

Game of Loyalties: Tragedy, Existentialism, and Psychoanalysis in *Suikoden II*

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the story of the cult-classic video game *Suikoden II* through the lenses of Aristotelian tragedy, existentialism, and psychoanalysis. It examines how friendship, loyalty, and betrayal are represented through the relationships among Riou, Jowy, and Nanami. Using qualitative narrative analysis, supported by ludonarrative analysis, the study examines selected in-game dialogues, cutscenes, and decision-making sequences involving the three characters. The findings show that Jowy functions as an Aristotelian tragic hero whose idealistic desire to end war leads to betrayal, political power, guilt, and self-destruction. Riou is read as a silent existential agent whose identity is shaped through moral choices, imposed leadership, and the player's decisions across different endings. Nanami is examined through psychoanalysis as an emotional anchor whose protective devotion reflects anxiety, attachment, and the desire to preserve family bonds amid war. The study argues that *Suikoden II* uses its character arcs and branching endings to turn loyalty, betrayal, and reconciliation into both narrative themes and player-driven moral choices.

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INTRODUCTION

Video games have evolved to become a powerful storytelling medium. They offer forms of narrative experience that differ from books, films, and other visual media because players participate in the unfolding of the plot. Kocurek (2018) applies Walter Benjamin's concept of storytelling as wisdom transmission to video games, arguing that immersive, plot-driven games can give players space for reflection and moral orientation.

Popular titles such as *The Last of Us*, *Dark Souls*, and *Skyrim* demonstrate the increasing narrative complexity of contemporary games. Such games show how interactive stories can be approached critically and even applied to educational situations (Dino, 2024). For this reason, video game narratives may be examined alongside literary and film narratives (Mukherjee, 2015; Sahmir & Ismail, 2020).

Role-playing games (RPGs) are narrative-driven games in which players control characters who develop through quests, conflict, and character progression. Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs) are a related genre

historically associated with Japanese game production and often structured around party-based characters and long-form narratives. *Suikoden II* is one such JRPG and is widely praised for its strong narrative focus.

Released in 1998 by Konami, *Suikoden II* is the sequel to *Suikoden* which was released three years earlier. The game has gained a cult following for its complex political intrigue, memorable characters, and layered storytelling. In *Suikoden II*, the player takes on the role of Riou, a young soldier who finds himself caught in a war between the Highland Kingdom and the City-State of Jowston. He must navigate conflicting alliances, character setbacks, and moral dilemmas. These elements have contributed to the game's reputation as one of the most emotionally engaging narratives in the history of role-playing games (Schwartz, 2009).

One of the main strengths of *Suikoden II* is that it allows personal relationships to develop alongside large-scale political conflict. The game explores the difficult relationships among Riou, his childhood friend Jowy, and his adoptive sister Nanami. These relationships provide a lens through which friendship, loyalty, and betrayal are represented. The game's worldbuilding is further shaped by the *108 Stars of Destiny*, a group of characters inspired by figures from the Chinese classic *The Water Margin* (Keulemans, 2023; Ohnuki, 2010). Each recruit has a distinct background and role within the larger narrative. Although the game includes branching choices and multiple endings (Subagja, 2023), this study focuses on the representation of interpersonal bonds among Riou, Jowy, and Nanami.

The game's continuing visibility is also reflected in the release of *Suikoden I & II HD Remaster: Gate Rune and Dunan Unification Wars*. Konami (2025) describes the remaster as an updated version of the original games, with revised visuals, sound improvements, and gameplay features. This continued attention suggests continuing interest in the series.

Suikoden II explores friendship, loyalty, and betrayal in ways that deepen its political and emotional conflict. Studies of loyalty show that social relationships may involve competing demands, leading individuals to experience both allegiance and disloyalty (Baxter et al., 1997; French et al., 2009). Such tensions are central to the relationships among Riou, Jowy, and Nanami, whose personal bonds are repeatedly tested by war, political obligation, and competing ethical commitments.

Suikoden II can be examined through literary and psychological perspectives. Its tragic conflicts connect personal loss with political action as characters such as Riou, Jowy, and Nanami confront competing demands of loyalty, fate, and ethical responsibility (Garuba, 2020). Psychoanalytic perspectives further clarify the characters' unconscious anxieties, suppressed emotions, and ethical blindness (Ali et al., 2020; de Klerk, 2016; Gellrich, 1984). Together, these perspectives provide a basis for examining how the game represents loss, conflict, and emotional struggle.

Previous research has examined themes in the *Suikoden* series and other role-playing games, particularly political allegories, power relations, and cultural readings. Schwartz (2009) explored the theme of othering throughout the *Suikoden* series and identified how the game mirrors the world's sociopolitical realities. On the same note, Subagja (2023) studied political violence in *Suikoden* using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach and examined how the game conveys ideological messages. Furthermore, the series is culturally and visually connected to the classical Chinese novel *Water Margin*, which serves as one of its narrative sources (Keulemans, 2023; Ohnuki, 2010). Although these works are useful, they do not directly examine the interpersonal themes of friendship, loyalty, and betrayal in *Suikoden II*. The studies reviewed here primarily address political, ideological, and cultural dimensions of the series. The interpersonal dynamics of friendship, loyalty, and betrayal among Riou, Jowy, and Nanami remain underexamined.

Studies on other major JRPGs particularly the *Final Fantasy* series have examined cultural frameworks (Sharrin et al., 2025), narrative and procedural representations of difference (Voorhees, 2009), linguistic immersion (Wibowo et al., 2024), and development strategies affecting narrative quality (Bjarnason, 2019). These studies show that JRPGs can be examined through cultural, linguistic, and structural perspectives. However, none of the studies reviewed here specifically addresses how interpersonal bonds of friendship, loyalty, and betrayal are represented within political conflict in *Suikoden II*.

Therefore, this study examines the representation of friendship, loyalty, and betrayal through the relationships among Riou, Jowy, and Nanami in *Suikoden II*. It addresses the following research question: How are friendship, loyalty, and betrayal represented in the relationships among Riou, Jowy, and Nanami in *Suikoden II*?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This study applies an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of *Suikoden II*, drawing on Aristotelian tragedy, existential philosophy, and psychoanalytic concepts. All these three perspectives offer ways to understand how the game represents conflict, choice, and emotional depth. Aristotle's tragic theory can be used to examine Jowy's rise and fall as a noble character whose actions lead to tragic consequences. Existentialism explains Riou's silence and the moral consequences of player-directed choices. Moreover, psychoanalysis helps explain the unconscious forces and repressed emotions that inform the relationships among Riou, Jowy, and Nanami. Collectively, these ideas provide a framework for discussing the story arcs of the individual characters and the ways in which *Suikoden II* uses storytelling to examine loyalty, betrayal, and moral responsibility.

Aristotle's Tragedy: Jowy as a Tragic Hero

A classical tragedy structure, as described by Aristotle (1902) in *Poetics*, can be used to understand Jowy's narrative role. Within this structure, a tragic character is defined as someone with an admirable or elevated character whose downfall results from a major mistake (*hamartia*). According to this structure, the protagonist's downfall is not caused by vice but by a mistake that creates a gap between the character's purpose and its consequences.

Jowy follows this pattern in *Suikoden II*. He is not a simple villain motivated by evil. Instead, his storyline is in line with Gellrich's (1984) argument that tragic conflict can emerge from competing moral values. His narrative role is not only to counter the hero but also to represent Garuba's (2020) idea of existential tragedy, in which a character's decisions place both moral purpose and life itself at risk. Unlike a static stage play, in which the audience helplessly watches a hero's fall, *Suikoden II* adapts aspects of Aristotelian tragedy into an interactive ordeal. The game allows players to consider the consequences of the character's *hamartia* through its narrative choices and possible endings.

Existentialism: Riou's Silent Burden and Moral Agency

According to existentialist philosophy, personal choice plays a major role in creating meaning rather than having meaning determined in advance. This philosophy is reflected in Riou, the silent protagonist in *Suikoden II*. His silence functions as a blank canvas. It is also a narrative device that reflects Sartre's (2007) ideas of self-determination and responsibility. Players are asked to choose Riou's reactions and allies, and by doing so, the narrative foregrounds must deal with the weight of choice in a morally uncertain environment.

Riou can be read as an "absurd hero," in Camus' (1991) sense, because he creates meaning amid conflict. Riou

represents the existential weight of freedom. *Suikoden II* does not always provide absolute moral answers. This absence reflects Sartre's (2007) concept of anguish, or the weight of freedom without external guidance. His silence may intensify this weight. It is not merely an absence of meaning but a space for repressed emotions, sadness, and uncertainty that are never directly spoken.

As Garuba (2020) notes, existential-tragic stories often introduce the knowledge of mortality and the anxiety it generates. This tension is reflected in Riou's narrative structure. By placing the player in the role of a silent protagonist, *Suikoden II* turns existential philosophy into a playable experience. This use of a silent protagonist invites players to reflect on responsibility, sovereignty, and the weight of self-authority, reinforcing the idea that identity is formed through action, not destiny.

Psychoanalysis: Repression and Projection in Riou, Jowy, and Nanami

Psychoanalytic theory can be applied to examine the underlying emotions and unconscious drives in *Suikoden II*. Freud's (1989) tripartite model of the psyche, which consists of the id, ego, and superego, and Jung and Hull's (2023) archetypes help situate the three main figures within a psychological reading. Nanami can be perceived as a superego-like figure because she often represents care and moral restraint. Her joyful, protective demeanor may conceal a deeper trauma tied to the siblings' early losses. As a result, her insistence on maintaining family unity can be read as a coping mechanism against the instability of the world around her.

To understand the narrative weight of Nanami's role, it is useful to situate *Suikoden II* within recent scholarship on RPGs, family, and gender. Hutchinson (2019) discusses the JRPG archetype of the missing parent, in which young heroes build surrogate families after being abandoned. This dynamic is relevant to the conflict in the game: while Jowy is connected to aristocratic power through the Atreides family, Riou and Nanami, who were raised by the war hero Genkaku, are more closely tied to a makeshift family formed through war, loss, and care. Riou and Nanami do not fight primarily for political ideology, but to preserve this fragile family bond.

This opposition between the "heroic" and the "domestic" is also reflected in other JRPG character patterns. For example, Nanako Dojima in *Persona 4* has a similar narrative function to Nanami: she represents innocence, domestic peace, and the home to which the hero returns. In *Final Fantasy VII*, Tifa Lockhart can also be compared with Nanami because she helps anchor the protagonist's disintegrating identity in a shared, pre-traumatic history. Such narrative anchoring is not incidental. Anatone (2023), in his analysis of *Final Fantasy VII*, explains how the Japanese *kishōtenketsu* pattern of introduction, development, twist, and conclusion can contribute to narrative and musical meaning.

This point is further elaborated by Gupta (2021) in his examination of the Guardian Forces in *Final Fantasy VIII*, specifically through the character of Ellone, an older-sister figure whose protective secrecy drives the game's emotional dynamics. This resembles Nanami's attempt to protect Riou by shielding him from danger and emotional harm. Although the genres differ, Smethurst and Craps (2015) offer a comparative point through the Western adventure game *The Walking Dead: Season One*, in which players are pressured to prioritize the safety of a dependent character through caregiving-based gameplay rather than purely strategic calculation.

Taken together with Wang and Hao's (2022) study on emotional attachment in RPGs, these studies suggest that Nanami can be read as more than a supporting character. She represents care and family attachment, which stand alongside the game's broader concerns with war, politics, and state-building.

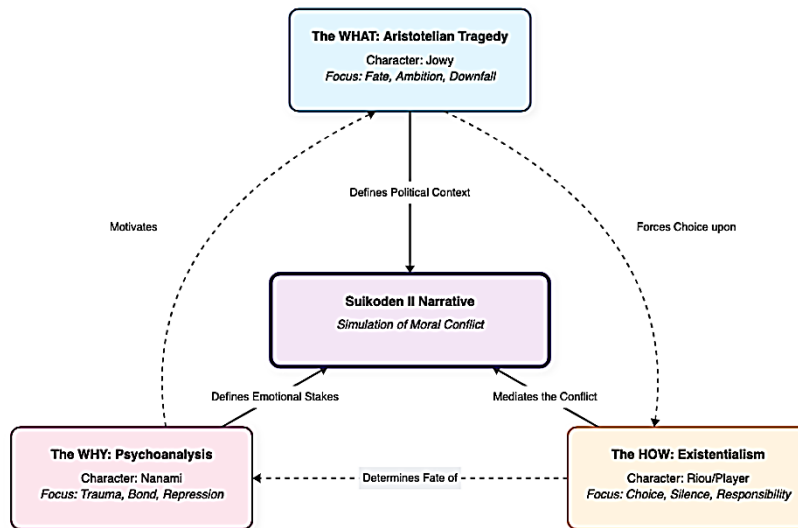
Theoretical Synthesis: A Triadic Narrative Structure

This paper brings together the three theories into one narrative reading, as shown in Figure 1. The interaction of the theories reflects the opposition between fate and free will. Psychoanalysis addresses the inner dimension

(the “Why”), including the unconscious motivation and trauma that shape the relationships among Jowry, Riou, and Nanami. Aristotelian tragedy contextualizes the outward events (the “What”), especially Jowry’s tragic descent as he confronts personal desire and the rigid political landscape he inhabits. Lastly, existentialism explains agency (the “How”) by focusing on Riou’s difficult decisions. Although the player directs Riou’s choices, the narrative places him between Jowry’s tragic fate and Nanami’s emotional needs. This analysis therefore positions *Suikoden II* as an interactive exploration of a moral dilemma.

Figure 1.

The Triadic Narrative Framework of Suikoden II



Note. Developed by the authors based on Aristotle’s (1902) theory of tragedy, Sartre’s (2007) existentialist philosophy, and Freud’s (1989) psychoanalytic framework.

Figure 1 illustrates how the three theories are combined in the present analysis. Psychoanalysis provides a lens for examining Nanami’s internal emotional motivations; Aristotelian tragedy helps explain the external political consequences of Jowry’s choices; and existentialism focuses on Riou’s agency and moral decision-making through player-directed choices. Together, these perspectives support the analysis of conflict, loyalty, betrayal, and moral responsibility among Riou, Jowry, and Nanami.

METHOD

The paper adopts a qualitative approach, primarily grounded in narrative analysis, to examine how the narrative of *Suikoden II* develops and reinforces themes of friendship, betrayal, and moral dilemmas through the main characters Riou, Jowry, and Nanami. Narrative analysis explores how stories are told and the meanings they express through dialogue, character development, and turning points (Riessman, 2008). To provide a richer interpretation, this study employs ludonarrative analysis to examine the interaction between gameplay mechanics and storytelling, particularly in decision-making sequences involving Riou, Jowry, and Nanami. This analysis is informed by Hocking’s (2007) concept of ludonarrative dissonance, which draws attention to the relationship between a game’s gameplay mechanics and narrative.

The primary data for this study consist of selected in-game dialogue screenshots, narrative cutscenes, and decision-making sequences involving the three focal characters. Screenshots and gameplay recordings are used to document these data. These scenes were chosen purposively because they involve key interactions among Riou, Jowry, and Nanami and are relevant to the study’s theoretical perspectives: Aristotelian tragedy,

existentialism, and psychoanalysis. Both major events, such as final confrontations, character deaths, and multiple endings, and smaller narratively significant scenes, such as the tent escape and emotional reunions, are included to demonstrate how thematic depth is embedded at different narrative layers.

This study is informed by a qualitative, interpretive orientation, which is concerned with interpreting meaning within its context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the authors identified dialogue, cutscenes, and decision-making sequences involving the three focal characters. Second, the selected scenes were coded according to their relevance to friendship, loyalty, betrayal, and moral responsibility. Third, the coded scenes were interpreted through the three theoretical lenses. Aristotelian tragedy was used to examine tragic conflict and the consequences of Jowy's choices; existentialism was used to examine Riou's agency and moral decision-making; and psychoanalysis was used to examine emotional conflict, repression, and family attachment among Riou, Jowy, and Nanami.

To support accuracy and transparency, the authors conducted and documented gameplay through recorded playthroughs and screenshot capture. Narrative events, character interactions, and dialogue excerpts were collected directly from the game during repeated play sessions. Narrative events, character intentions, and dialogue excerpts were collected directly from the game during repeated play sessions.

This approach treats video game narratives as literary and psychological objects of analysis. By treating *Suikoden II* as a multimodal cultural artifact, the study acknowledges both player agency and the narrative structure.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the analysis of selected dialogues, cutscenes, and decision-making sequences involving Riou, Jowy, and Nanami in *Suikoden II*. This study discusses Jowy through Aristotelian tragedy, Riou through existentialism, and Nanami through psychoanalysis before bringing these perspectives together in the final subsection. In the excerpts, a single slash (/) separates segments spoken by the same character, while double slashes (//) indicate a change of speaker.

Jowy as a Tragic Hero (Aristotelian Tragedy)

Jowy Atreides' arc in *Suikoden II* reflects the figure of the Aristotelian tragic hero: a character who is noble, well-intentioned, yet flawed. Aristotle (1902) defines tragedy as the fall of a protagonist from a position of esteem due to a critical error in judgment (*hamartia*) and a subsequent recognition of that flaw, which evokes pity and fear in the audience (Gellrich, 1984).

Jowy begins the game as Riou's loyal friend, someone brave enough to attempt an escape from Captain Rowd in Kyaro Town. His early defiance is not rooted in rebellion but in a desire for freedom and moral autonomy. His escape from the Highland camp foreshadows his revenge against the captain. His anger is evident in the town's prison, as depicted in Figure 2. This early episode foreshadows his larger pattern of concealed initiative and personal ambition.

Jowy's *hamartia* lies in his overconfidence and idealism: he believes he can control and redirect political power from within the system. After defecting to the Highland Kingdom and joins Luca Blight, one of the most ruthless enemies of the series, defends his betrayal as a necessary evil to bring the war to an end in a short time. According to the *Suikoden II: Prima strategy guide*, Jowy tries to control Luca's violence while working behind the scenes (Hollinger, 1999). The fact that he is married to Princess Jillia and has risen to become the

King of Highland also complicates his status. Jowy becomes a symbol of authority but also becomes trapped by it, burdened by responsibility and deceit.

Figure 2.

Jowy Expressing Anger Toward Captain Rowd



Note. Screenshot captured by the authors during gameplay of *Suikoden II* (Konami, 1998) and reproduced for scholarly analysis under fair use principles.

Jowy's character development is based on two important Aristotelian elements, *peripeteia* [reversal of fortune] and *anagnorisis* [recognition or discovery]. His *peripeteia* is marked by his change from comrade to king, and from ally to apparent enemy. His realization unfolds over several scenes; the most emotionally charged moment occurs during his duel with Riou at Rockaxe Castle, where he admits the great price of his ambition.

Because it's fate... That's got to be the answer / Riou, there are many people who are counting on you...
 // To the Dunan Army, you represent hope itself... / But I too... I too have people who need me. People who believe in me. // This land... Our home... It's not big enough for both Highland and the City-State.
 / That fact is what led to all this fighting, all this sadness. I began to realize that the day of the State meeting in Jowston. / I saw the State, established so its members could co-exist in peace, was itself a maelstrom of discord, jealousy, and antagonism. / I will establish one mighty nation in this land, one with nothing to do with Highland or the State. / A single powerful nation, born of force and wielding force... That's the one and only way of freeing this land from war...

Jowy's *peripeteia* becomes apparent as he achieves his ambitions, that is, by assassinating Luca and ascending the Highland throne. However, his rise brings estrangement rather than fulfillment. He becomes both a figure of power and a prisoner to it, isolated by the weight of leadership. This internal conflict may also be read through the psychological concept of the "death drive," in which the desire for redemption becomes indistinguishable from a subconscious desire for self-destruction (Ali et al., 2020). Jowy's repeated pursuit of high-stakes confrontations is not merely tactical. It represents a compulsive attempt to resolve his guilt through death as an ultimate release.

Moreover, Jowy's confession suggests that he believes idealism can bring about salvation. Such scenes allow players to recognize the extent of his inner struggle and the tragic mismatch between his intentions and their

consequences. The player's ability to influence Jowy's fate provides an element of catharsis, as the dramatic tension may be resolved through either mercy or loss.

Schwartz (2009) argues that the *Suikoden* series builds its world around othering and political struggle, and that Jowy represents this conflict. His friendship with Riou is displaced by loyalty to the kingdom, suggesting that personal morality is not always compatible with statecraft. Moreover, the emotional aspect of Jowy's tragedy is enhanced by his strained relationships with Nanami and Riou.

Figure 3.

Jowy's *Hamartia* and *Peripeteia*



Note. Screenshot captured by the authors during gameplay of *Suikoden II* (Konami, 1998) and reproduced for scholarly analysis under fair use principles.

As reflected in Figure 3, his defection creates a three-way rupture, with each character pulled by competing loyalties of love, duty, and ideology. In the good ending, when he and Riou meet at Tenzen Pass, he expresses his emotional isolation and descent into tragic contradiction. The scene brings his *hamartia* and *anagnorisis* into focus.

This is where our journey began. You and I walked along the same path for so long together, but this is where they began to diverge. / But, I have no regrets. But if I did, it would be that I had to betray the City-State and assassinate Lady Anabelle... / You and I were a lot alike.... We were both aiming for the same thing.

A later scene further develops this arc. When Jowy secretly goes to Muse to watch the outcome of the war, the consequences of his earlier choices continue to haunt him, as he remains a passive spectator. Jowy's last request to Riou to leave their duties and go with him is an attempt to regain innocence and recover the past they have lost before it is tainted by war. The symbolism is strong: even after becoming a political force, Jowy longs for the innocence and ease of childhood companionship. This creates a tragic irony: outwardly, he has gained power, but inwardly, he has lost the emotional life that once gave his choices meaning.

This tragic plot is consistent with Garuba's (2020) discussion of existential tragedy, in which central figures are not only subjected to classical fate but are also psychologically devastated by the futility and pointlessness

of their actions. In one possible outcome, when the player does not recruit all 108 Stars, Jowy's death reinforces his tragic arc. His desire for peace becomes the very catalyst for destruction, making him both the architect and victim of the game's central conflict.

In Aristotelian terms, Jowy can be understood as a tragic hero not simply because of his failure, but because he comes to recognize its cost. Garuba's (2020) discussion of existential tragedy also directs attention to the absurdity and personal burden of human action. Jowy is caught between noble intention and betrayal, which strengthens his tragic position. As mentioned earlier, the game's interactive dimension is most evident in its climax, where the player faces a definitive life-or-death choice. The choice, however, does not depend on Jowy's determination but on Riou's decision. Through Riou's choice, Jowy's tragedy is not merely observed; it is also shaped by the player, who must decide whether to perpetuate the cycle of violence or bring it to an end through an act of mercy.

Overall, Jowy's downfall is not caused by uncontrolled passion or moral corruption. Rather, it results from a noble desire for peace that leads to destructive choices. The game narrative challenges the player to grapple with moral compromise, the limitations of loyalty, and the inevitability of cost. In this sense, the Aristotelian tragic vision becomes visible in Jowy's character arc, turning his emotional conflict into a source of philosophical and narrative catharsis.

Riou and the Burden of Choice (Existentialism)

Riou, the silent protagonist character in *Suikoden II*, is a window through which the player can experience the game's moral dilemma and existential weights. Even without a voice, Riou is not deprived of personality. Instead, his silence becomes a space for player projection, requiring the player to navigate a world shaped by war, loyalty, and loss. In this way, Riou becomes an existential character whose identity is shaped not by predetermined characteristics but by decisions made in response to the absurd and the ethical grey world.

According to existentialist philosophers such as Sartre (2007) and Camus (1991), free will, personal responsibility, and the creation of meaning are important in a universe where meaning is not given by default. This philosophical stance is reflected in Riou's path. After being betrayed by the Highland Army and separated from his adoptive sister, Nanami, and his best friend, Jowy, Riou is forcibly thrust into leadership as commander of the New State Army. He does not choose this role; it is imposed upon him. Nevertheless, how he responds to this imposition defines him. This situation shows a core tenet of existential thought.

Riou's reluctant acceptance of leadership is seen when Shu, Riou's war strategist, proclaims as follows:

There is a person here who should be our leader. Riou, no. I mean, Lord Riou. You are the one who should become leader of the New State Army. We need you to show us the way to victory. // ... Many people look to you for hope. But more than all that, I've seen the brilliance in you. The kind of brilliance that this age needs. You must lead the State Army.

Shu expresses the existential need for responsibility. In this case, the game uses a narrative mechanic commonly referred to as the illusion of choice: if the players refuse to accept the role of leader, the dialogue restarts or the story halts until the role is chosen, as shown in Figure 4. This absence of a real refusal choice reflects Sartre's (2007) idea that Riou is thrown into a situation that he did not choose and cannot initially escape. The existential act, therefore, is not in selecting the role, but in the conscious acceptance of this imposed facticity. By eventually selecting "I will do it," the players move Riou from a passive victim of fate to an active agent who decides to bear the burden of the state, transforming a force of necessity into a personal project.

Figure 4.

Riou's Silent Acceptance Upon Being Given a Big Responsibility



Note. Screenshot captured by the authors during gameplay of *Suikoden II* (Konami, 1998) and reproduced for scholarly analysis under fair use principles.

In addition to existential ambiguity, Nanami's fake death scene compels Riou to make decisions based on partial knowledge. Although the army doctor, Huan, claims that he cannot save the life of Nanami, the fact that Riou continues to lead the army despite this deception reveals the existential theme of making many decisions with false or uncertain premises. Even though Riou does not express much sorrow directly, this ambiguity deepens the game's connection to existentialist thought.

In the last conflict with Jowy, the theme of existential authenticity is brought to the forefront through Riou's actions. Riou, existential authenticity is brought to the forefront in the last conflict with Jowy. This aspect is revealed when they meet at Tenzen Pass towards the end of the game.

Riou... I was always jealous of you. There's something about you. Always so strong... and gentle... / That's all that I ever wanted... to be loved by everyone just like you were... And that's why...

This scene confirms Riou's moral foundation. He is not defined by spoken declarations but by ethical action. This is what Consalvo et al. (2019) refer to as the rehearsal of ethos in the gameplay, in which players create identity through repeated moral decisions.

This rehearsal culminates in the game's branching narrative, which offers three distinct resolutions corresponding to different existential attitudes as follows.

- a. The "bad faith" ending: The first path allows Riou to flee the war entirely at Tinto City, around 75% of the way through the game. If the players repeatedly choose options such as "I can't do this," the game allows Riou to abandon the resistance. In existential terms, this outcome represents what Sartre (2007) calls "bad faith" (*mauvaise foi*), which is the denial of one's freedom in order to escape the anguish of responsibility. By fleeing, Riou rejects the burden of the special rune bestowed on him, the Bright Shield Rune, choosing the safety of obscurity over the anxiety of leadership.

- b. The “normal” ending: If Riou accepts leadership but fails to save Nanami or reconcile with Jowy, he becomes the ruler of the Dunan Republic. While “heroic,” this leaves Riou existentially hollow. As Camus (1991) suggests about the Absurd Hero, Riou accepts the struggle but is consumed by the institution. He fulfills his duty to the community but loses his connection to the private sphere, leaving a victory that feels isolating. Furthermore, this ending shows the cost of accepting public responsibility without restoring personal bonds. As Valčo and Bírová (2024) argue, existential freedom becomes most meaningful when exercised with responsibility toward others, a condition fulfilled if the player saves Nanami.
- c. The “best” ending: This perfect ending requires the most ludic effort: recruiting all 108 Stars of Destiny. This requirement aligns with the findings of Domingues et al. (2024), who argue that perceived challenge in RPGs is directly linked to narrative immersion; the arduous recruitment process forces the player to invest heavily in the world, making the eventual subversion of the binary choice emotionally earned. Here, Riou subverts the binary choice of the final duel by refusing to fight Jowy. In conclusion, the protagonist abandons the throne he fought to build and travels the world with Jowy and Nanami. This outcome is similar to the fact that the existential protagonist must create meaning outside existing frameworks, as Garuba (2020) notes. By rejecting kingship, Riou chooses personal meaning and restored relationships over political authority.

Similar to major works of existential literature, *Suikoden II* offers the player open-ended questions that make Riou not only the leader in the story but also a reflection of the player’s own moral position. Consalvo et al. (2019) discuss this type of moral choice and self-authorship in narrative design through the lens of the rehearsal of moral ethos through players’ in-game choices. On the same note, more recent research by Khodakarami et al. (2024) and Kouratoras (2020) reveals how existential thinking and dramaturgy in game narratives can encourage players to create their own meaning and sense of responsibility through engagement with moral dilemmas and branching narratives. In addition, this perspective is similar to the argument of Limanta (2015) on agency and structure in the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, in which social systems both restrict and define individual action. Similar to Andy Dufresne (the protagonist of the movie), Riou’s agency is not created in the absence of social and political structures, but rather through his ability to act within them.

In conclusion, Riou is not simply a mute protagonist. His silence becomes a space where the player’s choices leave a mark. Every word unspoken and every action taken shapes the game’s account of existential agency. The character of Riou becomes a reflection not only of philosophical inquiry but also of the player’s personal morals, offering a personalized account of freedom, love, and selfhood.

Nanami and the Psychology of Devotion (Psychoanalysis)

Nanami, Riou’s adoptive sister in *Suikoden II*, serves as the emotional anchor of the game, and her behaviors and motivations can be examined through a psychoanalytic lens. Her character moves between outward cheerfulness and inner anxiety, and this can be read using Freud’s (1989) tripartite model of the psyche: id, ego, and superego. As a maternal figure to Riou, Nanami consistently mediates between impulsive emotion (id) and idealistic restraint (superego), showing an ego shaped by anxiety and repressed trauma.

One of the early scenes that shows Nanami’s psychological attachment is her reunion with Riou in Kyaro. She chastises him bitterly and embraces him while repeating anxious questions.

Are you okay? Are you okay? You’re not hurt? Where have you been? Was everyone really killed? Huh? Huh? Huh? / Thank goodness. I was so, so, so worried. / Are you really okay? Did you eat anything funny? / Was there really a State spy? I heard there was a surprise attack.

This scripted outburst may be interpreted through Freud's (1936) concept of displacement, in which emotional intensity caused by fear is redirected into anger. Rather than articulating her fear directly, the story shows Nanami expressing exaggerated frustration and, in effect, using frustration to conceal her vulnerability.

Nanami's role as a protector is even more evident when they flee the Highland Kingdom and during the early stages of the New State Army. Although Nanami is a fictional character, her character arc can be read as a psychological reflection of childhood loss, as explained through Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory. The game portrays this fear of abandonment through Nanami's repeated concern for Riou's safety and her unwillingness to be separated from him, suggesting anxiety about separation and a strong need to maintain proximity to Riou.

Figure 5.

Nanami Taking the Arrow for Riou



Note. Screenshot captured by the authors during gameplay of *Suikoden II* (Konami, 1998) and reproduced for scholarly analysis under fair use principles.

A key psychological turning point occurs during the ambush at Rockaxe. Nanami takes an arrow for Riou (see Figure 5), an act that functions as what Hall (2025) describes as “reparative praxis.” Based on his discussion of *Metal Gear Solid V*, Hall (2025) argues that such narrative interventions enable characters to critique and seek to repair a broken world through acts of agency. Seen in this light, Nanami's sacrifice is not merely a symptom of internalized guilt. Rather, it can be understood as a structural intervention in which she claims agency against the game's tragic direction by trying to protect the domestic bond that war threatens to destroy.

This event is later complicated by the game's conditional narrative. If the player fails to recruit all *108 Stars of Destiny*, Nanami dies. If the player succeeds, she survives but withdraws from the violent political arena. This conditional survival not only increases the emotional stakes but also can be read in relation to the notion of the transitional object developed by Winnicott (2005). Nanami becomes an emotional point of connection between inner psychological safety and external disorder. For Riou, and possibly for the player, she functions as a source of emotional security. Her withdrawal serves as an allegory for the barrier between personal attachment and the impersonal demands of leadership and war.

In addition, Nanami's psychological development also reflects Jungian archetypes. She serves as both a caregiver and an innocent figure, and she appears to be Riou's moral compass. According to Jung and Hull

(2023), such archetypes can be related to the process of individuation, through which different parts of the self are brought into relation with one another. Riou experiences emotional maturity, self-sufficiency, and grief through Nanami's injury or disappearance, all of which may contribute to his process of individuation.

The emotional element of Nanami's potential death or survival highlights *Suikoden II*'s emotional impact. In this case, Nanami is not a disposable character; her narrative role is central to the player's experience. Research on self-representation through avatars suggests that digital avatars can mediate players' personal engagement with narrative events (Zimmermann et al., 2023). In *Suikoden II*, Riou may similarly provide a focal point through which players experience Nanami's fate. In conjunction with the findings of Klimmt et al. (2009) and Bopp et al. (2016) on negative emotions in play, this connection may evoke empathy, grief, and moral reflection. Nanami is not a secondary character but a psychological point of reference whose narrative destiny may shape the player's emotional investment and moral engagement.

Altogether, the role of Nanami in *Suikoden II* demonstrates how the use of psychological constructs such as defense mechanisms, modes of attachment, reparative drives, and symbolic archetypes can result in more detailed character development and stronger player engagement. Her storyline inspires both pity and self-reflection, making her a compelling representation of familial loyalty and emotional resilience in RPG narratives.

The Climax and Resolution: Fate, Freedom, and Interpretation

The final sections of *Suikoden II* feature emotionally charged endings. The ending sequence addresses the game's basic themes: friendship, loyalty, betrayal, and the weight of the choice. It culminates in the final struggle between Riou and Jowy and three possible endings depending on the player's choice. This moment reflects the existential message of freedom versus fatalism: Jowy claims he has come this way because of his own decisions, but Riou's response gives him a chance for redemption or closure.

This split resolution supports the argument of Consalvo et al. (2019) that video games allow players to rehearse their ethos and moral identity. The chance to redeem Jowy offers catharsis and closure, whereas a tragic outcome recalls Aristotelian conceptions of tragedy. The game also offers an example of what Aarseth (2012) defines as ergodic narrative. Such narratives emerge through player effort and agency, not only through predetermined conclusions.

Moreover, the difference between the tragic and peaceful resolutions reflects different interpretations of loyalty and betrayal. The act of forgiveness toward Jowy suggests that their relationship can survive political conflict and violence, and that loyalty remains meaningful even after betrayal. In contrast, when the story ends in retribution, it becomes a more conventionally tragic resolution in which betrayal must be punished. These two readings are consistent with theories of ludonarrative studies, which hold that meaningful play emerges particularly when narrative implications remain ethically unclear and emotionally engaging (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2024; Murray, 1998).

The aesthetic and emotional effects of these endings, whether in the solemn walk to Jowy's grave or the quiet walk into the mountains with Jowy, contribute to the narrative richness of *Suikoden II*. When narrative and gameplay mechanics provide emotional resolution, as Calleja (2011) argues, players may become more immersed in the game. These contrasting resolutions are not only the closure of the plot but also the philosophical core of the game: human relationships shape choice, and meaning lies in how characters and players respond to betrayal, not merely in the betrayal itself.

CONCLUSION

Suikoden II represents a range of literary and philosophical concepts. These can be traced in each of the game's main characters: Jowy's downfall follows the pattern of Aristotelian tragedy; Riou's silence reflects existential themes of self-reliance and responsibility; and Nanami's role reveals the psychological cost of struggle. The game should therefore be understood not only as entertainment but also as an interactive text. Through its branching narrative, players are invited to confront loyalty, disloyalty, and the search for reconciliation.

There are, however, limitations in this study because of its close reading of selected characters and themes. The use of three specific frameworks narrows down the scope of the research. As a result, it excludes other possibly useful approaches, such as postcolonial readings, feminist approaches, and broader comparative treatments with other popular JRPG series, such as *Final Fantasy*, *Chrono Trigger*, *Persona*, or *Dragon Quest*. In addition, the study relies heavily on textual and narrative interpretation rather than empirical data from players, which limits the ability to assess the game's actual reception among players. Future studies could compare similar narrative patterns in other media to broaden the discussion of interactivity and emotional storytelling across platforms.

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