Why Choose You? - Exploring Attitudes Towards Starter Pokémon

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Abstract. Non-playable characters (NPCs) are prevalent features of video games. Forming attachments with NPCs is often considered a core part of play. However, previous research suggests such relationships may vary drastically between players: some may view NPCs as important companions, whilst others consider them as mere gameplay tools. There is a gap in the knowledge base regarding the factors which may influence attachment. Specifically, it is unclear whether a player's attitude towards their own play corresponds to different levels of attachment. This report uses survey data from 8,371 participants from Pokémon communities to explore how players perceive attachment to in-game companions. We measured gameplay approaches (for example, if participants perceive themselves as competitive or casual players) and their attitude towards Starter Pokémon, ranging from the perception that they are the most important Pokémon in the game, to a gameplay burden. Initial exploratory results suggest that players may be more attached to a Starter Pokémon if they possess a more casual rather than competitive playstyle, and are playing for the first time over replaying with added challenges.

Keywords: Companion · Emotional Attachment · Non-Player Character · Parasocial Relationship · Starter Pokémon

1 Introduction

Non-playable characters (NPCs) are a vital component of both tabletop and video games, acting as gameplay elements for players to interact with the world. The literature contains significant theoretical speculation that players' social interactions with NPCs and their identity can influence a player's game experience [1], with the development of a strong bond between the player and NPCs considered to potentially bring richer game experiences [2]. Parasocial relationships, where players experience one-sided feelings of social intimacy with media characters, are proposed to result from repeated encounters with NPCs [3–6].

However, players may also experience negative emotions towards an NPC if they do not meet the player's expectations [7]. This may arise from ludonarrative dissonance between the narrative versus how the NPC acts in-game [8–10]. For

example, a companion NPC, who players must escort and protect in order to progress, may constantly put themselves in danger, with little regard for safety.

As stated by Warpefelt [7], attitudinal factors, such as a player's unbelief in an NPC's social aspect, may be in play when considering players' negative behaviours with NPCs. Recent literature work has focused on altering characteristics of games in attempts to improve believability through design. For example, by creating more convincing game environments [7] and more appealing characters [2,11], or giving NPCs their own background and motivation aligned with their story to enhance credibility in their actions [1,12].

Thus, prior research has explored features that may determine parasocial bonds developing with NPCs *between games*. A nascent literature has begun to investigate whether the motives players bring to a play experience contribute to such attitudes developing. For example, Milman [13] investigated whether different play motives (e.g. escape, coping) were able to predict parasocial relationships developing with in-game characters. However, relatively little work has explored how these relationships may vary *between players of a single game*, and how this variation may relate to the reasons for engaging with such a game.

2   Method

Design: We used a cross-sectional design to examine player attachments towards companion NPCs in **Pokémon**, and how this alters depending upon gameplay approaches. Since its release in 1996, the gameplay has remained fairly consistent over the years. The player takes the role of a Pokémon Trainer, who instructs their party of Pokémon on what attacks to use in turn-based battles. The Pokémon, meanwhile, act as companion NPCs that the player bears responsibility for. The player cannot progress without using their Pokémon to win the battles before them, and the Pokémon cannot act without the player's input.

In particular, we examined attitudes towards **Starter Pokémon**, who are the first Pokémon the player obtains in the game. The same three are available to choose from in every playthrough of a game, making them a consistent presence players must encounter. As a result, they are marketed as possessing higher narrative and gameplay importance over other Pokémon found in the early game.

10364 participants were recruited via advertisements in casual and competitive Pokémon communities on Reddit to answer our survey, and after cleansing erroneous and incomplete answers, 8371 responses were used in our analysis.

Measures: We recorded the following measures from participants. All measures involving Likert scales included questions asking "*How much do you agree with the following statement?*", ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*.

Attachment to Starter Pokémon: In order to provide a brief but interpretable measure of a player's attachment to their Starter Pokémon, we asked "*What best describes your relationship with your Starter Pokémon?*" Participants were given four options: '*I view my Pokémon as the most important*

Pokémon in the game' (12.5%), *'a special companion and part of the team'* (76.9%), *'no differently to any other Pokémon'* (9.7%), and *'a gameplay burden'* (0.8%).

Gameplay Purpose: The player's purpose for their most recent gameplay was also recorded, with three options given: *'first-time/brand new release'* (57.8%), *'replay for fun'* (23.0%), and *'replay with an additional challenge'* (19.2%).

Casual or Competitive: We asked *"Do you consider yourself more of a casual player, or a competitive player?"* 79.9% identified as casual, and 20.1% as competitive. We formed a composite index estimating if their playstyle is more casual
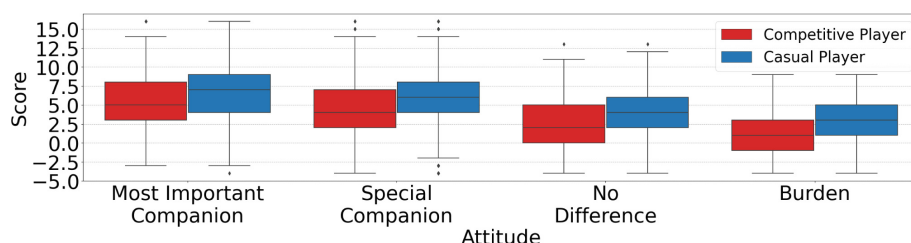

Fig. 1. Likert scale scores for questions on playstyle with Starter Pokémon, grouped by attachment levels and if players identified as casual (blue) or competitive (red).
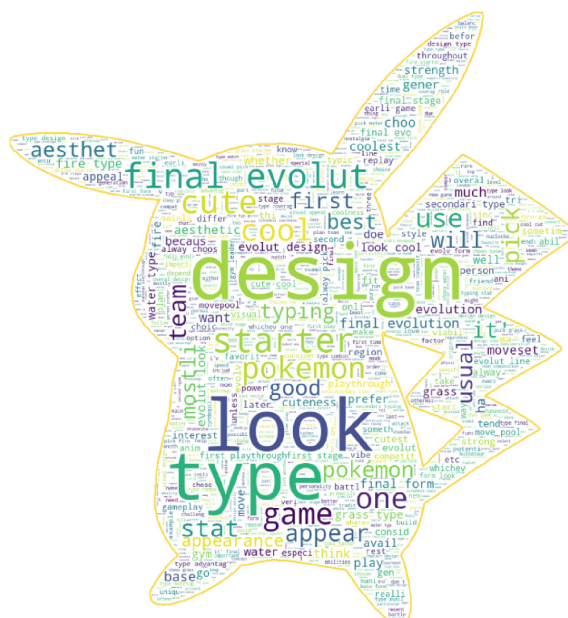

Fig. 2. A word cloud of participants' considerations when choosing Starter Pokémon.

or competitive, with a Likert scale scoring responses to statements such as "*I have recreated my Starter Pokémon in Pokémon Showdown for online battles.*"

Perceived Usefulness: We formed a composite index estimating how important a Starter Pokémon's in-game usefulness is considered, with a Likert scale scoring responses to statements such as "*I will never replace my Starter Pokémon on my team with another Pokémon that shares the same type.*"

Design Appeal: We formed a composite index estimating how important a Starter Pokémon's appearance and design is considered, with a Likert scale scoring for statements such as "*I care more about how my Starter Pokémon looks than how strong they are.*" We also asked "*What considerations do you think of when you choose your Starter Pokémon?*", and allowed for a freeform response.

3   Results and Discussion

We performed some preliminary tests on our data to compare attitudes towards Starter Pokémon against both the players' gameplay purpose and approach.

Table 1 highlights a significant difference exists between players replaying with additional challenges compared to first-time players or replaying for fun. Table 2 suggests that players who replay with additional challenges are more likely to view Starter Pokémon indifferently or as a burden. Therefore the attachment between players and Starter Pokémon may drop significantly when self-enforced rules are introduced to make the game more challenging.

Meanwhile, Table 3 similarly highlights that competitive players overall are more likely to feel neutral or negatively towards their Starter Pokémon compared to casual players. This is shown in Fig. 1, where the median and interquartile lines for casual players tended to rank higher on the Likert scale for all four attitude groups compared to competitive players, suggesting more favourability.

Table 1. Dunn's Test on relations between player purposes, using attitude towards Starter Pokémon for comparison ($\alpha = .05$)

	First Time	Replay
Replay	0.2334	–
Replay + Challenge	$4.228526e^{-11}$	$3.037131e^{-06}$

Lastly, Fig. 2 shows the normalised answers from our wordcloud for what participants considered when choosing their Starter. Variations of 'design', 'look', 'type', 'cute', 'cool' and 'final evolution' were frequent responses, suggesting that appearance is an important factor to consider when examining how player attachments to NPCs are formed.

Table 2. Player purposes versus attitude towards Starter Pokémon ($X^2 = 61.1$, $\rho \approx 0$)

	First Time		Replay		Replay + Challenge	
	Real	X^2	Real	X^2	Real	X^2
Most Important	12.9% (626)	0.81	13.1% (252)	0.58	10.4% (167)	5.75
Special Companion	78.1% (3780)	0.93	76.2% (1467)	0.11	74.1% (1193)	1.68
No Difference	8.1% (392)	13.23	9.9% (191)	0.07	14.4% (232)	36.12
Burden	0.8% (39)	0.1	0.7% (14)	0.33	1.1% (18)	1.38

Table 3. Player types versus attitude towards Starter Pokémon ($X^2 = 136.09$, $\rho \approx 0$)

	Casual Player		Competitive Player	
	Real	X^2	Real	X^2
Most Important	13.0% (872)	1.67	10.3% (173)	6.66
Special Companion	78.3% (5241)	1.65	71.4% (1199)	6.58
No Difference	7.9% (529)	23.16	17.0% (286)	92.3
Burden	0.7% (50)	0.81	1.3% (21)	3.21

In conclusion, it appears lower attachment occurs more frequently for competitive players and those replaying to challenge themselves, whereas first-time and casual players were often more positive towards their Starter Pokémon.

4   Future Work

There are many potential avenues for future research to explore and consider, building upon the survey data used here. For one, not all of the questions answered by participants were considered in the current analysis. These include questions such as asking whether players find themselves talking to their Starter Pokémon as though they can hear them whilst playing, or how players feel about game features like **Pokémon-Amie** or **Pokémon Camp** which allow players to directly interact with their Pokémon. Exploring the relationships between these opportunities for parasocial interactions and how players approach the game will help to develop a greater understanding of how these attachments form.

There are some additional limitations within our survey that must also be acknowledged. Most notably, Reddit is but a small fraction of the Pokémon community - most participants generally came from countries that can understand or speak English (such as in Europe or North America), and all responses used for analysis were stated to be over the age of 18. Additionally, both participating subreddits (r/pokemon[1] and r/stunfisk[2]) have a good mixture of casual and

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[1] https://www.reddit.com/r/pokemon.
[2] https://www.reddit.com/r/stunfisk/.

competitive users. Thus, results may have differed if participants were recruited from other parts of the wider Pokémon community and playerbase. For example, from younger users below 18 years of age, from alternative platforms such as Twitter, from more competitive communities such as Smogon University[3] or players participating in the official Pokémon Video Game Championships[4], or from non-English-speaking countries such as Japan and Korea.

Further studies should perhaps consider the attitudes and attachments of participants from other sections of the Pokémon community, in order to examine the emotional difference and attachments experienced by players from different countries, experiences and age groups, as well as further exploration on the attitudes held by groups of casual and competitive players. This could also explore scenarios where competitive players might have formed particular emotional attachments to Pokémon that they have found consistent success with, rather than those obtained during the main story's gameplay. Players may form attachments to the species of Pokémon rather than any specific individual of that species, which may be worth looking into as well.

Finally, it would be important to consider whether these findings still hold true for other games with more human-like NPCs who act independent of the players' actions, whereas Pokémon are more animalistic in design and in behaviour, and almost always require the player's input in order to act. One further research direction may be to understand players' emotional attachments between human-like and other types of NPCs when contrasted against how players approach their gameplay within different games.

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