

Narrative Trust in Choice-Based Games: Rethinking Emotional Immersion Through Twine and AAA Dialogue Trees

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ABSTRACT:

This paper investigates *narrative trust* in choice-based interactive digital narratives (IDNs). Not to be confused with literary notions of the narrator's reliability, narrative trust is a form of emotional engagement where players believe not just in characters, plot, or outcomes but in the systems that shape them. Drawing from player surveys and close readings of four games – *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, *Detroit: Become Human*, *Depression Quest*, and *With Those We Love Alive* – the study explores how emotional reliability is constructed, felt, and sometimes broken. Trust, we argue, emerges not from the number of endings or the complexity of branching but from the system's ability to register intention with coherence and weight. Through structural analysis of design mechanisms like responsive hesitation, we show how narrative systems earn or lose credibility. When players feel mis-recognised as the system responds with silence, flattening, or didactic funnelling, trust collapses. But when a system hesitates, absorbs, or simply listens, even refusal can feel like recognition. This paper calls for design that values resonance over spectacle, showing that emotional mechanics are not soft features but central engines of narrative play.

KEY WORDS:

digital games, game studies, interactive digital narratives, narrative choice-based games, narrative studies, narrative trust, player agency, structural design.

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Introduction

I trusted Connor to make the right decision, even if I wasn't holding the controller.
– Survey response #26, *Detroit: Become Human*

This paper begins from a moment that game studies does not always hold onto for long: the shift from evaluation to belief. At this point, the player engages the game as a structure that can carry intention and sustain uncertainty over time. Trust, here, settles at the level of the system. Moments like this remain difficult to account for within existing frameworks of agency and interactivity, where emphasis has tended to fall on choice, outcome, and system design rather than on the player's sustained belief in the system itself.

Choice-based digital games have long been central to discussions of agency and interactivity in narrative form. Early accounts of ergodic literature and cybertext position meaning as something produced through traversal rather than reception (Aarseth, 1997). Later work on procedural narrative and participatory storyworlds extends this view, arguing that digital environments require players to interpret both narrative content and the rules that organise it (Murray, 1997; Ryan, 2006). Within this framework, interactive digital narratives (IDNs) can be understood as systems in which progression depends on player action and interpretation. Most scholarship approaches IDNs through the architecture of choice. Attention has been given to branching structures, moral decision systems, and the distribution of agency within rule-based environments (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). In large-scale games, these processes are often externalised

through flowcharts, morality indicators, and outcome summaries that render system logic visible. In text-based and independently developed works, particularly those created using Twine, choice operates through constraint, repetition, or refusal embedded directly into the narrative structure (Friedhoff, 2013; Harvey, 2014). Across these forms, choice remains the primary site through which narrative meaning is organised.

However, player accounts tend to linger elsewhere. They return to moments where system response feels inattentive, delayed, or difficult to interpret in relation to intention. Outcomes arrive without sufficient signal, and systems track behaviour quietly and disclose their logic only after the fact. These moments do not point to a lack of agency. Rather, they suggest instability in how the system holds and translates player input over time. Narrative engagement begins to hinge on whether responses remain legible across the duration of play.

This paper develops the concept of narrative trust to describe this condition. Narrative trust refers to the player's sense that their actions are being registered in ways that remain emotionally and structurally intelligible as play unfolds. The term draws from literary discussions of narrative reliability, where readers assess the credibility of a narrative voice (Booth, 1983). In interactive media, attention shifts toward the system as the site of that assessment. What matters is how it responds, how it delays, how it holds or releases consequence.

This study examines narrative trust across four choice-based interactive digital narratives: *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015), *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream, 2018), *Depression Quest* (The Quinnsspiracy, 2013), and *With Those We Love Alive* (Porpentine, 2014). These works differ in platform, aesthetic, scale, and production context, yet emerge within a relatively concentrated period of contemporary interactive narrative design. This allows for comparison across divergent forms without foregrounding graphical fidelity or budget, instead focusing on how systems organise response across interaction. The analysis proceeds through qualitative, interpretive methods grounded in structural reading, supported by anonymised survey responses. These materials are used to situate how players describe recognition, dissonance, and moments of withdrawal in relation to system behaviour. The argument that follows treats narrative engagement as a function of system responsiveness. Emotional immersion depends on whether the system continues to register intention in ways that can be read over time. Narrative trust takes shape through coherence, resistance, and delay which thins out when response becomes opaque, generic, or difficult to trace. In this sense, narrative trust operates as a structural condition of meaningful play.

Theoretical Framework

Work on interactive digital narratives has consistently returned to the relationship between player action and system response. Early formulations of ergodic literature position the reader as an active participant whose traversal produces meaning through effort and decision (Aarseth, 1997). This shift places interpretation within a structured environment, where the organisation of paths, constraints, and outcomes shapes the conditions under which narrative can be encountered (Nitsche, 2008). Murray (1997) extends this understanding by framing digital environments as spaces structured by procedural affordances, where agency emerges through interaction with rule-based systems. Ryan (2006) further develops this line of thought by emphasising that players interpret not only storyworlds, but also the logic through which those worlds respond. Here, agency has

often been treated as the central organising concept. Studies of branching structures and decision systems tend to focus on the availability of options, the visibility of consequence, and the distribution of control within designed environments (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Ethical approaches to gameplay refine this discussion by examining how systems assign weight to player action and frame decision-making within moral structures (Sicart, 2009, 2013). These approaches establish vocabulary for understanding how systems organise choice and consequence while also foregrounding the importance of coherence, even when outcomes remain uncertain or delayed.

Alongside this focus on agency, scholarship on affect and embodiment has shifted attention toward how interaction is felt across time (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). Calleja (2011) describes player engagement as a process of incorporation, where the boundaries between player and system become less distinct through sustained interaction. Massumi (2002) approaches affect as a pre-conscious intensity that circulates through action and response, shaping experience before it is articulated. Bruner (1990) and Freeman (2010) situate narrative meaning within the processes of memory and interpretation, where experience is structured retrospectively through patterns that hold across time. These perspectives frame interaction as something that unfolds gradually, shaped by accumulation, delay, and variation rather than by discrete moments of decision.

Moreover, Twine, an open-source tool for creating hypertext-based interactive narratives, has become closely associated with independent interactive fiction and small-scale digital storytelling practices. Twine-based works typically operate through text-driven interfaces, limited computational infrastructure, and a focus on accessibility (Anthropy, 2012), allowing creators to produce narrative systems outside commercial development frameworks (Alexander, 2014). Within this context, design practices often prioritise constraint and minimalism. Rather than expanding choice, these systems frequently restrict it, using repetition, denial, or limited interaction to shape player experience (Friedhoff, 2013; Harvey, 2014). Constraint operates as a structural condition that directs attention toward how systems respond, rather than how many options they provide. This approach situates meaning within pacing, tone, and the modulation of response.

Across these strands of scholarship, a shared concern emerges around how systems register and organise player input over time. What remains less explicitly addressed is how players come to sustain belief in the system itself as an ongoing narrative presence. Existing frameworks account for action, consequence, and interpretation, yet they rarely isolate the conditions under which system behaviour is experienced as credible, attentive, or coherent across extended interaction.

Several games foreground this question through their design. *Eliza* (Zachtronics, 2019) structures interaction through constrained dialogue, where the player's role is limited to reading pre-scripted therapeutic responses. Meaning, here, emerges through restriction, pacing, and the accumulation of context across sessions. *The Beginner's Guide* (Everything Unlimited, 2015) organises its progression through a guided sequence that controls access to interpretation, shaping how players engage with authorship and intent over time. In *Heaven's Vault* (Inkle Studios, 2019), interpretation is embedded directly into system response, as translation choices alter both narrative understanding and future possibilities. *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019) distributes decision-making across internalised dialogue systems, where competing voices respond to player input with varying degrees of persistence and contradiction. These works do not rely on the expansion of choice. Their systems maintain engagement through modulation, memory, and responsiveness. Player input is absorbed, delayed, reframed, or returned in altered form. The emphasis, thus, shifts toward how systems sustain continuity across interaction, allowing players to interpret present moments in relation to prior actions and emerging patterns.

The concept of narrative trust builds on these theoretical foundations by focusing on how system behaviour is experienced over time. It directs attention toward responsiveness, coherence, and the conditions under which player intention remains legible within the unfolding structure of the game. Rather than centring the availability of choice, this framework examines how systems hold, transform, and return player input across the duration of play.

Defining Narrative Trust

Trust, in this context, refers to a player's ongoing sense that their actions are being registered in ways that remain intelligible across the duration of play. It operates at the level of system behaviour. Players continue to act within a narrative environment when responses retain coherence, even under conditions of ambiguity, delay, or restriction. This coherence does not depend on favourable outcomes. It depends on whether the system sustains a readable relationship between intention and response.

Existing work in narrative theory and reception studies has addressed related questions through different conceptual frames. Reader-response theory, for instance, situates meaning within the interaction between text and reader, emphasising interpretation as an active process shaped by expectation, memory, and context (Iser, 1978). In game studies, this line of thinking extends into discussions of agency, immersion, and procedural authorship, where player experience is understood as emerging through interaction with designed systems (Murray, 1997; Ryan, 2006). Ethical approaches to gameplay examine how systems assign weight to decision-making, often focusing on consequence, responsibility, and moral framing (Sicart, 2009, 2013). Work on affect and embodiment further shifts attention toward how interaction is experienced across time, emphasising intensity, incorporation, and the role of the body in meaning-making (Massumi, 2002; Calleja, 2011).

These approaches account for interpretation, action, and experience, yet they do not isolate the player's sustained belief in the system as an object of analysis. Agency describes the capacity to act. Immersion describes the depth of engagement. Ethical frameworks describe how actions are evaluated. None of these terms fully address how players come to rely on system behaviour as something that can be read, anticipated, and trusted across extended interaction. Narrative trust focuses on this condition of reliance, where engagement is shaped by the perceived continuity and responsiveness of the system over time.

The concept draws from literary discussions of narrative reliability, where readers evaluate the credibility of a narrative voice and the consistency of its account (Booth, 1983). However, interactive systems reorganise this relation where evaluation shifts toward the system, which structures response through rules, pacing, and the distribution of consequence. Players interpret these responses as they unfold, forming expectations about how the system will continue to behave. Trust develops within this interpretive process, shaped by repetition, variation, and the accumulation of prior interaction.

Moreover, work on ergodic literature situates the reader as a navigator who traverses a structured space in which paths and outcomes are only partially revealed (Aarseth, 1997). Ryan (2006) emphasises that players interpret procedural logic alongside narrative content. Murray (1997) describes digital environments as spaces in which agency is enacted through interaction with systems that respond over time. These accounts establish the conditions under which players engage with interactive structures, while leaving open the question of how system behaviour is experienced once patterns begin to stabilise. Further research on ethical gameplay and procedural design examines how systems assign weight to action and structure consequence (Sicart, 2009, 2013). Decisions

acquire significance through the way systems absorb, delay, and return them. Consistency across these processes allows players to form an understanding of how the system operates. This understanding does not require full transparency. Instead, it relies on the persistence of patterns that can be recognised and interpreted as play progresses.

Narrative trust develops within these conditions of pattern recognition. It takes shape as players begin to anticipate how the system will respond, adjusting expectations in relation to prior outcomes. This process unfolds gradually. Early interactions establish a baseline for how decisions are acknowledged. Subsequent responses either reinforce or destabilise this baseline. Systems that maintain continuity across these moments allow players to interpret outcomes within an evolving framework. Systems that shift without signal or remain unresponsive disrupt this process, producing uncertainty that cannot be resolved through further interaction. I place particular emphasis on responsiveness rather than on the quantity of available choices. Systems may offer limited options and still sustain trust when responses remain legible across time. Systems with extensive branching structures may generate instability when responses fail to align with the patterns they establish. The issue centres on how systems hold player input, how they return it, and how these processes accumulate into a readable structure.

Narrative trust, therefore, operates as an interpretive condition that emerges through sustained engagement with system behaviour. It is shaped by pacing, memory, feedback, and the modulation of consequence across time. Players remain engaged when these elements maintain continuity across interaction, allowing intention to persist within the unfolding structure of the game.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology focused on the analysis of narrative systems and their behaviour over time. Narrative trust is approached as an experiential and structural phenomenon that emerges through interaction, rather than as a variable to be measured. The analysis therefore combines close structural reading of game systems with contextual player discourse, allowing for an examination of how system response is encountered, interpreted, and evaluated during play.

The primary method employed is close structural analysis. Games are treated as expressive systems in which meaning is produced through the organisation of interaction (Fernández-Vara, 2014). Attention is directed toward decision pacing, feedback timing, moments of hesitation or refusal, the visibility or opacity of consequence, and the ways in which systems register or disregard prior player input. The aim is to identify recurring patterns through which systems acknowledge, delay, or fail to recognise player intention. These patterns form the basis for evaluating when narrative trust is sustained and when it begins to weaken.

The study examines four choice-based interactive digital narratives: *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, *Detroit: Become Human*, *Depression Quest* and *With Those We Love Alive*. These works were selected to reflect variation in platform, scale, aesthetic, and production context. Two are large-scale, commercially produced titles that externalise system logic through visible structures such as branching flowcharts, relationship indicators, and outcome summaries. The other two are Twine-based works that operate through constrained interfaces, textual presentation, and limited choice sets. This selection allows for comparative analysis of narrative system behaviour across differing design traditions, while maintaining a shared emphasis on player choice as a structuring mechanism.

To situate structural analysis within player experience, the study draws on an anonymised qualitative survey conducted by the author in June 2025. The survey was distributed through online game-related communities and academic networks. Participation was voluntary, and no personally identifying information was collected. A total of 138 respondents completed the survey, each indicating familiarity with at least one of the selected games. The survey consisted of seven prompts addressing continuity, coherence, feedback legibility, outcome interpretation, authorial transparency, narratorial cohesion, and emotional credibility. Responses included both scaled selections and open-ended reflections. Only open-ended responses are cited in this study. These are used illustratively to provide insight into how players articulate experiences of recognition, confusion, or disengagement in relation to system behaviour. It is important to note that the survey material is not treated as representative or generalisable data. Rather, it functions as contextual discourse that supports interpretive analysis rather than as evidence for statistical claims.

All responses were anonymised at the point of collection and are cited by response number. The study adheres to standard ethical research practices for minimal-risk, anonymous data collection. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and consented to the use of their responses for academic analysis. No sensitive personal data was requested or retained.

Publicly accessible online discussions were also consulted during the research process to identify recurring patterns in player language surrounding choice, consequence, and system responsiveness. These materials informed the analytical framework but are not directly quoted or treated as citable sources within the study. Their role is limited to contextual orientation.

This methodological approach positions narrative trust as a function of system behaviour rather than player psychology. The focus remains on how systems respond across time and how those responses are interpreted as coherent, opaque, or misaligned with player intention. By combining structural analysis with situated player discourse, the study maintains analytical traceability while preserving the interpretive nature of the phenomenon under examination.

Narrative Trust in Practice

Players place narrative trust in systems that sustain coherence under pressure, where consequences feel traceable to prior action and intention. Trust, then, forms gradually through patterns of response that remain legible across time, even when outcomes are difficult, ambiguous, or irreversible.

In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, narrative trust emerges through accumulation rather than spectacle. Outcomes are rarely immediate, and the system does not foreground causal logic through explicit feedback. Instead, consequence is distributed across time, often surfacing after extended narrative distance. The Bloody Baron questline, for instance, unfolds through delayed consequence and dispersed narrative resolution, where key outcomes emerge outside conventional cutscene framing. One respondent describes encountering its conclusion not as a staged event but as part of the environment itself: “The fact that the last time I saw the Baron wasn’t in a cutscene but rather including him in the scenery made this moment much more impactful. It allowed me to come to my own emotional understanding and resolution, rather than the game telling me how I should feel” (Survey response #29).

The system does not direct emotional response or provide closure through cinematic framing. It allows the player to register consequence through absence and environmental continuity. This produces a form of coherence grounded in recognition rather than instruction. Players are not told what their choices mean, yet they are able to reconstruct meaning retrospectively. Narrative trust is sustained because outcomes remain intelligible, even when they are painful.

In *Detroit: Become Human*, system logic is made visible through flowcharts, relationship meters, and branching summaries. Scholarly work has framed this visibility as a form of ethical education, where consequence is externalised through a butterfly-effect structure (Magová, 2020). In practice, this visibility produces moments where trust depends on whether the system appears to remember prior intention in meaningful ways. Connor's deviation arc provides moments of hesitation as staged through slowed time and suspended action, allowing accumulated decisions to shape future behaviour without immediate resolution. A respondent reflects this sense of continuity directly: "I trusted Connor to make the right decision, even if I wasn't holding the controller" (Survey response #26). Here, trust extends beyond individual choices and attaches to the system's ability to sustain a coherent trajectory of behaviour. The player recognises that prior decisions have been absorbed into the system's structure. Trust emerges through this continuity, where the system appears to carry forward intention rather than resetting it at each decision point.

Not all systems, however, sustain trust through accumulation or visibility. In *Depression Quest*, trust operates through constraint. The game restricts available choices by presenting options that cannot be selected, foregrounding limitation as a structural condition. Player responses consistently describe recognising intended actions while being prevented from enacting them, and interpreting this restriction as aligned with the experience the game represents (Survey response #112). In this case, trust emerges from alignment between system behaviour and thematic condition. The system does not expand possibility but reinforces limitation in ways that remain legible. Constraint becomes meaningful because it corresponds to an internal logic that players can recognise and interpret.

A different configuration appears in *With Those We Love Alive*, where the system minimises feedback and removes visible consequence tracking altogether. Rather than signalling outcomes, the game situates meaning within ritualised interaction, including embodied actions such as drawing sigils on one's skin (Bem, 2014; Larose, 2017). Player responses describe this experience as "personal" and interpretive, closer to reading than to conventional gameplay (Huang, 2017), where meaning is sustained without explicit system acknowledgment (Survey response #124). Here, trust operates without overt feedback. The system does not confirm or evaluate action, yet maintains coherence through tone, pacing, and sustained address (Katherine, 2022). Silence does not register as absence but as continuity of form (Louise, 2015).

Narrative trust, therefore, cannot be seen to depend on the number of choices available or the visibility of system logic. It emerges through the consistency with which systems register intention, whether through accumulation, constraint, or minimal response. Different design strategies produce this effect, yet they converge on a shared condition: players are able to interpret how their actions relate to the system's behaviour over time.

When Narrative Trust Collapses

Players do not place narrative trust in spectacle. They place it in systems where consequence feels earned rather than imposed. This trust depends on whether the system's response can be understood as part of an ongoing structure.

In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, some of the most affecting moments sustain narrative trust through accumulation rather than dramatic revelation. The Bloody Baron questline, for instance, unfolds through delayed consequence and environmental resolution, where outcomes emerge within the world rather than through cinematic closure. This design approach allows players to encounter consequence as something embedded in the world rather than delivered to them.

This form of distributed consequence recurs across player accounts. Respondents frequently emphasise the way outcomes feel connected to earlier actions, even when those actions seemed minor at the time. As one player notes: "Every choice I made mattered. It spawned a different world based on choices that seemed minuscule" (Survey response #2). The system does not foreground its logic through explicit markers. It allows meaning to accumulate across time. Trust emerges through the perception that the world continues to respond in ways that remain internally consistent, even when those responses are harsh.

In *Detroit: Become Human*, system responsiveness is made visible through flowcharts, relationship indicators, and outcome tracking. Scholarly work has framed this visibility as a form of ethical education, suggesting that consequence is externalised to encourage reflection (Magová, 2020). Player responses indicate that this visibility can both support and complicate narrative trust. When feedback aligns with emotional pacing, it intensifies engagement. Moments involving Connor are frequently described in these terms. One respondent notes that decision-making within his storyline created a heightened sense of involvement, as they "liked his story the most so it hooked me, therefore making me feel more engaged both emotionally and in terms of wanting to play" (Survey response #5).

At the same time, the system's transparency can introduce tension when outcomes appear to follow an evaluative logic. Some players describe moments where moral expectations shaped their decisions in advance, producing a shift from expressive play toward anticipation. In such cases, the system remains highly responsive, yet that responsiveness is interpreted as selective. Trust becomes contingent on whether the system appears to recognise a range of intentions or privileges a narrower set of outcomes.

Depression Quest approaches trust through constraint rather than expansion. Its crossed-out dialogue options present actions that are visible but unavailable. This structure has been widely read as a representation of depressive experience (Steffen, 2014). Player responses reflect a similar interpretation. One respondent describes how the restriction itself produced immersion, noting that "I was unable to cheat my way out of the choices I've made and actually understand what this person is going through." (Survey response #124). The system acknowledges intention without fulfilling it. Trust here emerges through alignment between constraint and thematic condition. The refusal makes sense within the framework the game establishes.

In *With Those We Love Alive*, narrative trust is shaped through absence rather than feedback. The game does not track consequence in visible ways. It relies on pacing, tone, and embodied interaction. Trust is sustained through continuity of address and the sense that the system remains present, even when it does not respond in explicit terms.

Across these works, narrative trust does not emerge from the number of choices or the scale of branching structures. It takes shape through the relationship between intention and response as it unfolds over time. Systems that sustain trust register player action in ways that remain legible, whether through accumulation, hesitation, constraint, or silence. Differences in form and scale do not determine the presence of trust. What matters is whether the system continues to respond in a way that can be read.

Design Ethics for Narrative Trust

Narrative trust develops through sustained interaction between player intention and system response. It is not a fixed attribute of a game, nor a by-product of narrative complexity. It emerges through patterns of behaviour that remain legible over time. Systems that sustain this form of engagement do so by maintaining attentiveness, even when response is delayed, constrained, or withheld, as well as in forms of environmental and affective storytelling where systems organise emotional response through atmosphere and world design (Verheul, 2025). The following principles outline a set of design considerations grounded in this condition.

a) Read intention, not just action

Player input carries more than selection. It conveys hesitation, repetition, refusal, and tone. Systems that respond only to discrete choices reduce interaction to mechanical exchange, where meaning is derived from outcome rather than engagement. More responsive systems register how a choice is made, not only what is chosen.

Work on interactive drama has long suggested that systems operate alongside the player, shaping experience through timing, framing, and interpretation (Mateas & Stern, 2005). Within this framework, narrative trust develops when players perceive that their stance is being recognised. This does not require complex modelling or extensive tracking. It requires consistency in how the system interprets patterns of behaviour. When response reflects intention rather than isolated input, interaction begins to carry continuity.

b) Keep it coherent

Branching structures alone do not produce meaningful consequence. Systems that multiply outcomes without establishing an internal logic risk fragmenting the relationship between action and result. Coherence depends on whether outcomes can be traced back to earlier interactions in a way that remains interpretable. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, consequence emerges through accumulation rather than immediate feedback. In *Detroit: Become Human*, coherence is sustained unevenly, with certain arcs maintaining continuity while others narrow interpretive range. In *With Those We Love Alive*, coherence is maintained through tonal and structural consistency rather than branching variation. These examples suggest that coherence is not tied to scale or visibility. It is produced through alignment between system behaviour and the patterns it establishes over time.

c) Make constraint do something

Restriction can sustain engagement when it remains responsive. Denied options, limited pathways, and enforced pauses can register intention without resolving it. Their effectiveness depends on whether they evolve in relation to continued interaction.

In *Depression Quest*, restricted choices establish a clear relationship between intention and limitation. This structure holds as long as constraint continues to signal variation in tone or pacing. When restriction remains static, its expressive force diminishes. Constraint becomes background rather than response. Systems that employ limitation effectively allow it to shift, linger, or intensify. The absence of action continues to carry weight when it is shaped by context.

d) Let the system remember

Narrative systems do not need to record every variable to appear attentive. They need to behave as if prior interaction matters. This impression can be produced through small adjustments in dialogue, pacing, or tone that reflect earlier states.

Games such as *Disco Elysium* and *Heaven's Vault* demonstrate how interpretive continuity can be maintained without exposing underlying systems. Player responses shift the texture of interaction rather than redirecting it entirely. In more constrained works such as *Eliza* and *The Beginner's Guide*, memory operates through framing rather than variation, where repetition and withholding create a sense of accumulated experience. In each case, the system sustains presence by responding in ways that acknowledge prior engagement.

Conclusion

Narrative trust operates as a condition of sustained belief in how a system responds over time. It shapes how players interpret consequence, how they remain engaged, and how they make sense of outcomes after interaction has ended. When this trust holds, players continue to read the system as coherent, even when it produces loss, ambiguity, or refusal. When it weakens, interaction shifts. Decisions become instrumental. Attention moves from interpretation to prediction.

This study has examined how narrative trust forms and unravels across four choice-based interactive digital narratives: *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, *Detroit: Become Human*, *Depression Quest*, and *With Those We Love Alive*. These works differ in scale, interface, and design logic. Each presents a distinct way of organising interaction. Across them, a consistent pattern emerges. Trust develops when systems maintain a readable relationship between intention and response. It weakens when that relationship becomes difficult to trace.

The analysis has shown that this condition is not dependent on the number of choices or the visibility of branching structures. Systems that distribute consequence across time can sustain trust without explicit feedback. Systems that make their logic visible can support engagement when that visibility remains aligned with narrative pacing. Constraint can register intention without resolving it. Absence of feedback can maintain presence when it carries form. These variations suggest that narrative trust is tied to how systems behave, rather than how much they offer.

The integration of player responses has further clarified how these dynamics are experienced. Moments of trust are often described in relation to continuity, where outcomes feel connected to prior interaction even when they are not anticipated. Moments of breakdown are described through disorientation, where players are unable to reconstruct how their actions have been interpreted. These accounts do not function as generalisable data. They provide insight into how system behaviour is read over time.

The concept of narrative trust contributes to existing discussions of agency, procedurality, and ethical gameplay by shifting attention toward the credibility of the system itself. It frames interaction as a process of interpretation in which players assess not only what a system allows, but how it responds. This perspective opens space for further work on how different design strategies shape long-term engagement, particularly in contexts where choice is constrained, delayed, or withheld. The study also identifies a set of design considerations grounded in attentiveness. Systems that sustain narrative trust tend to read intention rather than isolated input, maintain coherence across time, allow constraint to function as response, and create the impression that prior interaction matters.

Narrative systems do not need to explain themselves in order to be trusted nor do they require large scales or complex branching. They need to remain interpretable. When players continue to read system behaviour as meaningful, engagement persists beyond individual decisions. Trust follows from that continuity.

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