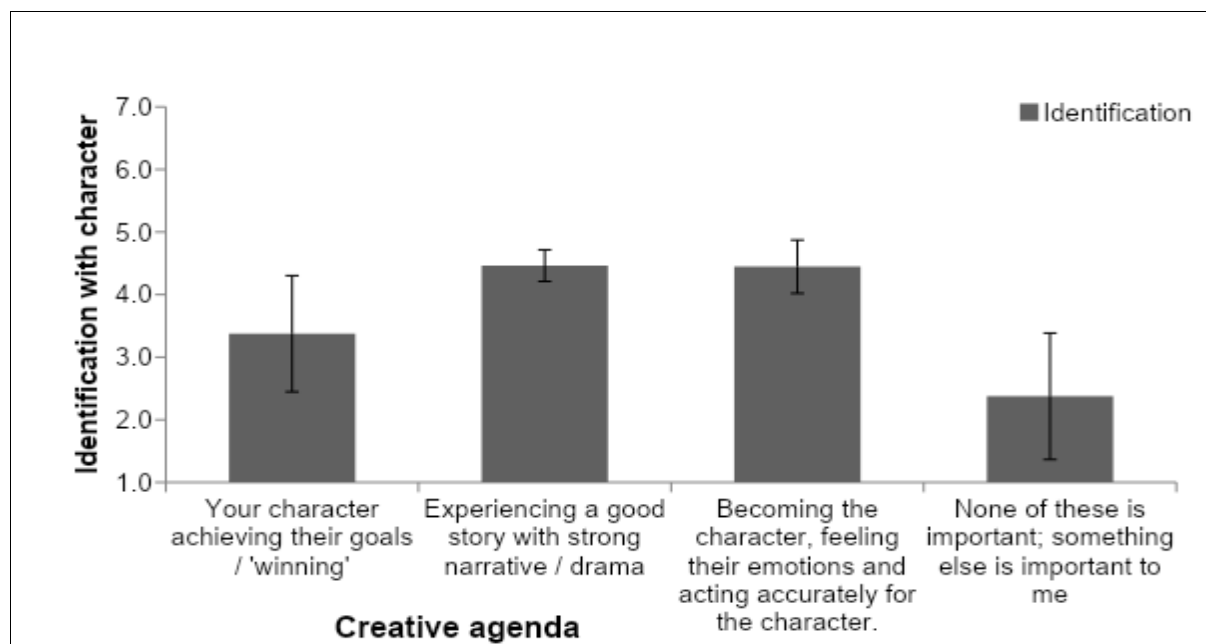
The type of device (phone, tablet, computer, other), had no impact of identification ( $p = 0.902$ ), and neither did having a distracting environment ( $p = 0.629$ ). There is also no evidence that player gender ( $p = 0.781$ ), age ( $p = 0.687$ ), geographical identity ( $p = 0.139$ ), being a native speaker ( $p = 0.596$ ),

education level ( $p = 0.210$ ), degree subject ( $p = 0.253$ ), middle-earth knowledge ( $p = 0.947$ ), IF experience ( $p = 0.408$ ) and tabletop RPG experience ( $p = 0.916$ ) had any impact of identification.

There was a significant finding that the participant's "creative agenda" did influence identification  $F(3, 123) = 4.78$   $p = 0.003$ . Means are shown visually in Figure 3.

However, Tukey analysis revealed the only significant differences are between the "None of these is important; something else is important to me" group and the said "Experiencing a good story with strong narrative / drama" group ( $p = 0.005$ ) and the 'Becoming the character, feeling their emotions and acting accurately for the character' group ( $p = 0.008$ ). Given the small size of this group (only 3% of all participants), caution should be taken in reading too much into this result.

Figure 3  
The Interaction of creative agenda on identification with character



## DISCUSSION

Good significant evidence has been produced that readers/players identify more strongly with good fictional character than evil fictional characters. It is consistent with less formal observation made in Hook (2019) which as a byproduct of design compared characters of different morality across different stories. However, this is a novel finding in having strong statistical evidence for the first time to support this.

One explanation for this may be teaching from religious stories and society generally to favour "good" over "evil", which results in this bias. While some games such as the tabletop role-playing game *Vampire: The Masquerade* (Rein-Hagen & Wieck, 1991) may at surface level focus on players controlling protagonist "evil" monsters, often these are about such characters striving to be good (and failing to do so, bring us onto the other topic).

Highly significant evidence has also been found for stronger identification with losing characters rather than winning characters. This is a novel and somewhat unexpected finding. The reasons for this remain uncertain. Juul (2013)'s claims that games offer player a journey. If the focus is indeed on the journey rather than the outcome this might have been an explanation if no significant differences had been found either way, but this is not the case.

Juul (2013) also argues that failure in a game is a player (not character) failure, and enjoyment of games derives from escaping failure, often by skill improvement; pleasure derives from improving oneself. It's unclear if such an approach generalises from skill-based video games that can be played repeatedly to a story-game played once, and to games that try to present a literary character rather than merely a controlled playing piece. If we accept Juul's argument and that it does generalise to this kind of story-game, then it might offer a possible explanation; the act of losing when playing a game feels like a successful learning experience, which is pleasurable. However, this explanation relies on the unproven assumption that pleasure strengthens identification; Igartua (2010) argued that identification increases enjoyment, but not the other way round.

Cohen (2011)'s psychoanalytical approach sees being a loser as an impersonal truth, encouraging humility to achieve acceptance of it. However, he writes in an aspirational way, which implies this state is something people generally have not achieved. It may be this finding suggests greater acceptance of being a loser than he imagines.

Another possible explanation of this result is the Jungian concepts of projection and splitting. If the protagonist is considered an "other", then the identity of "loser" is projected onto them, away from the self, defending against any negative feelings of being a loser. A protagonist that loses then affords the reader the opportunity to make this ego-defending projection, while one that wins does not. This would indicate why a losing protagonist is preferred. However, this concept is not a good fit with the concept of identification, since it's based on seeing the protagonist as "other". This might be understood as an element of double thinking, seeing the protagonist as both relatable, but also an "other" to safely project onto. This would be comparable to identifying with a celebrity, political or religious leader while still recognising them as an "other". This is an area where identification is distinct from the identifying as a member of a group, as Tajfel (1970) describes.

An alternative way to understand both these results is the assumption that people identify more strongly with characters that share their own identities ("like themselves"). People overwhelmingly identify themselves as good hence identify more strongly with a good character. Furthermore, people may identify as losers as previously discussed, so identify more strongly with a losing character. While this assumption at first glance seems reasonable, as discussed earlier research has found it is not true in all cases (Hook, 2019; 2020) so caution should be taken here.

Looking at both topics together shows a stronger identification for "good losers". In literary terms this might indicate the narrative potency of tragedy protagonists such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, or mythic figures that ultimately lose such as *King Arthur*. It also applies in many cases to protagonists in the horror genre, such as those in the work of H.P. Lovecraft (which also have a great many adaptations across gaming and other media). In terms of modern mainstream video gaming, the award-winning *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar games, 2019) depicts a protagonist who loses, dying of illness contracted during the narrative.

The lack of significant differences between the three creative agendas suggests that which one the participant regards as more important has no impact on identification. Caution should be taken here in relation to "Your character achieving their goals" / "winning", where numbers are small and data is suggestive, and the small number which selected in the "none of these is important" answer which did have a significant difference. Nonetheless, it is an interesting finding that the identification is so similar between the two agendas that cover most of the participants.

Most participants saw the protagonist as male. This may reflect the focus in Tolkien's work (and perhaps the fantasy genre more generally) on male protagonists. More research is needed to investigate this topic.

### Reflection on the method

This experiment has been another application of the story-game as experimental stimulus method developed by Hook (2019), applying experimental method to the game studies discipline and the topic of identity / identification. For coverage of digital games as stimulus generally see Järvelä et al. (2014). The discussion of classic psychology experiments as if they were games in Hook (2012) may also be of interest to readers.

The limitation of this online methodology is that participants are only those people who use the internet, having gaming and/or fantasy interests, and can read English. However, the participant pool



is very diverse in other ways, especially across geography (and my implication, nationality). One could make the case 'gamers' may be psychologically different in some respect from the wider population so findings won't generalise, but so far there is a lack of evidence to support this.

This is also a successful example of a double-barrelled experiment, testing two separate hypotheses at the same time. This relies on recruiting a sufficiently large sample but has the merit of generated additional insight from the research activity. It also has the benefit of being able to check for an interaction effect between the two, something not possible if they were both tested as separate experiments.

In contrast to previous experiments, this experiment added a fourth answer 'None of these is important; something else is important to me' to the question about creative agenda. The fact that so few participants choose this option (3%) may imply the near completeness of the existing three options described by Boss (2008).

### **Practical applications of the findings**

The most obvious practical application of these two findings is to inform the construction of narratives, both in interactive media and (if we assume the results generalise) to static media as well. Characters who are 'good' and 'lose' are identified with more strongly, with all associated benefits that have been claimed, such as increasing the reader's enjoyment.

The finding on losing is in stark contrast to notions of heroic narratives often used in video games where a protagonist 'wins' and puts the world to rights. This finding suggests more games should embrace the concept of a protagonist losing. This may even merely be in the narrative presented (e.g., in cut-scenes), distinct from the interactive or skill-based parts of the game which Juul focuses on.

We might also consider if the results generalise to other forms of identification, such as building identification with a celebrity or politician. Rather than presenting a politician as a 'winner' (e.g., in Trumpian narratives), presenting them as (sometimes) losing may generate more identification. This might be seen as humanising them, making them relatable or demonstrating perseverance.

### **Implications for future research**

When designing future experiments in this tradition, the character's morality and the story outcome should be considered carefully. At the very least they need to be kept consistent across different experiments. It may also be worth creating a story to encourage strong identification, so that the impact of whatever conditions are being investigated is more apparent.

It would be interesting to take forward the findings on the impact of a character's morality. The topic of morality is more complex in fiction settings that lack an objective morality. It may be that readers will apply their own sense of real-world morality as to whether they judge the character to be good, or in some cases may judge them by the morality of the culture of the character's own fictional setting. This may be an area of personal difference between people. More research would be needed to understand this topic. This may be difficult to explore experimentally, but a different methodology such as qualitative interviews may yield some insight here.

The lack of significant findings from all the other secondary questions might raise questions about the value of such questions in future research. While gathering such background data is not negative, long questionnaires can dissuade potential participants from completing them. It may be worth removing some of these questions in the future, especially if there are ideas for alternative data to be gathered for analysis instead.

An interesting side that emerged while reflecting on these findings is the relationship between identification with a character, and the enjoyment/pleasure for engaging with the media. With an additional question or two, it would be possible to gain hard data to show if these two factors correlate.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research has continued to move forward a novel experimental design and found evidence of two narrative features that impact of identification with a fictional character, and in ways that might not

have been anticipated: That people identify more strongly with good than evil character, and with losing rather than winning characters, and that there is no interaction between the two effects. This represents new insight, that may inform the creation of fictional characters and narratives across media. As with previous experiments in this tradition, this study shows the experimental approach can be effective to study this previously humanities-held topic.

This experiment is a further demonstration of using online experiments, enabling a large and diverse international group of participants, and ensuring high ecological validity that making the activity close to their everyday experience. It also informs future design in suggesting there is lack of need to reuse the secondary questions.

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