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# “Everything is going to be okay”

## Analysing emotional landscapes in Interactive Digital Narratives through the exploration of complex psychological themes in *Omori*

### ABSTRACT

Interactive Digital Narratives (IDNs) are a powerful medium to address complex psychological issues and societal challenges, offering users exposure to disruptive and counter-hegemonic perspectives. This analysis explores the role-playing game *Omori*, designed by OMOCAT in 2020, to illustrate how narrative mechanics and visual aesthetics in IDNs serve as symbolic vectors for playfully conveying complex themes and points of view, which are often stigmatised or misrepresented. In *Omori*, the use of symbolic language through textual investigations, a nonlinear narrative structure, and an audiovisual repertoire that oscillates between the whimsical and the disturbing, effectively illuminate topics such as depression, anxiety, isolation, and trauma responses, enabling players to feel closer to and empathise with the protagonist's struggles and allowing them to gain a deeper understanding of such topics in a playful, yet profound, manner and through game-related logics. The interplay between interactivity and narrative in *Omori* highlights how IDNs can effectively heighten emotional responses in players through immersion and identification with the characters, making them a powerful tool for emotional and cognitive engagement.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Meaningful narrative experiences can be made with a range of digital artefacts. These include Interactive Digital Narratives (IDNs), a type of digital narrative expression that combines computer science and the arts (Roth & Koenitz, 2016). Several studies in the field of game design highlight their narrative and emotional power (Koster, 2005; Salen & Zimmerman, 2005; Schell, 2015)

and how they differ from more traditional and linear media in both narrative and participatory nature (Bellini, 2022; Murray, 2012). The distinctive quality of IDNs lies in their ability to function as an interactive form of narrative expression, whereby users can actively and dramatically modify plot developments (Murray, 2012). Users experience a variety of emotions and have control over what happens on the screen by providing multiple inputs. IDNs can take many embodiments, from interactive fiction to interactive cinema to narrative games (Koenitz, 2010), but they always require actors' participation (Frome, 2007), as every decision must be represented in a way that alters the narrative. Players' emotional responses are intensified by this proactive and useful method of engaging with IDNs because actor-participants become fully immersed in a fictional world (Wolf, 2013) and feel the consequences of their choices more intimately and personally. Thus, rather than being primarily influenced by what they see, users of IDNs are primarily determined by what they do (Frome, 2007). Thanks to their multimodality (Bellini, 2022), IDNs are able to organise and arrange the discourse on difficult topics, taking into consideration several opposing viewpoints and non-hegemonic perspectives, allowing the audience to experience them in one universal setting.

The present contribution focuses on the use of IDNs for conveying challenging topics and how users can experience different emotions when dealing with such themes. First, it outlines the function of emotions in IDNs, examining how the coexistence of semiotic modes and narrative roles can generate diverse viewpoints and address both the affective and cognitive aspects of users' emotional reactions. Subsequently, a deeper analysis of how game mechanics and components enable the representation of complex themes and expose the users to opposing and emotionally challenging points of view is conducted through an examination of the role-playing game *Omori* (Omocat LLC, 2020).

## 2. EMOTIONS IN IDNS

Interactive Digital Narratives (IDNs) offer players escapism from everyday life through enjoyment and pleasurable stimuli, even without tangible rewards (Yannakakis & Paiva, 2015). As societies evolve, traditional games have shifted from simple puzzles to more complex experiences that address real-world issues and contemporary needs (Koster, 2005). In this changing environment, game design aims to elicit amusement and engagement but also critical thinking, exposing players to complex human behaviours and emotionally charged viewpoints that deepen comprehension of real-world problems and foster empathic responses (Dubbelman et al., 2018).

IDNs exemplify this approach, with *users-players* also taking on the role of *interactors* that inhabit the fictional environment and carry out actions to maintain and "bring forth" the storyworld (Bellini, 2022). Unlike traditional media outlets, the narrative of an IDN is closely linked to the players' actions, granting them *agency* to directly shape the plot, thus creating a novel form of storytelling

(Frasca, 2001; Irshad & Perkis, 2020; Mäyrä, 2019; Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum, 2010; Wardrip-Fruin et al., 2009). Players are not merely viewers but real actors whose presence is acknowledged within the fictional world and whose actions directly affect the evolution of the game dynamics as well (Kors, 2017).

The emotional connection in IDNs is profound, with players experiencing a blend of cognitive, affective, and behavioural reactions as they immerse themselves in the fictional world and control more than just an avatar. In this sense, in IDNs emotions are both the experience catalyst and a major determinant of their success (Yannakakis & Paiva, 2015).

Triberti and Argenton (2013) suggest that games demanding high engagement and strong narrative connection can significantly enhance players' well-being during gameplay, also by provoking challenging emotions like frustration and fear, which players are prepared to face (Salen & Zimmerman, 2005). This emotional engagement can be seen as a form of self-care with a profound level of catharsis (Pawar & Clarke, 2015), making such game experiences both meaningful and therapeutic.

During the playthrough of an IDN, the player's *fictional role* can influence various emotional experiences and empathic engagements. Kors (2017) identifies three player perspectives that contribute to different empathic feelings: the observer perspective, the victim perspective, and the partaker perspective. In the first, the player takes on the role of an "extradiegetic observer" who contributes to the story's development but is unable to influence the fictional world or engage in social interactions with the intradiegetic actors. This provides zero agency and often leads to a sense of detachment, but enables players to better comprehend the intricacy of the fictional dynamics and the various points of view at play. Through the victim's perspective, the player "inhabits the body, role, frame of reference, and typically the standpoint of the intradiegetic victim" (Kors, 2017), thus having a visceral experience and developing a deeper understanding of the intradiegetic victim's struggles. This perspective has been widely associated with the idea of "standing in another's shoes" and fosters high levels of empathy engagement. From a partaker's perspective, the player is part of the intradiegetic universe and is able to assist and help the intradiegetic victim without experiencing his/her distress. This perspective fosters empathy by heightening altruistic behaviours. Unlike traditional media, IDNs can offer all these perspectives based on the narrative and emotional needs.

*Game content*, or all the designed elements the player interacts with and surrounds themselves with while playing, is another way to elicit emotional responses in IDNs. These elements dynamically adapt themselves to the player's responses, defining the game experience from an audio-visual and narrative perspective (De Lima et al., 2018). According to Yannakakis and Paiva (2015), this makes them one of the primary sources of emotion elicitation. Some of the fundamental building blocks that are included in this definition are environmental features and spatial layout (Younis & Fedtke, 2023), game mechanics

and reward systems (Fiadotau, 2015), and audiovisual repertoire made of lighting design (Knez & Niedenthal, 2008), colour palettes and saturation (Geslin et al., 2016; Joosten et al., 2010), and sound effects and music tracks (Zehnder & Lipscomb, 2006). In IDNs, the narrative intensifies the playing experience even more: thanks to its adaptive nature, it can evolve hand in hand with the player, providing a unique and tailored experience that unleashes more heightened feelings (De Lima et al., 2018; Yannakakis & Paiva, 2015). All these “sensory percepts” (Bellini, 2022) create a collaborative multimodal system that heightens and facilitates the player’s immersion and emotional response.

The question then arises to what extent interacting with these digital experiences that merge interactivity and narrative can affect behaviour and trigger an emotional reaction in people while also providing a safe environment to explore outcomes without real-life risks. To further examine these points, a case study of the game *Omori* (Omocat LLC, 2020) shows how it elicits profound emotional responses and influences player behaviour.

### 3. PLAYERS’ COGNITION IN OMORI

Exploring the cognitive effects of interactive digital narratives through *Omori*, a 2020 role-playing game by Omocat LLC, reveals how narrative complexity, game mechanics, and player interactions are interwoven to create a rich, emotionally engaging experience (Bellini, 2022). This integration is critical in understanding how an IDN not only tells a story but also deeply involves players in its unfolding, shaping cognitive and emotional responses.

The title “Omori” itself plays a crucial role as a paratextual element, setting initial expectations for the players (Fiadotau, 2015). Serving as a gateway into its layered narrative, it subtly prepares players for intensely personal and reflective experiences, mirroring the solitude and introspection typical of hikikomori (Pozza et al., 2019). The game leverages a dual-setting structure, alternating between a fantastical dream world, divided into *White Space*, *Head Space*, and *Black Space*, and a grim reality—the actual fictional real world. This narrative device not only immerses players in a dynamic emotional landscape but also compels them to actively adapt their cognitive and emotional strategies (Harley et al., 2015). In the dream world, which is a vivid representation of the protagonist’s imagination, elements are surreal and whimsical, instilling a range of positive emotions that act as a buffer, or a form of escapism, against the harsher themes of trauma and anxiety subtly permeating the narrative. This mirrors psychological theories suggesting that positive emotions can foster resilience against stress and trauma, offering a temporary reprieve and emotional strength (Fredrickson, 2001). In this space, players find themselves immersed in a world where reality blurs with dreamlike madness. In contrast, when the game shifts to the fictional real world, players are confronted with its grim and realistic environments that echo the protagonist Sunny’s past traumas. This sharp contrast elicits raw, often distressing emotions, challenging players to manage and reconcile these feelings

with the comforting escapism experienced in *Head Space*. The narrative structure of the game plays a crucial role in players' cognitive engagement, mirroring the psychological processes involved in dealing with trauma (Van Der Kolk, 2014), and requiring players to navigate through and recollect the fragmented realities of Sunny. Game elements are presented in ways that defy traditional genre expectations and contribute significantly to the narrative's impact. The storyline is layered with themes that are gradually revealed through symbolic elements and narrative progression. This active involvement is necessary as players hypothesise and reassess their cognitive understanding of the unfolding story. Furthermore, *Omori*'s emotional resonance is amplified by its detailed character development, which presents a cast of actors grappling with their own fears and traumas. By inviting players to empathise with these experiences, *Omori* enriches players from an emotional and affective point of view while also stimulating their cognitive understanding of perspectives divergent from their own, as it requires players to understand perspectives and emotions that may be far removed from their own. This consideration of both psychological dimensions – affective and cognitive – through which players can immerse themselves in the story and the characters' struggles highlights *Omori*'s comprehensive approach to stimulating empathy, a construct of multidimensional nature that encompasses overlapping affective and cognitive facets (Davis, 1983).

The game also integrates emotional management into its core gameplay mechanics, wherein players' choices of emotional states for characters directly influence their capabilities and the game's outcome. For instance, making a character feel happy, sad, or angry has tangible effects on their abilities and how they handle challenges. This strategic use of emotions not only deepens the narrative but also reflects the feedback loops and multimodal interactions discussed by Bellini (2022), demonstrating how emotions can dramatically alter both personal and IDN trajectories.

This nuanced integration of emotion serves as a central gameplay mechanism that deepens the narrative and makes the story and character interactions more compelling. Interacting with complex emotional dynamics mirrors real life, where emotions substantially impact personal capabilities and relationships. By doing so, *Omori* offers a counter-hegemonic perspective on mental disorders and also challenges societal norms and biases surrounding this topic, echoing the call for narratives that engage with social issues and empower players to actively explore and affect the story (Mariani & Ciancia, 2023).

Elson et al. (2014) further discuss how narrative, mechanics, and context act as key determinants of player experience in digital games. In *Omori*, the seamless integration of game mechanics with narrative elements exemplifies this interaction. Decisions made by the player not only propel the narrative forward but also affect the characters' emotional states, which in turn influence gameplay outcomes. This dynamic showcases how *Omori* uses its gameplay mechanics not just for player interaction but as a narrative device that reflects

the protagonist's psychological state, thereby deepening the player's engagement with the game's themes. The cognitive impact of *Omori* is deeply tied to its emotional resonance. The game's ability to evoke strong emotion is not merely a byproduct of its storytelling; instead, it is a deliberate design choice that serves to deepen the player's engagement. Through its gameplay, *Omori* invites players to critically engage with and reflect on the impact of emotions and trauma, providing a profound commentary on human psychological experiences.

#### 4. "OMORI FEELS DEPRESSED!" NARRATIVE MECHANICS USED TO CONVEY THEMES AND VALUES

*Omori* represents a compelling exploration within the role-playing video game genre, emphasising its role as a narrative-driven game. It is crucial to clarify that while narrative games are part of the broader category of Interactive Digital Narratives (IDNs), not all video games qualify as IDNs (Bellini, 2022). IDNs are characterised by their deep integration of narrative elements that significantly influence and are influenced by the player's actions – a distinction not applicable to all video games. For example, games not centred around narratives that focus more on gameplay mechanics without substantial storytelling elements or story-driven player interaction cannot be considered IDNs per se.

In *Omori*, the emphasis on narrative mechanics is manifested through an intense focus on player-driven progression within a tightly woven story framework. The game organises players' activities and choices to advance through a meticulously crafted narrative, balancing their agency with guided narrative experiences, as is typical in narrative games (Ryan, 2015). Dubbelman (2016) argues that these mechanics invite players to engage in actions that build engaging stories and imaginary worlds, thereby enriching their cognitive and emotional landscapes. Players navigate game worlds, engage in battles, and interact with environments and characters to advance the story. The exploration and environmental storytelling are calibrated to allow personal interaction, yet they maintain boundaries that preserve narrative coherence.

This structured approach to storytelling is crucial in *Omori*, as unrestricted exploration could detract from the game's thematic focus. It is important to note, though, that even when players appear to be exploring at random, the game's narrative is guiding them to elicit specific emotions or reveal crucial plot details. So, while exploration may appear unrestricted, it is actually carefully crafted to maintain narrative coherence and ensure an engaging and meaningful experience for the player. The game's mechanics and rules are adeptly employed to create compelling narrative events through spatial conflicts, characterisation, and player choices, thus ensuring that each player's decision contributes meaningfully to the unfolding story (Dubbelman, 2016).

The role-playing game (RPG) genre is particularly well-suited to *Omori*, where a narrative-rich storyline is central to the player's experience. RPG mechanics, with their straightforward gameplay approach, allow narrative elements



to prominently emerge. Every interaction, whether through dialogue, combat, or exploration, can reveal deeper layers of the story. This blend creates poignant moments that merge the whimsical with the grave, emphasising stark contrasts between dreamlike states and harsh realities. Thus, the RPG format is not just a backdrop but a vital framework that enriches the entire gaming experience.

#### 4.1 EMPATHIC ENGAGEMENT THROUGH STORYTELLING

*Omori* uniquely frames its narrative by bifurcating the protagonist's experience into two worlds, each serving as a lens through which players explore Sunny's trauma. Character development is articulated through contrasts between the characters' real-world personas and their dream-world representations, reflecting a psychological fragmentation indicative of deep-seated trauma. As highlighted by Younis and Fedtke (2023), Sunny's journey is marked by an identity crisis between his repressed self, Omori, and his actual self, revealing deep psychological fragmentation. In the dream world, Omori represents Sunny's idealised self, happy and untouched by past traumas, living perpetually in a pre-trauma idyll. Conversely, in the real world, Sunny is portrayed as a hikikomori who has not left his house since the incident that marked him deeply, showing the severity of his withdrawal from reality. The gradual unveiling of these differences deepens players' understanding of the impact of trauma on personality and relationships, enhancing empathetic connections with the game's characters.

Sunny undergoes a significant transformation as he confronts and attempts to reconcile his traumas and anxieties. As the narrative unfolds, players are granted an intimate perspective on his concerns and journey towards self-acceptance, emphasising the dichotomy between reality and psychological manifestation. This gradual revelation of the character's complex backstory lets players foster an emotional bond and empathise with them (Jørgensen, 2010, as cited in Kors et al., 2020). As players navigate through both worlds, they encounter various characters and scenarios that differ markedly between the real and imagined settings. These differences are not merely aesthetic but are reflective of the protagonist's psychological interpretations and distortions. The culmination of Sunny's identity crisis and the tension between the dual aspects of existence are dramatically played out in the final section of the game and, in particular, in the final bossfight, where the protagonist must confront and defeat Omori to shatter the escapist world he has created. This confrontation symbolises a tormented battle between facing a painful reality and succumbing to a fabricated realm of denial. By participating in this resolution, players deeply engage with the themes of trauma, identity, and mental health disorders, fostering a profoundly empathetic connection with the protagonist (Younis & Fedtke, 2023).

According to research on narrative immersion in interactive digital environments, such a focused narrative perspective can deepen empathy by forging a personal and profound connection with the character (Carpentier et al., 2015). As the narrative progresses, the game cleverly invites players to engage in a

deeper exploration of these contrasts. The protagonist's desire to understand his own psyche and resolve his internal conflicts is what motivates this investigation. The discrepancies between how characters and situations are perceived serve as a narrative mechanism to highlight the protagonist's internal struggles and anxieties. This interpretive layer of the gameplay is crucial for advancing the plot, as each revelation about the character's psyche provides both narrative depth and gameplay motivation. Consequently, players are drawn into a complex interplay of uncovering hidden motivations and resolving the protagonist's inner turmoil. The game's design effectively uses its narrative and mechanics to encourage a deep engagement with the story, urging players to piece together the underlying causes of the protagonist's perceptions and the consequent reimaginings within the dream world.

In the context of Interactive Digital Narratives (IDNs), *Omori* effectively uses avatar identification to engage players, allowing them to inhabit a secondary world by embodying a virtual persona tailored for the narrative environment (Codamo, 2021). This role can be explicit or implicit, and players may control a visible avatar or an unseen entity, thus influencing their engagement with the storyline (Roth & Koenitz, 2016).

By identifying with a character within the secondary world, users can choose how to respond to in-game scenarios, thereby generating new narrative content and exhibiting emotional investment in the game (Ahn, 2015).

According to Gee (2003, as cited in Triberti & Argenton, 2013), engagement with an interactive digital artefact involves three identities: the player's real identity, the avatar's virtual identity, and a projective identity that bridges the two. This triadic model facilitates the transfer of experiences from the virtual to the real, enabling players to experience and internalise the game's narrative and thematic elements. This immersive interaction fosters a dynamic exchange of meanings and emotions, reminiscent of real-life personal transformations (Triberti & Argenton, 2013).

Within *Omori*, a profound example is presented that encapsulates the exchange of meaning and emotions between the game and the player: the game's environment and its characters are crafted to appear incredibly lifelike, challenging conventional expectations about the fictional nature typically associated with video game worlds. Initially, players navigate a seemingly fantastical world conjured by the protagonist's imagination during sleep. In this environment, *Omori* combats foes with a knife, reducing their life points until they are defeated. This mechanic is commonly understood in gaming as a means to progress past obstacles rather than to depict actual violence. However, the implications of such actions become starkly apparent during a confrontation in the real world when Aubrey, another character, is unintentionally wounded, causing immediate cessation of the fight amidst shock and panic from all present. This moment underscores the stark divergence between the consequences in the dream world and the harsh realities of the physical world, blurring the lines



between fiction and reality for both *Omori* and the player, and highlighting the protagonist's disturbed mental state and its profound implications for his perception of reality. Players are drawn into his psychological turmoil, marked by depression and a distorted perception of reality, prompting a reflective engagement with the narrative that transcends typical non-interactive experiences.

#### 4.2 PORTRAYING TRAUMA THROUGH AESTHETICS

Playing *Omori* feels like being immersed in a dream, where the world is rendered through a blend of dithered pixel art and hand-drawn sketches. This artistic approach subtly shifts focus from mere appearances, guiding players to recognise that everything depicted is a manifestation of the wide array of emotions experienced by Sunny, which inevitably impacts the player as well. The aesthetic design and metaphorical elements form a core structure that represents and articulates the main theme and fosters emotional resonance between the story and its players. Here, the visual design excels at depicting emotion, with each character's emotional state clearly illustrated by a coloured aura that surrounds them during combat situations and by expressive facial animations. This makes the characters' inner states visible and easily interpreted by the player, helping them to instantly understand emotional states.

The integration of visual and emotional cues within *Omori* serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it deepens the narrative by allowing emotions to visibly influence gameplay mechanics, such as the effectiveness of combat moves. Secondly, it enriches the storytelling by providing a visual shorthand for character development and plot progression. As characters evolve or regress emotionally, these changes are visibly marked in their auras and expressions, providing a clear and readable barometer of their development throughout the game. This visual methodology does more than just tell a story; it actively involves players in the emotional landscape of the game, enabling them to make more informed decisions in combat and interactions by providing visual feedback on characters' emotional states. This system creates a feedback loop where players participate in the emotional journeys of the characters. Also, the game's environments are not just passive backgrounds but active storytelling elements, each offering distinct experiences of escapism and confrontation with trauma. As noted by Younis and Fedtke (2023), *Omori*'s environmental design goes beyond mere aesthetics, embedding profound psychological meanings within the game's narrative. The environments generated by the character's imagination, specifically *White Space*, *Head Space*, and *Black Space*, symbolise different facets of the protagonist's trauma handling.

*White Space* is the epitome of trauma avoidance through its monotonous and minimalistic design. This space, the first encountered by the player, is sparse and undecorated, emphasising isolation and the suppression of painful memories. Here, *Omori* is alone with his cat and some objects, and nothing happens. An overwhelming emptiness and a black-and-white palette characterise the environment. Here, the lack of colour and detail reflects a deliberate avoidance of

trauma triggers, facilitating a hollow, risk-free form of escapism where Omori can exist free from traumatic memories (Younis & Fedtke, 2023). The music, notably minimalistic and repetitive, complements such visual austerity.

In contrast, Head Space, with its vibrant colours and nostalgic elements, evokes childhood memories, embedding escapism through idealised nostalgia. The environment, reminiscent of children's playrooms, features bright, saturated colours and fantastical elements that invoke childlike wonder and safety. Here, Omori is not alone, and other characters appear – the friends he wishes he could have had with him at that traumatic moment. However, this space is occasionally punctuated by disturbing elements that signal unresolved trauma lurking beneath its cheerful surface. This complex environmental layering represents a nuanced exploration of how escapism and trauma can coexist, often unsettling the player with unexpected intrusions that mirror the unpredictability of traumatic memories. The soundtrack enhances this nostalgic escapism with lively melodies until eerie disturbances subtly remind of darker realities.

Black Space, encountered at the narrative climax towards the ending, is visually disturbing and has chaotic imagery, representing the raw and horrific revelation of trauma. Its visual design starkly contrasts with the orderly White Space and the comforting fantasy of Headspace (Younis & Fedtke, 2023). The dissonance of eerie tracks and unsettling sounds intensifies the player's anxiety, effectively conveying the psychological turmoil associated with confronting repressed memories and traumas. This space challenges the player's perceptions and evokes strong emotional reactions, marking the protagonist's direct confrontation with his traumatic past. The disordered nature of Black Space breaks away from the artificiality of the other spaces, providing a stark, unfiltered experience close to the traumatic incident itself (Younis & Fedtke, 2023). This culminates in the final battle, where Sunny confronts Omori in a psychological conflict where repressed traumas are either kept hidden or accepted and brought to light.

### 4.3 EMOTIONAL COMBAT SYSTEM

Interactive narratives intensify audience empathy, especially when interactivity is deeply embedded within the narrative experience (Hand & Varan, 2009). *Omori* leverages this phenomenon through its unique, emotion-based combat system, which not only aligns with but deepens the narrative's exploration of the protagonist's psychological struggles. As players navigate *Omori*'s dual worlds, they encounter adversaries in various forms, each representing the protagonist's fears or memories. In the overworld, these encounters may be random, part of mandatory plot-driven boss fights, or avoidable, offering players agency in their engagement level. Combat in *Omori* employs a traditional RPG turn-based system, enriched by a nuanced emotional dimension: characters can exhibit emotions like *happiness*, *sadness*, *anger*, or *neutrality*, each influencing combat dynamics with escalating intensities. These emotions visibly alter the characters' auras and expressions during battles, enhancing the

immersive quality of engagements. Furthermore, each character possesses unique abilities tied to their emotional states, which evolve throughout the game, reflecting their personal growth and struggles. For instance, Omori, shaped by his depression, uses skills associated with sadness. The effectiveness of his moves is contingent on both his and the enemy's current emotional state, mimicking a rock-paper-scissors dynamic (figure 1). This not only enriches the gameplay but also serves as a narrative device, illustrating the characters' internal battles and emotional resilience.



Figure 1: *Omori* emotion chart.

Characters' emotional states are pivotal and influence not only individual battle outcomes, unlocking different unique mechanics, but also overarching narrative themes. For example, Space Ex-Boyfriend manifests his bipolar disorder symptoms (Grande et al., 2016) in combat through dramatic mood swings that affect his abilities. Such portrayals provide narrative depth, reflecting the real-world complexities of mental health issues and their impact on individuals' interactions and behaviours. This is emphasised during *Omori*'s boss fight against this character, who alternates between two emotions, sadness and anger. During depressive moments, his attacks will do less harm, while during irritable moments, his attacks will be stronger.

Game mechanics also extend beyond individual battles. In-game events can alter characters' emotions, linking narrative progression directly to gameplay. This integration ensures a cohesive experience where narrative and ludic elements constantly interact, enhancing the game's thematic coherence and reducing ludonarrative dissonance (Codamo & Mariani, 2021; Seraphine, 2016).

As the story progresses, the young protagonists realise the necessity of teamwork and emotional intelligence to navigate the challenges presented to them. This awareness is mechanically encapsulated through the introduction of a dynamic *follow-up* system in combat, which allows characters to strategically collaborate during battles, enhancing their effectiveness by triggering emotional states that confer unique statistical benefits. For instance, early in the game, a follow-up action might see Kel throwing a ball at Omori who, failing to catch it, becomes sad and increases his defence. As their relationship develops during the game, a new follow-up interaction sees Kel throwing the ball to Omori who now successfully catches it, reflecting a strengthened bond and mutual understanding. This change not only shifts Omori's emotional state to happiness but also significantly boosts his attack. Such mechanics deeply integrate the narrative aspect of the development of character relationships into the gameplay, allowing players to witness and influence the growth of characters' bonds through their decisions and actions.

The *tag* mechanic further illustrates character dynamics. This system allows players to switch the party leader to utilise their unique abilities for solving puzzles and navigating the game environment. Each time a *tag* is initiated, the game displays a photograph of the outgoing party leader passing the role to the incoming one (Fig. 2). This visual representation not only facilitates a functional role within the game but also captures a moment of interaction between characters, offering players a glimpse into their personalities and the nature of their relationships. The poses and expressions during these transitions reveal subtle details about how the characters perceive each other, enriching the player's understanding of both characters' personal traits and interpersonal relationships within the game.

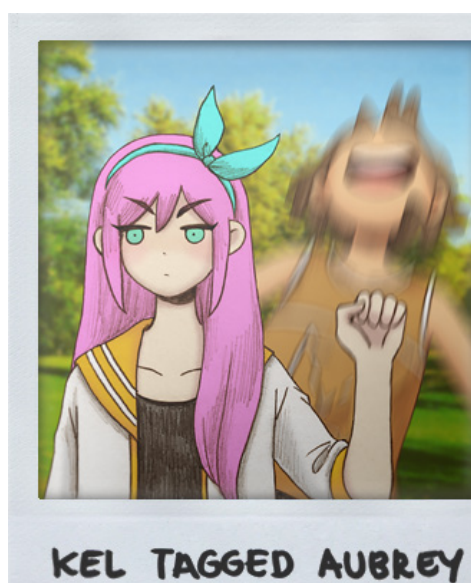


Figure 2: Tagging Aubrey using Kel as party leader. The relationship between the two characters is evident in this snapshot.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Interactive Digital Narratives like *Omori* are considered one of the most comprehensive multimodal communication systems, conveying meaning through texts, still and moving images, speech, music, and sound effects (Bellini, 2022). They give players direct agency by breaking from conventional storytelling techniques, enabling them to empathise with characters on a deep level and experience their perspective. According to Bellini (2022) and Koenitz et al. (2021), IDNs' complexity enables them to address societal issues and portray non-hegemonic themes, thereby increasing their accessibility to a wider audience.

In addition to providing users with a cohesive and meaningful experience, IDNs have the power to emotionally activate users and communicate themes and values that are rarely portrayed, especially those related to mood and mental health disorders. The brief review of *Omori*'s main mechanics and game elements serves to illustrate this. With a symbolic use of artistic and visual elements, the game's unique engagement with trauma and escapism – particularly addressed through thoughtful environmental design choices – exemplifies how IDNs can deepen understanding of such psychological phenomena and make these experiences tangible and accessible for players (Younis & Fedtke, 2023). However, *Omori*'s charming and innocent facade conceals moments of strong psychological terror, and its content, which involves characters avoiding a tragic reality by seeking refuge in an apparently safe realm, may not be suitable for all players. As they progress through the game, they form an unbreakable bond with the characters, particularly Sunny. They are gradually transposed into his mind, gaining a deep understanding of his mental struggles, which the game depicts by weaving together escapist and realist contexts (Younis & Fedtke, 2023). This immersive experience, unachievable in more traditional narratives, allows players to deeply connect with the protagonist and to assimilate, comprehend, and internalise his psychological state, which is not only narrated but experienced firsthand.

Finally, *Omori* is a prime illustration of how IDNs can use their narrative structures to depict and clarify intricate emotional and psychological themes. These structures enable intense interactions that heighten emotional responses, highlighting the significant influence of interactive storytelling in contemporary media environments.



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