

Have you Ever Experienced Someone Else's Breakup in First Person?

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Abstract: As video games have gradually become more immersive and impactful on players' emotions, it is quite important to know and address how players' unique experiences can influence the perception of difficult topics like heartbreak and depression. This study investigates how does closure from past relationships influence players' emotional responses while playing *Sayonara Wild Hearts*. The research employs extensive gameplay analysis including repeated playthroughs to construct interpretations of the chapters, levels and thematic contents. This was followed by examining online blogs, articles and research works regarding breakup, depression, closure, pop music, and music as a therapeutic medium to draw literature references. Additional findings were drawn from essay videos and posts from dedicated online communities. Empirical validation was obtained through conducting online survey, examining the relationship between closure and gameplay experience. The findings indicate that the participants who achieved closure from past relationships tend to experience the game as an affirmation of self-love. In contrast, players who continue to grapple with unattended emotional baggage often experience the game as a form of catharsis to confront their negative emotions.

Keywords: Sayonara Wild Hearts, Breakup, Emotional closure, Music in video games, Games as therapeutic tool, Catharsis in games, Player emotional response

1. Introduction

Love and heartbreaks are timeless in terms of the themes explored in pop music. *Sayonara Wild Hearts*, a poppy throwback arcade game, celebrates pop music by integrating these emotions into the heart of gameplay. The narrative centers on a young woman experiencing depression following a recent romantic dissolution, who catapulted into a world of vibrant colors and upbeat poppy music where personified tarot cards hinder and accompany her in her journey of self-discovery. Each chapter of the game is linked to a tarot card and its meaning, which serves as a metaphor for the main character's emotional progression through the stages of grief and self-healing. This paper examines how closure from past relationships can influence players' emotional responses to the game. Previous studies have explored how video games can engrave a deep impact on a player's emotional domain. According to (Nitsche, 2008), the events within games can be so memorable that they transcend outside of the virtual space, triggering emotional responses that can extend to real life. In such circumstances, players may seek validation of their feelings from other people who played the same game, showing how evocative narratives can create personal and memorable experiences. In *Sayonara Wild Hearts*, this concept is reflected in how several communities formed on different social media platforms to share and discuss their personal experiences with the game's meaning narrative on heartbreak and healing. These discussions on social media depict how interactive storytelling can create personal connections with players and allow them to reflect on their own personal lives. However, there is limited study of how players past experience, particularly closure from past relationships influence their experience of games designed around difficult themes like depression, heartbreak, and healing. This study aims to address this research gap.

2. Background

Heartbreak is one of the most personal and intimate crises that a person can endure. It numbs away the emotions, destroys self-esteem, and makes one question their own worthiness of love. Romantic breakups can even lead to symptoms like bereavement, such as intrusive thoughts, insomnia and health issues (Field, 2011). These can include biochemical effects like cardiac abnormality (Broken Heart Syndrome), which mimics physical heartache and immune dysfunction (Field, 2011). Emotional distress from a breakup can blur the self-concept, making it difficult to redefine identity and increasing emotional pain (Slotter, et al., 2010). In contrast, closure is a feeling of acceptance that helps individual move forward. Without it, unresolved emotions and uncertainty (Hendrickson & Štětinová, 2016) may stay, increasing distress (Koessler, et al., 2019). Achieving closure can improve mental well-being and confidence (Kansky & Allen, 2017). Given the emotional toll of breakups, our research investigates how closure influences the way people experience provocative content, particularly video games like *Sayonara Wild Hearts*.

Previous studies have explored various methods to address emotional pain from breakups. One study found propofol, an anaesthetic, may suppress traumatic memories (Vallejo, et al., 2019), but also warned of hormonal side effects and risks like memory loss. In contrast, another suggests that heartbreak songs can impose cathartic effects and reduce negative emotions, highlighting music's applicability as therapeutic tool (Tsai, et al., 2014). Since music encourages emotion addressing rather than suppressing, we prompted to ask: does closure shapes how players connect with a "pop-album" game like *Sayonara Wild Hearts*? And if so, can its musical narrative offer therapeutic experience, like commercial pop music?

For millennia, music has comforted the human soul when words fell short. For instance, *Blood on the Tracks*, often referred to as Bob Dylan's "Breakup album", has been greatly appreciated by listeners for decades for using raw and introspective lyrics (Garrigan, 2023) to express love and loss with a folk-rock sound. Each songs invites listeners to fill in the gaps with their own struggles (Jarnow, 2016). Similarly, *Sayonara Wild Hearts* explores love-sickness in a similar way, blending interaction with melody of pop soundtracks to guide players through the protagonist's transformative journey. For both of the creative works, the emotional progression is mapped through track-like stages which allow listeners to draw layered interpretation from their own perception of the experience.

There are other video games with similar emotion journeys. For example, *Florence* is an interactive puzzle novel that tells the story of a young woman's first love and its end. Each interaction is carefully designed to evoke emotions tied with the narrative, allowing players to feel her feelings. Similarly, *Celeste* tells a story about a young woman trying to conquer her anxiety and self-doubt by climbing a dangerous mountain. Each chapter she climbs reflects her internal hurdles, offering catharsis for players who have faced similar difficulties (Watanuki, 2019). *Octopus Pot*, a visual novel developed as a thesis project, explores romantic relationships and breakups. It invites the players to empathize with the characters going through phases of falling in love, growing apart, breaking up, and moving on (Cummings, 2022). Like *Sayonara Wild Hearts*, these games rely on the emotional backgrounds of players to shape their experiences.

Drawing from these examples, our study aims to answer the questions raised earlier. The findings may contribute to understanding how human emotional state can shape experiences in games in general, while also extending the domain on how digital media can serve as a tool for emotional healing after trauma.

3. Analysis

The following sections present a comprehensive analysis of the game through multiple interpretive lenses. These interpretations are derived from gameplay experience and online articles, community forum discussions and survey responses. We chose to divide the game into seven main chapters, the first chapter being *Clair De Lune* and the final chapter being *Wild Hearts Never Die*. The whole game is completely immersed in music, and each song is an integral part of the story, hence the title "pop-album video game" (Webster, 2025).

3.1 Claire De Lune

At the beginning of the game, the narrator explains that the heart of a young woman, our protagonist, is shattered into pieces, and her sorrow echoes through space and time, creating a subspace in the universe. The protagonist is then drawn into this subspace, embarking on a journey through neon-lit highways. This mirrors the denial stage from Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler's five stages of grief (Kübler-Ross, et al., 2014), where "the world becomes meaningless and overwhelming". Here the subspace of heartbreak resembles the overwhelming nature of denial and the protagonist's non-responsiveness depicts the "numbness".

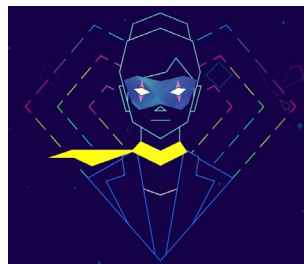


Figure 1: Claire De Lune's level selection icon, depicting The Fool

Different sources describe these events using various interpretations, but the core message remains consistent. For example, on a blogpost from *Comic Book Resources* (Nejam, 2022), the writer interprets this moment as the beginning of "The Fool's journey". Similarly, the YouTube channel Eyebrow Owl (EyebrowOwl,

2022) and the blog (Crusader, 2019) agree that the prologue symbolizes the beginning of a fool's journey, a spiritual odyssey in which a humble individual embarks on a path toward enlightenment.

From these interpretations, we can conclude that, like The Fool, the protagonist, being naive and heartbroken, answers the call of an unexpected adventure towards her self-discovery.

3.2 Dancing Devils

On her journey of self-exploration, the first figures The Fool faces are the *Dancing Devils*. The Devil tarot card shows Baphomet, or the horned goat of Mendes, symbolizes the balance between good and evil, but also sins, addiction, and desire. There are several interpretations of The Fool's interaction with the devils.

In this stage, the Fool follows the *Dancing Devils* and confronts them with the help of the tarot Wheel of Fortune, which symbolizes destiny and fate, manifested as a motorcycle.



Figure 2: The Devil tarot card

One common interpretation sees the *Dancing Devils* as representations of past relationship's residue. She recalls the pain she endured and feels *anger* (Kübler-Ross, et al., 2014) about having to go through the same process of moving on again. She has, yet again, to overpower them, and each encounter can be seen as the personal struggle and effort required to move on.

The song *Begin Again* suggests how the last relationship is nothing more than "Broken glass, smoke and ash" anymore and that it left her "Sad and scarred". Moreover, the lyrics "But I just cannot bear / One more of those calls / Where I talk and you say nothing at all" imply an abrupt closure of the past relationship, which left her saying "It's the last time" over and over again. Despite that, she is "Just happy to begin again" because she finally surrenders to the fact that there is "No need to understand" because "It's time to forget / All the pain and regrets" that those one-sided calls left her with.

Another interpretation frames (Arantt, 2020) the *Dancing Devils* in the role of peers, or rather the protagonist's anxiety caused by them, and this is supported by the way they dress and act. Each attack could represent insecurity and a perceived criticism. This feeling of being judged by the others is, in the end, overcome by The Fool when she realizes other's opinion no longer defines her.

3.3 Howling Moons

The Moon arcanum symbolizes fear and illusions (Guide, n.d.), bringing unresolved emotions into the present, causing emotional distress. Rather than confronting them, one may suppress them into the subconscious. When this card appears, it reminds her to trust intuition, reject any negative self-talk, and break down emotional blockages.

Several interpretations exist for this chapter. A Reddit user (Arantt, 2020) sees the Howling Moons as symbolic of the struggle to let go fake friends amid depression and social anxiety. Another interpretation comes from a Youtuber who highlights the prominent blue hue of the level as representing sadness, phrasing, "Have you ever felt blue?". Meanwhile, Backlog Crusader (Crusader, 2019) interprets the psychedelic visuals symbolize "confusion" and "crossroads", represented in the sections where players must decide which side to take.



Figure 3: The Howling Moons

Throughout the level, The Fool confronts her inner conflict. She uses "Justice" and "Judgement" depicted as guns attached to the "Wheel of Fortune" a mystical motorcycle, first introduced in the Dancing Devil stage. Justice reflects balance, conscience, and order, while Judgement points to awakening.

In the level's soundtrack, "Dead of Night", the chorus line, "When all you cared for is the fire / You ended up blinded by the light" implies that focusing only on the negative aspects can make her blind, obscuring the positive things around her to cherish. When the chorus drops, the Howling Moons summon a three headed robotic wolf that tries to stop The Fool from following her intuition reflecting her internal resistance. By defeating them she begins to restore her emotional balance and overcome self-doubt.

3.4 Stereo Lovers

Before the *Stereo Lovers* chapter begins, the Fool must ascend a representation of the Tower tarot card, which often means destruction, chaos, and revelation (Guide, n.d.), meaning, overcoming fear of change. After overcoming various obstacles, she reaches a portal that leads to the *Stereo Lovers*. The Stereo Lovers give the tarot "Strength" to the protagonist to challenge her to a duel, symbolizing the courage needed for healing. She ultimately slashes them, revealing their duality.

The Lovers card here reflects the duality of a past relationship, either being two separate people or good and bad traits of one person. The interpretations vary depending on the player's personal experiences. For instance, a player without proper closure may see these two as opposite figures and their world transition finger snap as two different worlds with or without the lost partner. One if everything worked out perfectly and the other as the harsh reality in which the partner is no longer present, in particular a world where she is forced to move on while still being deeply connected. This duality of "what-ifs" and imaginary outcomes can be seen as *bargaining* (Kübler-Ross, et al., 2014), the third stage of grief.

Someone who had a clean closure may consider the two halves of the *Stereo Lovers* to be the good and bad traits of their former partner. The finger snaps triggering world transitions may represent the protagonist's effort to reconcile the opposing aspects of the past relationship. When she is finally does a snap herself, it resembles reclaiming control. This symbolises a moment of growth which is often reached after reflecting on what to avoid or seek in future partners.



Figure 4: The Stereo Lovers

Another view, particularly for players without closure, conceptualises the two *Stereo Lovers* as symbolic of an ex-partner and a new romantic interest. The Fool is therefore caught in an emotional dilemma between fully healing from the old relationship and investing feelings and effort in a fresh start with someone new. One half of *Stereo Lovers* may represent the lingering attachment to an ex-partner, while the other half could represent a rebound. A rebound relationship is a romantic involvement usually pursued right after a breakup as a

distraction from unresolved feelings. This interpretation highlights the importance of closure before engaging emotionally in a new relationship.

The songs related to this chapter are, in order, Hearts & Swords, Parallel Universes, and Mine. While Hearts & Swords and Parallel Universes are instrumental, Mine has lyrics that can be analysed to better understand the level. The lyrics “Won't you be my lovely liar? / You're the story I desire / It doesn't matter if it's fake / I love to own for owning's sake” suggest an obsession with control over another person, even if the relationship with this person is not real or authentic. Moreover, “What isn't real could never fade / We prefer the masquerade” means that the protagonist knows exactly that the object of her obsession is a lie, yet she prefers to live with this lie rather than finding something more truthful. This theme of deception and longing allows different interpretations of these levels, making it not only about romantic conflict but also about self-deception and emotional closure.

3.5 The Hermit

The Fool reaches a stage where she faces the Hermit⁶⁴. The pace is comparably slower, which offers a break from the fast action of the earlier stages. The Fool is offered a new tarot, which is called Chariot, that symbolizes control, willpower, and success (Guide, n.d.). Eventually, the Fool faces the Hermit. We also found a variety of interpretations of this stage. One interpretation suggests The Fool gradually attaches to a digital world in a form of escapism from reality. During her journey to shift herself back to face reality, she gets spirited away to Hermit's virtual world and fights her way to defeat and regain her consciousness.

Another convincing interpretation of this chapter is that Hermit's digital world represents loneliness and isolation that come from *depression* (Kübler-Ross, et al., 2014), the fourth stage of grief. In this virtual world, The Fool experiences a return to childhood and everything that gave her comfort, in this case video games. She tries to protect herself with familiar things, but in the end, she has to snap back to reality. Backlog Crusader (Crusader, 2019) states that this stage is all about self-discovery. The Hermit is the last card of the 22 major Arcana, which signals the approach to the conclusion of The Fool's journey toward complete enlightenment.

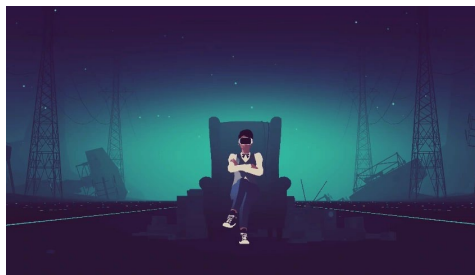


Figure 5: The Hermit

Paying attention to the soundtrack "The World We Knew", the lyrics say, "They say begin again / But I'll take any fragments I can find", which encapsulates the fatalistic and yearning thought process of anyone familiar with the darkest depths of a heartbreak. At the end of the level, the Fool literally breaks out of the through prison depicted as a VR world, resembling “withdrawal” (Kübler-Ross, et al., 2014). The Hermit arcanum represents solitude, self-discovery, and humility, which can be tied with the slow process of healing from depression caused by a heartbreak, a process that comes with time and maturity.

3.6 Little Death

The next stage begins with the Fool sailing through in the ocean, following heart-shaped figures forming a circle. Backlog Crusader (Crusader, 2019) relates the light with The Star arcanum, representing direction and renewed hope (Guide, n.d.) like the ancient navigators followed stars to find their way across seas. The battle with *Little Death* happens over several stages. At the first encounter, *Little Death* uses The Hanged Man arcanum to summon flocks of floating skulls with bat wings, while the Fool counters with Temperance arcanum, which symbolizes patience and purpose, and it turns into a shining bow.

A Reddit user (Arantt, 2020) explains that the battle represents fighting *depression* and implies the Hanged Man as a metaphor for "depression demanding sacrifice", referring to suicidal thoughts. The Fool's use of Temperance shows her psychological growth as she is not directly fighting depression, but rather the evil winged symbolizing her internal battle. On the second stage, Little Death summons the Sun arcanum, which is about joy and playfulness. According to the same Reddit user (Arantt, 2020), the Sun, posing a hazard as death

itself, represents lifecycle, foreshadowing success and the nearing end of depression. Backlog Crusader (Crusader, 2019) suggests that, despite its negative name, the Death card reflects a profound change, a transformation, and rebirth. This is clearly portrayed in the game as Little Death goes through several "transformations" during the battle as she sheds her forms. During the last stage, her body blasts away, leaving only "The Eye of Death", a massive floating eyeball that must be defeated. When death is finally defeated by the Fool, it merges with all other boss cards to create a clone of the Fool.



Figure 6: The Little Death

Reading between the lines in the lyrics of the background song "Inside", it is quite clear that even if she wants to say something, she holds back. It may suggest that a person may be mature enough to feel that they are holding themselves back but not strong enough to let go. That is how depression holds back its victim.

3.7 Wild Hearts Never Die

After destroying the evil eye of death, the final act begins with the protagonist losing her Fool persona and returning to her original form. The most powerful event comes when all evil arcana merge to create the Fool's clone who chases the protagonist and reenacting earlier battles. However, this time instead of fighting, she responds with compassion. She kisses the Fool, embracing her fears and the pain she's carried for so long. In that moment, she stops running from heartbreak, finally *accepting* (Kübler-Ross, et al., 2014) the loss and finding the closure she had been seeking. M. Heron (Gamboa, et al., 2023) addresses this moment as cathartic, a pure self-acceptance moment. This phase completes the stages of grief, illustrating what Kübler-Ross describes as "a new norm that we must learn to live with", indicating the transformation to the new self.

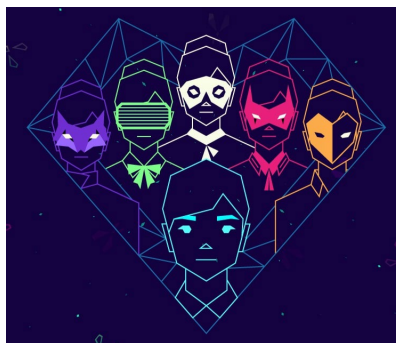


Figure 7: Wild Hearts Never Die's level selection icon, showing the protagonist and all the bosses

A Reddit user (Arantt, 2020) suggests that *Sayonara Wild Hearts* shares the core message of the game that things eventually get better. A key line, "We're just changing our shape like butterflies / Cause wild hearts never die", captures the idea of growing resilience and transformation. This message is beautifully reflected in the game's final act, where the glittering dragon becomes the protagonist's heart, showing how she has become whole again throughout her journey. In the final scene, the protagonist returns to her room at home, with longer hair to indicate that time has passed. She seems to be calm, composed, and whole.

From the discussion above, we can say the soundtrack in *Sayonara Wild Hearts* complements the narrative intentions of each level. According to (Heron, 2015), game audio can serve as a form of 'developer annotation' to the ongoing narrative, often operating in a subtle and subtextual way (Heron, 2015). In *Sayonara Wild Hearts*, the soundtracks are used in a subtextual way to add more context to the audio-visual storytelling. We think this idea adds an extra layer of medium that connects players with the story it wants to tell creating a mental bridge with narrative.

4. Discussion

The analysis of *Sayonara Wild Hearts* chapters reveals that players' interpretations vary based on personal experiences. This highlights the game's ability to resonate deeply and uniquely with each player, offering reflections of their own personal struggles and growth. For the players who have reached emotional closure after a breakup, the game can serve as an affirmation of resilience. They might see the battle against the Dancing Devils or the Howling Moons, as a representation of the struggles they have already conquered in the past. The final chapter, *Wild Hearts Never Die*, may feel like a validation of their healing process and a reminder that pain contributes to personal growth.

On the other hand, for the players who are still attached to a past relationship and are struggling with unresolved feelings, the game may present itself as a sort of cathartic experience. The game acts as a space where they can project The Fool's journey with their own to process their unresolved feelings. The act of facing bosses could resonate with them as their effort to heal their broken heart. However, these kinds of players are still in the middle of their personal fight against unhealed wounds. That's why the final chapter, particularly the moment of acceptance of herself, could represent their final goal, a reminder that closure is attainable, even if not yet realized.

We conducted the survey using Google Forms, consisting primarily of closed-ended questions and a few short answer items. The questionnaire was anonymous, and 70 individuals from online communities participated. We have used narrative analysis to cluster the respondents, and the closed-ended format facilitated efficient analysis and enhanced the accuracy of quantitative results. Table 1 presents the distribution of the respondents and their responses in percentiles.

Table 1: Summary of the responses from participants in percentiles

| | Participants with breakup history (71.4%) | Participants without breakup history (28.6%) |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Found the game cathartic | 57.1% | N/A |
| Connected with gameplay/music | 21.4% | 65% |
| Associated with other life events | 21.5% | 35% |

5. Future Work

There are several aspects that we wanted to explore thoroughly but did not have enough time or resources to progress. One of the key aspects is to examine the potential of games as digital media to help individuals struggling with depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) resulting from heartbreak or other emotional distress. We have also noticed how *Sayonara Wild Hearts* and *Florence* use simple yet symbolic mechanics that incorporate the player's mind game, and we want to explore if there are certain mechanics in games that can provide temporary relief from negative conditions like stress or anxiety.

In the future, we would like to work towards these directions, as the application of games as digital media to serve as a therapeutic medium is still unexplored. We believe video games hold the potential to help individuals struggling with mental blocks or difficulties due to trauma.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion to our paper, we showed how serious issues, such as depression and heartbreak, can impact the body and mind of people in significant ways. Then, we studied how music can help broken hearts during their healing process. After that, we compared different games with similar themes. We proceeded considering the different ways in which players' perspectives shape their emotional response while playing *Sayonara Wild Hearts*. This game's unique design and symbolism allow it to resonate with players in diverse ways, whether they are on a journey of self-discovery or searching for closure from a past relationship. By analysing different interpretations, we understood this game can be a place for emotional reflection and can serve as a cathartic experience for others.

For those who found closure, the game serves as an affirming reminder of their strength. They may interpret the battles as symbols of past struggles they have already conquered, and the final chapter, *Wild Hearts Never Die*, can feel like a validation of the progress they have made. On the other hand, players who are still dealing with unresolved feelings may experience the game as a cathartic space to confront their emotions. For them, engaging with The Fool's journey gives them a chance to reflect on their own situation, with each challenge

symbolizing their ongoing fight for self-healing. The conclusion of the story offers them hope, a reminder that closure is possible even if it has not yet been achieved.

When a heartbreak consumes one's life for a long period of time, it feels like an eternity of misery. But anyone who has overcome the pain can attest that it is really just a footnote on the path through life. *Sayonara Wild Hearts* reminds of the audience the single eternal truth, which is "you are worthy of love".

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Ethics declaration: Permission to record the responses from the online survey for the purpose of this research was obtained by all respondents. They were fully aware about the purposes of the research and how their responses would be used.

AI declaration: We acknowledge the use of ChatGPT and Grammarly to identify spelling mistakes and grammatical errors. The mentioned AI tools were not used to generate any kind of text or argument for this research.

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