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**Player Attitudes to Avatar Development in Digital Games:
An Exploratory Study of Single-Player Role-Playing Games
and other Genres**

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A Doctoral Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of

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Abstract

Digital games incorporate systems that allow players to customise and develop their controllable in-game representative (avatar) over the course of a game. Avatar customisation systems represent a point at which the goals and values of players interface with the intentions of the game developer forming a dynamic and complex relationship between system and user. With the proliferation of customisable avatars through digital games and the ongoing monetisation of customisation options through digital content delivery platforms it is important to understand the relationship between player and avatar in order to provide a better user experience and to develop an understanding of the cultural impact of the avatar.

Previous research on avatar customisation has focused on the users of virtual worlds and massively multiplayer games, leaving single-player avatar experiences. These past studies have also typically focused on one particular aspect of avatar customisation and those that have looked at all factors involved in avatar customisation have done so with a very small sample. This research has aimed to address this gap in the literature by focusing primarily on avatar customisation features in single-player games, aiming to investigate the relationship between player and customisation systems from the perspective of the players of digital games.

To fulfill the research aims and objectives, the qualitative approach of interpretative phenomenological analysis was adopted. Thirty participants were recruited using snowball and purposive sampling (the criteria being that participants had played games featuring customisable avatars) and accounts of their experiences were gathered through semi-structured interviews. Through this research, strategies of avatar customisation were explored in order to demonstrate how people use such systems. The shortcomings in game mechanics and user interfaces were highlighted so that future games can improve the avatar customisation experience.

Keywords: avatar customisation / player character / computer game / video game/ digital game/ single-player games / role-playing games / interpretative phenomenological analysis / player experience

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Special thanks go to my partner, Dace, who has been an endless source of encouragement and patience.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

CAQDAS	Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software
CoH	City of Heroes
CPU	Central processing unit
DA: O	Dragon Age: Origins
DLC	Downloadable Content
DM	Dungeon Master
D&D	Dungeons and Dragons
IPA	Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis
ME	Mass Effect
ME2	Mass Effect 2
MMO	Massively Multiplayer Online
MMORPG	Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game
NPC	Non-player character
PC	Personal Computer
PS	PlayStation
PVP	Player versus Player
RPG	Role-Playing Game
RTS	Real-Time Strategy
SL	Second Life
V.A.T.S	Vault-Tec Assisted Targeting System
WoW	World of Warcraft

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

This thesis addresses how players experience avatar customisation; examining how they perceive the systems they are interacting with in order to progress through computer games. Avatars are the representations of players in digital games and virtual worlds, and they range from being closed (non-customisable, often with independent personalities and goals) to being completely open (no pre-determined personality and entirely customisable). Through the ability to customise various characteristics of an avatar such as gender, body, eye colour and clothing it has been argued that open avatars can accommodate the desires and values of players¹. Avatars are characterised in Game Studies as the player's physical representation in a game world^{2 3}, but this thesis argues that according to the perceptions of participants, avatars are actually at the confluence of several gameplay systems. Serving as a representation of the player's progress in a variety of ways, the results of this thesis will reveal the multitude of strategies players use to customise their avatars and the meanings they assign to their experiences with avatars and related systems.

This thesis is relevant due to the propagation of avatar customisation elements through multiple genres of computer games (platforming, sports, first-person shooters often include customisation elements that were once confined to avatars in role-playing games). Through the duration of such games (between ten to 200 hours depending on the game) players progress their avatars through embedded reward systems, sometimes investing real-world money to acquire new equipment and abilities. If player experiences are to be improved and the impact of using an avatar is to be understood, then the interplay between player creativity and the design choices of game developers must be investigated.

¹ Gee, J.P. *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*, 2003, p.54-66.

² Tyschen, A & Canossa, A. *Defining Personas in Games Using Metrics*. [Paper presented at FuturePlay 2008. Toronto, Ontario, Canada. November 3-5, pp.1-8]
<<http://www.itu.dk/people/alec/articles/persona%20and%20metrics.pdf>>, 2008, [accessed 01.09.12].

³ Castronova, E. *Theory of the avatar - CESifo Working Paper No. 863*.
<<https://www.ifo.de/portal/pls/portal/docs/1/1189884.PDF>>, 2003, [accessed 01.09.12].

1.2 A brief history of open avatars in computer games

As the capabilities of gaming hardware and software have developed, so has the avatar. Originating as two dimensional sprites, avatars have evolved into three dimensional models with increasingly detailed features. It can be argued that before there were visual avatars in role-playing games, they were only the sum of a collection of statistics and menus existing alongside a mental picture of what the avatar might look like in the player's head. Text Computer Role-Playing Games (C-RPGs) originated with Don Dalow's *Dungeon* (written sometime between 1975 and 1976) which was a multiplayer game in the style of table-top RPG *Dungeons and Dragons*⁴. Gary Whisenhunt and Ray Wood produced the graphical RPG *dnd* (named after abbreviation 'D&D' for *Dungeons and Dragons*) for the PLATO system in the mid-1970s. It depicted levels and the player's avatar in addition to including a levelling system, a plot and other elements that are recognisable in a modern C-RPG⁵.

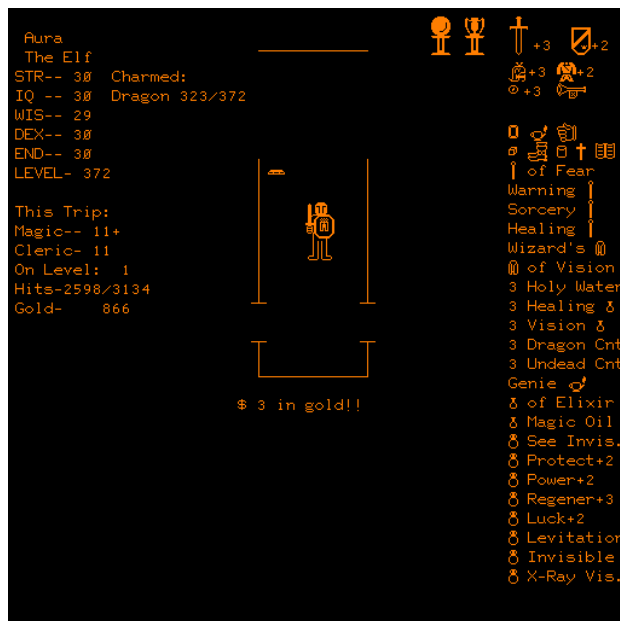


Figure 1 – An avatar of *dnd* exploring a maze⁶.

The basic representations of the early mainframe C-RPGs have developed into the 3D avatars of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, *Mass Effect* and *Fable* (bringing along many of the basic mechanics adapted from table-top RPGs). Open avatars are not only found in C-RPGs;

⁴ Barton, M. *Dungeons and Desktops: the History of Computer Role-playing Games*, 2008, p.30-31.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.32.

⁶ Kungfuman [Wikipedia username]. *File:Dnd8won.png*.

<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dnd8won.png>>, 2006, [accessed 01.09.12].

many genres such as sport games, first-person shooters and social simulators are incorporating elements of the open avatar into their design. Untangling the history of the avatar is for another project; the following chapter will give the research its context within the industry and establish the avatar's position as a financial asset.

1.3 The industry and the avatar

Among the most notable characteristics of the digital games industry are its unpredictability and the ease with which developers and publishers can run out of money due to poorly performing sales and expensive development cycles. The developers Free Radical Design, Factor 5 and Ion Storm are amongst the developers who despite producing critically some lauded games succumbed to financial problems resulting from low sales and creative missteps. Console manufacturers have come and gone (e.g. Atari and Sega) and the mid-1980s saw the market crash due to high quantities of poor quality software which damaged trust in developers and publishers.

Consumer confidence recovered and by the seventh generation of consoles (Nintendo Wii, Microsoft Xbox 360 and Sony PlayStation 3) sales of digital games in the UK surpassed DVD, music sales and movie box office takings^{7 8}. As the industry has grown, so have consumer expectations. The technical and artistic demands of game development have elevated production costs to the point where a top-ten game is estimated to cost \$28 million (excluding the marketing budget which is often twice the cost of production)^{9 10}. There are also opportunities for games to acquire funding and avoid the traditional retail channels through pay-for-developmental-alpha-access games, crowd funding and digital distribution.

Avatars have always had an important role to play in the turbulent games market; as well as representing the player in a game, recognisable avatars such as Mario, Lara Croft and Master

⁷ Wallop, H. *Video games bigger than film*. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/video-games/6852383/Video-games-bigger-than-film.html>>, 2009, [accessed 16/03/11].

⁸ Dring, C. *Video games now bigger than movies*. <<http://www.mcvuk.com/news/read/video-games-now-bigger-than-movies/093209>>, 2012, [accessed 16/08/12].

⁹ Crossley, R. *Study: Average dev costs as high as \$28m*. <<http://www.develop-online.net/news/33625/Study-Average-dev-cost-as-high-as-28m>>, 2010, [accessed 16/03/11].

¹⁰ Usher, W. *Tim Schafer Compares Past Video Game Budgets To Current Budgets*. <<http://www.cinemablend.com/games/Tim-Schafer-Compares-Past-Video-Game-Budgets-Current-Budgets-39474.html>>, 2012, [accessed 10/11/12].

Chief represent the core in-game affordances such as shooting and jumping. These closed, non-customisable avatars are also figurehead characters for valuable franchises that extend beyond digital games to books, movies and toys. Open (customisable) avatars are predominantly for allowing players to customise their presence without the restrictions of a pre-defined character personality and fixed feature set. Customisable avatars are also used to represent users of the Xbox Live service and in the Nintendo Wii's Mii channel (which can be imported into games such as *Wii Sports* and *Wii Fit*).

The networking of consoles has allowed for the digital delivery of game content which has also made the ongoing development and distribution of avatar customisation assets a lucrative business. For example, microtransaction payments and downloadable content (DLC) are used to support free-to-play MMOs through premium items, clothing and accessories allowing developers to sell access to new levels of growth, abilities and missions. Microsoft have also capitalised on the Xbox Live stores capacity for microtransactions by making premium accessories available for Xbox Live avatars to wear.

DLC packs are often used as pre-order bonuses in order to encourage people to buy games new instead of used. DLC packs create more options for players to decide how they want to customise and grow avatars but this means the out-of-the-box potential for avatar progression is no longer the same for all consumers. For example, *Mass Effect 3* is predominantly a single-player game with downloadable storyline missions and weapon packs. In addition, it has a multiplayer campaign with the option to purchase early access to weapons and avatar classes that would normally only be unlockable after playing a certain amount of time.

In contrast to the DLC and microtransaction strategy of offering different ways of customising an avatar, paid-for-alpha-access games offer a different approach to avatar systems. For example, *Minecraft* was built around a core concept of being a sandbox building game with a destructible environment and crafting systems. Avatar systems and accessories were added incrementally, with paid access to the alpha and beta allowing players to first-hand experience the evolution of a game still in development. The official release now includes a host of systems resembling RPG-style leveling and progression that were not originally available. Massively multiplayer online games also periodically iterate on avatar systems, so being able to see gradual changes to the options players have available is

not necessarily a new aspect of digital games, but being able to see and experience how systems are developed is different to the usual levels of polish demanded from big budget games.

From an industry perspective, avatars have been and continue to be an important marketing tool and financial asset for developers and publishers to exploit. How, though, do players perceive avatars?

1.4 Research problem

The central research problem that this study addresses is “how do the players of digital games perceive avatar development options whilst creating and maintaining projective identities?” Answering this question involved investigating and analysing how a player’s creativity and goals interface with a game’s systems to form the projective identity which shapes the avatar, whether the player’s needs are being met by the avatar systems available and if there is adequate room for expression of the player’s goals in the game.

A review of the literature revealed a lack of work with regards to the perception of avatars in single-player games, with the majority of research focusing on how avatars might impact on social identity in virtual worlds and massively multiplayer online games. The first wave of avatar studies in offline or single-player games concentrates on the researchers’ interpretation of how a game alters or extends their identity, such as those by Gee¹¹, Rehak¹², and Filiciak¹³. Gee used his experiences of a role-playing game to create a theoretical model of how identity functions in a game, separating the virtual identity (our avatar) from the real identity, and the projective identity (which is a combination of our avatars and our motivations and values)¹⁴.

The second wave of avatar-based research into single-player games began with Waggoner’s investigation into Gee’s projective identity in three role-playing games using four

¹¹Gee, ref. 1, pp.54-66.

¹² Rehak, B. Playing at Being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar. In: Wolf, M.J.P & Perron, B., eds. *The Video Game Theory Reader*, 2003, pp.103-127.

¹³ Filiciak, M. Hyperidentities: Postmodern Identity Patterns in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games, In: Wolf, M.J.P & Perron, B., eds. *The Video Game Theory Reader*, 2003, pp.87-102.

¹⁴ Gee, ref. 1, p.54.

participants¹⁵. Collecting rich descriptions of participants' gameplay and interviewing them on their motives, Waggoner's research showed that the relationships players have with avatars in worlds which are not populated with other players can be as dynamic as those in virtual worlds. It also showed that people with varying degrees of digital game literacy responded differently to avatars, with those who considered themselves as gamers identifying strongly and investing in their counterparts, whilst less experienced or interested participants were less aware of any investment they had made in their avatars.

Studies that seek to analyse a player's experience with avatars need to dive into the game mechanics participants are interfacing with, to identify the different systems prioritised by players in their experiences and address the results in relation to how these systems have been studied separately. Previous research on this matter has taken place within Game Studies, a flourishing discipline with researchers often coming to it from their own perspectives of sociology, psychology, narratology, sociology, computer science, amongst others. There is a growing body of digital games research, including this study, which comes from researchers who primarily identify as coming from the perspective of Game Studies without projecting externally to other disciplines. There are also game design text books and articles from industry professionals that will be considered to help explain and understand the opinions and accounts of participants. The following aims and objectives were formulated in order to explore the issue of avatar development and projective identities, with aim 2 and its subsequent objectives being based on the outcomes of aim 1.2.

¹⁵ Waggoner, Z. *My Avatar, My Self: Identity in Video Role-Playing Games*, 2009, p.14.

1.5 Aims and objectives

Aim 1: To determine the main features of avatar systems in digital games.

Objectives:

- 1.1 To understand existing player perspectives on avatar customisation and projective identity in digital games.
- 1.2 To identify the main features of projective identities as perceived by players.

Aim 2: To explore the meaning assigned to the features of avatar systems in digital games based on the subjective accounts of players.

Objectives:

- 2.1 To gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings that players assign to the numerical development and management of avatars in digital games.
- 2.2 To gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings that players assign to avatar appearance customisation in digital games.
- 2.3 To gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings that players assign to the morality and ethics of digital games.
- 2.4 To gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings that players assign to the role of narrative mechanics in the creation and maintenance of projective identities in digital games.
- 2.5 To gain an in-depth understanding of the role of everyday information practices in the creation and maintenance of projective identities in digital games.

1.6 Significance of the research

Despite the prevalence of open avatars in single-player games and as a financial asset in the games industry, there is limited research into the experience of customising avatars and how players perceive avatars. This exploratory study seeks to provide a better understanding of the impact on the player's experience in order to better understand the impact of avatar systems on gaming culture and the industry. The research is also significant due to its scope

as several games and different genres are analysed instead of just one which has been the case with past avatar customisation studies (e.g. Waggoner¹⁶).

This research is unique due to its emphasis on gathering rich accounts of the lived experience of using open avatars in single-player games (although online games are sometimes used for comparison) and the number of participants. It is also unique due to its interdisciplinary approach to analysing the data in these accounts. In the course of this research, a broader picture of how players use avatars and are influenced in their decisions by developers, friends and information sources that would not have been obtained if this research had focused on gathering opinions through surveys or had settled for conducting shorter interviews. The benefit of this approach is that perceptions of participants are gathered in great detail, as they all have slightly different interpretations of the elements of the same game in addition to some similarities of opinion. This allows the researcher to focus on individuals and how their habits change from game to game whilst comparing them with how the rest of the sample behaves.

An audience for this study is the game scholar interested in understanding how players perceive game mechanics and the implications of using avatars. This research will also be useful for developers interested in how avatar mechanics are received by players and for the improvements that can be made to user interfaces in order to improve the player experience suggested in the conclusions. An additional audience for this research became apparent when relatives and partners of participants expressed an interest in understanding why the participants make the in-game choices that they do and what, if anything, these choices mean. As such, an additional aim in presenting this research is to ensure the results and analysis are supported with sufficient background to enable casual readers as well as developers and game scholars from any discipline to be able to understand and interpret the conclusions.

In 2010 the researcher presented a poster at the Avatars and Humans Pre-Conference in Hamburg where valuable feedback was received on data collection, later presenting a paper on the information practices aspect of the research at the Role-playing in Games Seminar in

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Tampere¹⁷, and a paper on the information overload theme at Under the Mask 2012 in Luton¹⁸. The researcher also co-authored a book chapter on the information practices involved in digital games with Harviainen and Sköld to appear in *Social Information Research*¹⁹ published by Emerald Group featuring some of the results from this study. Further papers and articles based on the themes of this research are planned for presenting and publication in 2013.

1.7 Structure of thesis

This first chapter has introduced the reader to the study and chapter two presents the literature reviewed in order to provide context for the study and the avatar systems discussed by participants. Chapter two, sections 2.1-2.2 evaluates the existing research on avatars and explains the gap in the literature from which the first main aim of the research is derived. Sections 2.3-2.6 evaluate the literature identified as a result of fulfillment of the first aim of the research. Section 2.3 pertains to avatar appearance customisation, section 2.4 relates to narrative and bleed, section 2.5 discusses research on ethics and morality in digital games, whilst section 2.6 deals with resource management, attribute development and information practices.

Chapter three details the research methodology and methods, explaining the application of the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis to the study. Chapter three, section 3.13 provides brief backgrounds for each of the games that participants describe and section 3.14 introduces the participants.

The results of the research are presented in chapters four through eight with each chapter representing a distinctive portion of avatar game mechanics. Chapter 4: deals with the strategic management of resources and development of avatar attributes, chapter five concerns appearance customisation, and chapter six details results relating to narrative mechanics including interacting with NPCs. Chapter seven presents results concerning moral

¹⁷ Gough, R.D., Dearnley, J.A. & Muir, A. *Information Acquisition for Role-Playing: A Preliminary Model*. [Paper presented at Role-Playing in Games Seminar, University of Tampere, Tampere, Finland, 10th-11th April 2012].

¹⁸ Gough, R.D., Dearnley, J.A. & Muir, A. *[Spoilers!] Information overload and game-related social media*. [Paper presented at Under the Mask 2012, University of Bedfordshire, Luton, 13th June 2012].

¹⁹ Harviainen, J., Gough, R. & Sköld, O. Information phenomena in game-related social media. In: Wilden, G. & Holmberg, K., eds. *Social information research*, 2012.

decision making in games whilst chapter eight presents results relating to how participants used information practices to help develop strategies for dealing with the avatar systems described in the previous chapters.

In chapter nine the findings are discussed in relation to existing research. Chapter ten presents the conclusions and implications of this research along with recommendations for future research. Following the bibliography, the appendices contain details for resources used during the literature search (appendix one), the interview schedule (Appendix two), codes relating to the emergent themes (appendix three) and theme diagrams (appendix four).

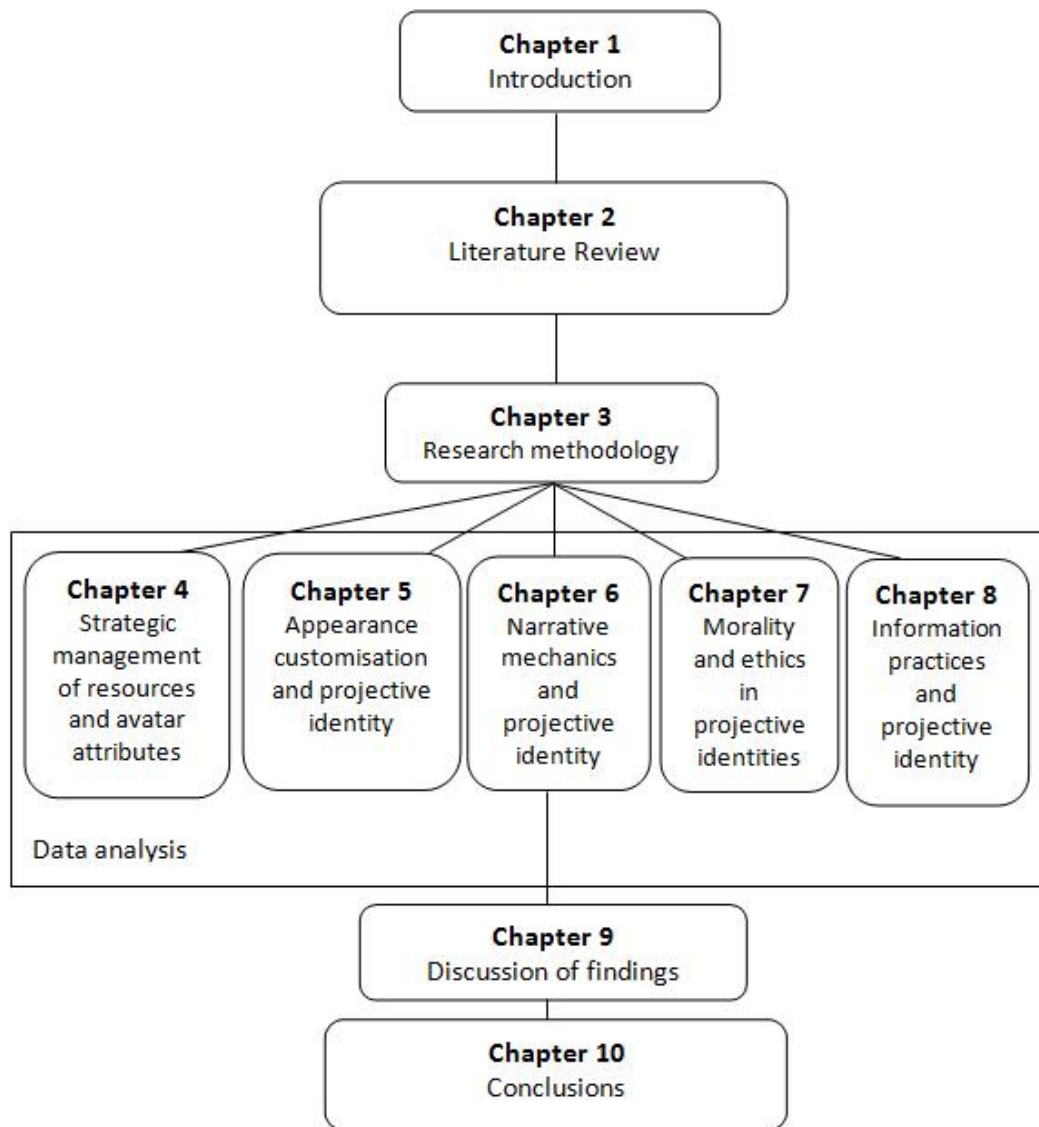


Figure 2 – Structure of thesis

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Games, game mechanics and Game Studies

This research concerns how avatars are received and utilised by the players of digital games and how avatars fit into the mechanics of a game, therefore, it is necessary to briefly introduce two definitions of game, explain what game mechanics are, and address why the term 'digital game' is used instead of 'computer game' or 'video game'.

2.1.1 What is a game?

This question of "what is a game" continues to be a point of contention in Game Studies and whilst the two definitions offered here are seen as important milestones they also provoke debate within the field.

Salen and Zimmerman offered the follow definition of games as a synthesis of their favoured characteristics of previous definitions:

*A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome.*²⁰

Based on a deconstruction of the elements that made up other definitions for games (including Salen and Zimmerman's proposal), Juul offers his own criteria, or "classic game model" that applies to many types of games other than just digital games:

- Games have rule based formal system;
- Games have variable and quantifiable outcomes;
- Games have different outcomes which are assigned different values;
- The player exerts effort in order to influence outcomes;
- The player feels emotionally attached to outcomes;
- The consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable²¹.

Sitting alongside the traditional 'rules' and 'outcomes' that are repeated features amongst definitions of game is Juul's own addition of emotional attachment to outcomes. This differs to other definitions in that it emphasises the psychological impact of game activity instead of

²⁰ Salen, K. & Zimmerman, E. *Rules of play: game design fundamentals*, 2004, p.80.

²¹ Juul, J. A Dictionary of Video Game Theory. <<http://www.half-real.net/dictionary/>>, 2005, [accessed 10.12.2012]

focusing only on the formal structure of a game. It recognises that games can influence how players feel and that game designers have to be aware of what they intend each aspect of their game to impact on a player's emotional state. Juul's emphasis on emotional attachment is relevant to this research because it indicates that avatars and their related mechanics are meant to provoke some kind of emotional response from players. This research aims to find out how individuals interpret and feel about avatar-related outcomes.

In addition to possessing rules and quantifiable outcomes, Juul, Salen and Zimmerman claim that games are systems made up of multiple elements that work together to form a whole. Game mechanics are amongst the elements that make up the system of a game.

2.1.2 What are game mechanics?

Sicart argues that mechanics, along with rules and challenges are general properties of a game system that give games their structure²². These terms constitute the essential grammar of digital games and therefore represent part of the framework of a game the player interacts with when using an avatar. Sicart defines game mechanics as:

*"methods invoked by agents for interacting with the game world. [...]Game mechanics are concerned with the actual interaction with the game state, while rules provide the possibility space where that interaction is possible, regulating as well the transition between states. In this sense, rules are modelled after agency, while mechanics are modelled for agency."*²³

Agents can be human or part of the computer system and can be further separated into agents who have access to certain game mechanics and not others, e.g. non-player characters who only have one or two abilities compared to the player's full range of abilities.

A method is an action or behaviour available to an agent such as making Mario jump in *Super Mario Galaxy*, slowing down time by triggering Adrenaline Rush in *Mass Effect* and combining two items to make a new one in *The Curse of Monkey Island*. Such methods are limited by the rules that apply to the game world, and occasionally to rules that apply specifically to one mechanic (such as a limitation on when and where a mechanic can be used).

²² Sicart, M. Defining Game Mechanics. *Game Studies*, 8(2), <<http://gamestudies.org/0802/articles/sicart>>, 2008, [accessed 10.12.2012].

²³ *Ibid.*

Mechanics triggered by players are typically mapped to an input method such as pressing A to make Mario jump, selecting Adrenaline Rush from the power wheel in *Mass Effect*, or using the mouse to click on one item and drop it onto another in the *Curse of Monkey Island* to see if they combine. Game loops monitor the inputs made by a player along with every other changeable state (such as how close the player is to an end goal) and are responsible for calculating and updating an avatar's health and other attributes.

2.1.3 Why 'digital games'?

The terms 'video game' and 'computer game' are often used interchangeably and there is no agreement between researchers on which term should be used. Wolf²⁴ believes that 'video game' is the most popular term used in popular society, culture and the industry for all electronic games, though the original usage was limited to games played on a television screen. Dovey and Kennedy preferred 'computer game' to cover all types of games²⁵, whilst Tavinor notes 'computer game' is sometimes only associated with games played on personal computers²⁶.

Salen and Zimmerman prefer 'digital games' over 'computer games' and 'video games' for the sake of simplicity:

*The physical medium of the computer is one element that makes up the system of the game, but it does not represent the entire game. The computer hardware and software are merely the materials of which the game is composed.*²⁷

The terms 'computer game' and 'video game' can have suggestions as the sort of hardware, software, controls and game mechanics of a game, for example Gee believes checkpoints are a feature of video game or consoles as opposed to computer games whilst he associates the mouse and keyboard with computer games²⁸. This research investigates multi-platform games so for ease of understanding the term 'digital games' will be used to cover all games regardless of the hardware and operating systems they run on.

²⁴ Wolf, M. J. P. What are video games? In: Wolf, M, J.P. *Video Game Explosion – A History from Pong to Playstation and Beyond*, 2008, pp.3-7.

²⁵ Dovey, J & Kennedy, H.W. *Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media*, 2006.

²⁶ Tavinor, G. *Definition of Videogames*.

<<http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=492>>, 2008, [accessed 10.12.2012].

²⁷ Salen & Zimmerman, ref. 20, p.86.

²⁸ Gee, ref. 1, p.34.

2.1.4 What is Game Studies?

Mäyrä defines Game Studies as ‘a multi-disciplinary field of study and learning with games and related phenomena as its subject matter’²⁹. Game Studies is still in the process of forging an identity; however, it has established itself as a field of inquiry and branch of knowledge. The rising popularity of digital games as a source of entertainment is a factor in the expansion of the Game Studies field which according to Aarseth was predominantly concerned with game theory (for mathematically analysing competitive situations), play research (for understanding children’s play), understanding gambling addictions, developing games and simulations for learning, and the philosophy of sport³⁰.

Game theory and edutainment (of which this study is neither) are merely parts of digital Games Studies which has evolved its own specific discourse.

The first major exchange of ideas that occurred within digital Game Studies centered on the Ludology/narratology debate. On one side were the narratologists who believed in games as texts that can be analysed using methods from film and literature studies, and that games serve as a gateway towards the goal of interactive drama. Murray is famous for her narratological study *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* for claiming that every game “electronic or otherwise, can be experienced as a symbolic drama”³¹. Murray interprets *Tetris* in the following manner:

*In Tetris everything you bring to a shapely completion is swept away from you. Success means just being able to keep up with the flow. This is a perfect enactment of the over tasked lives of Americans in the 1990s – of the constant bombardment of tasks that demand our attention and that we must somehow fit into our overcrowded schedules and clear off our tasks in order to make room for the next onslaught.*³²

The participatory nature of games for Murray represent a stepping stone towards her utopian vision of ‘cyberdrama’, or interactive procedurally generated computer-based

²⁹ Mäyrä, F. *An Introduction to Game Studies: Games in Culture*, 2008, p.8.

³⁰ Aarseth, Game Studies: What is it good for? *The International Digital Media & Arts Association Journal*, 1(3), <http://rylish.usu.edu/courses/rhetoric_games/images/aarseth_game_studies.pdf> 2005, [accessed 10.12.2012]

³¹ Murray, J. *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 1997, pp.142-7.

³² *Ibid.*

stories. This has led to some academics accusing Murray of overlooking or misinterpreting the fundamental features of digital games. Ludologists as explained by Frasca hold the stance that “games cannot be understood through theories derived from narrative”³³, and that to consider digital games primarily as narratives overlooks the intrinsic properties of games.

Aarseth and Eskelinen denounced what they saw as colonisation of Game Studies by literary, theatre, drama and film researchers and their application of outdated definitions and poor knowledge of mainstream drama to games^{34 35}. They attacked Murray’s analysis of Tetris as contributing nothing towards knowledge about digital games:

Instead of studying the actual game Murray tries to interpret its supposed content, or better yet, project her favourite content on it; consequently we don’t learn anything of the features that make Tetris a game. The explanation for this interpretative violence seems to be equally horrid: the determination to find or forge a story at any cost, as games can’t be game because if they were, they apparently couldn’t be studied at all.

Eskelinen’s stance and that of other ludologists (e.g. Juul) only lead to further debate on the role of story in digital games where Ludologists were portrayed as entirely rejecting the contribution of narrative to digital games. Frasca claims this debate stems from a series of “misunderstandings, mistakes and prejudices”³⁶. Ludologists do not entirely reject the contribution of narrative to the experience of playing a game but are defensive of what they see as the fledgling independence of Game Studies.

The intensity of this debate was perhaps due to Game Studies being in its infancy and still establishing its identity. *Simulation and Gaming*, a journal with the mission of publishing

³³ Frasca, G. *What is ludology? A provisory definition*. <<http://www.ludology.org/2001/07/what-is-ludolog.html>>, 2001, [accessed 10.12.2012]

³⁴ Eskelinen, M. The Gaming Situation. *Game Studies*, 1(1), <<http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/>>, 2001, [accessed 10.12.2012]

³⁵ Aarseth, E. Computer Game Studies, Year One. *Game Studies*, 1(1), <<http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html>>, 2001, [accessed 10.12.2012]

³⁶ Frasca, G. *Ludologists Love Stories, Too: Notes from a Debate That Never Took Place*. [Online Proceedings of Level up: Digital Games Research Conference, University of Utrecht, Utrecht, Netherlands, 4th-6th November 2003, p.97], <www.digra.org/dl/db/05163.01125>, 2003, [accessed 10.12.2012].

research into the application of computer simulations to education, training and research was established in 1970. It was only in 2001 that a journal dedicated to the cultural, aesthetic and communication aspects of digital games was established in the form of 'Game Studies', an online open access peer reviewed journal. The Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) was set up to provide a focal point of discussion and support for game researchers. Beginning in 2003 DiGRA hosted a biennial conference, and the biennial Nordic DiGRA began in 2010. Seminars and conferences have also focused on a specific part of Game Studies such as the *International Conference on the Philosophy of Games*, *The social side of gaming: International Conference on the Social Aspects of Digital Gaming*, *Avatars and Humans: Representing Users in Digital Games* and the *European Conference on Game-based Learning*.

There are research degree programmes that are creating academics solely from the perspective of Games Studies, but undergraduate degrees are more likely to concentrate on game design as opposed to gaming cultural issues. The DiGRA 2013 "10 Years of Game Studies" panel revealed that the lack of development in undergraduate programmes, hampered by the economic downturn in society and the restructuring of universities, is a source of disappointment for Games Studies academics³⁷.

Game Studies has attracted academics from a diverse range of disciplines (e.g. psychologists, sociologists, computer scientists, economists, information scientists, game designers) and now has its own dedicated scholars. The large amount of topics investigated in Game Studies is ever expanding and difficult to summarise. In his analysis of eight texts frequently used in the teaching of Games Studies, Leaning³⁸ indicated that a framework of enquiry was emerging that incorporated such areas as the history of digital games, the ludic qualities of games, game aesthetics and game space, cultural factors, agency, avatars as representation, and gender, amongst others. Some of the additional topics encountered during the progress of this study include how digital games might be preserved for future generations, creating

³⁷ Mäyrä, F. "10 Years of Game Studies" panel notes.

<<http://fransmayra.fi/2013/08/28/10yearsofgamestudiesnotes/>>, 2013, [accessed 01.09.2013].

³⁸ Leaning, M. The construction of video games studies in British Higher Education. *Networks* [online], 16, <<http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/projects/networks/issue-16-january-2012/the-construction-of-video-games-studies-in-british-higher-education>>, 2012, [accessed 01.09.2013].

games for learning, games for coping with and overcoming disabilities, the legal issues and economics of digital games, and how to develop games for improving health.

Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith and Tosca identified four main types of analysis that occurs in Game Studies as focusing on the game, the player, gaming culture and ontology (the philosophical foundation of games) and also claimed game researchers can be split into those who generally use ontology and game analysis (formalists) and those who look at game players or culture (situationists)³⁹. In reality, research often spans both of these groups but Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith and Tosca's point is that there are many perspectives from which to analyse games.

2.1.5 Conclusion

This sub-chapter has briefly discussed how games have been defined as systems by other researchers, and the associated language that exists for describing games. Rules, game mechanics and game loops all contribute to the experience the player has when controlling an avatar, and games create an emotional investment in outcomes which this research is interested in. The chapter has also identified Game Studies as an expanding discipline that is the focus of attention for researchers from a variety of backgrounds and different interests. Game Studies has reached the point where it has dedicated scholars and degree programmes are creating academics that come solely from the perspective of Game Studies. Digital game research can be formalist or situationist (depending on if the player, game or game culture is the focus of the investigation), or a mix of the two approaches. This research is concerned with how players respond to avatar-related game mechanics; the player is the main focus so the research can be characterised primarily as situationist.

Chapter 2.2 will review the literature relating to the relationship between avatar and player. Literature is considered from a variety of disciplines and perspectives involved in Game Studies in order to show where the existing research fits into the body of knowledge and to provide a contrast for this study's result.

³⁹ Egenfeldt-Nielsen, S., Smith, J.H & Tosca, S. P. *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*, 2008, p.11.

2.2 Avatars in digital games

2.2.1 Defining Avatars and characters in digital games

Before examining the literature concerning the relationship between the player and avatar, the existing definitions of the terms synonymous with a player's stand-in or representative in games must be reviewed, clarifying how such terms have been used in gaming culture and game scholarship. 'Avatar' first appeared in English in 1784, derived from the Sanskrit word 'Avatara', meaning 'descent' in Hindu mythology, it is held that there will be ten manifestations of Vishnu on earth, avatars of the god himself⁴⁰. In contemporary usage the term has shifted from puppets of gods to puppets of man, and is more likely to be related to digital culture than divine possession. 'Avatar' appears to have first been used in a digital context in *Habitat*, a virtual world experiment created by Randal Farmer and Chip Morningstar in 1986:

*Chip came up with the word 'avatar,' [...] because back then, pre-internet, you had to call a number with your telephone and then set it back into the cradle. You were reaching out into this game quite literally through a silver strand. The avatar was the incarnation of a deity, the player, in the online world. We liked the idea of the puppet master controlling his puppet, but instead of using strings, he was using a telephone line.*⁴¹

Here the relationship between the user and their avatar is spelled out in crude terms: the puppet and the puppet master; the user's incarnation in the online world. Given that this is possibly the first usage of the term in a virtual world it is unsurprising that it retains some remnants of its religious origins.

Academic definitions of 'avatar' can be very broad, for example Filiciak defines them as "the user's representative in the virtual universe"⁴², which is applicable to any controllable object in a digital game. There is no specific element to this definition to tie avatars to digital games and to differentiate them from the profile pictures associated with message boards.

⁴⁰ Britt, A. *On Language – Avatar*.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/10/magazine/10wwln-guest-t.html?_r=1&ref=magazine&oref=slogin>, 2009, [accessed 11/05/12].

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Filiciak, ref. 13, p.89.

Wilson's definition promotes the role of choice and self-representation as important parts of the avatar, allowing players to choose how they portray themselves in a virtual world or digital game:

*The avatar in cyberspace (or computer game persona) – as a virtual, surrogate self – can be understood as a 'stand-in' for our real-space selves; a visual agent that represents the user. [...] Avatar spaces indisputably involve choice and communicative exchange in the creation and socialisation of one's [avatar].*⁴³

Wilson's definition overlooks single-player games where real-time communication between players has not historically been possible. The chat systems embedded in Steam, the Xbox 360 and PS3 have made real-time communication between players in different games a reality. This is not facilitated through the game avatar itself, but through the console/digital distribution platforms' communication features and profiles. Wilson also champions choice as a defining element of the avatar, but this has not been adopted widely by other academics. Kromand is one of the few to highlight that customisability may have a role in defining avatars, or at least the type of avatar the player is using. Kromand defines the avatar as a "game unit that is under the player's control"⁴⁴, the player's entry point into the game. The word "unit" represents the avatar's physicality in game space and the clear marking of this physicality on screen.

Kromand sought to categorise avatars according to differences in their design across two continuum. The first being between closed and open avatars, where *closed avatars* have a fixed personality and *open avatars* only develop personality traits with the players intervention⁴⁵. The second continuum adopts Smith's classification of *central* and *acentral* identification from film theory, where characters identify with onscreen characters from an emotional first-person perspective as themselves (central identification) whilst viewers can also see characters emotionally from the third person (acentral identification).

⁴³ Wilson, L. *Interactivity or Interpassivity: a Question of Agency in Digital Play*. [Online Proceedings of the 5th International Digital Arts and Culture Conference, RMIT University, Melbourne, 19th-23rd May 2003, p.2].

<<http://hypertext.rmit.edu.au/dac/papers/Wilson.pdf>>, 2003, [accessed 11/05/12].

⁴⁴ Kromand, D. *Avatar Categorization*. [Paper presented at DiGRA2007: Situated Play. University of Tokyo, Tokyo. October 23 2007, p.400]. <

<http://www.digra.org/dl/db/07311.16435.pdf>>, 2007, [11/05/12].

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.401.

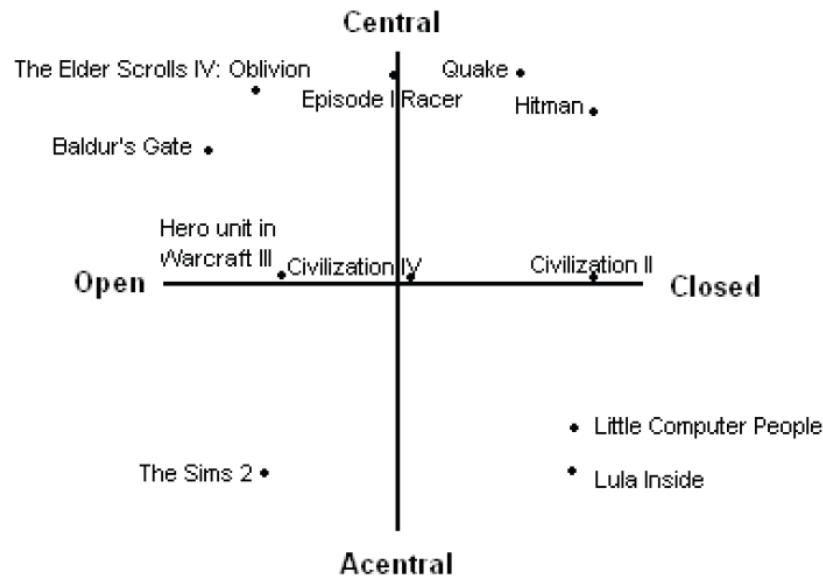


Figure 3 – Kromand's categorisation of avatars including examples⁴⁶

It is rare for one particular definition or discussion of avatars to gain momentum, although Klevjer's discussion of avatars as the prosthesis and extension of the user in games and virtual spaces has gained some traction. Klevjer does not emphasise the primacy of customisation, arguing instead that avatars are an "instrument or mechanism that defines for the participant a fictional body and mediates fictional agency; it is an embodied incarnation of the acting subject."⁴⁷

Klevjer chooses to differentiate avatars from characters, where characters have with their own goals and intentions which allow players to act, think and feel vicariously, but the relationship between player and character is primarily to do with narrative, not identification with the player⁴⁸. This changes for role-playing games where a player may control something that is both avatar and character, which is different from purely avatar-based play. For example, role-playing games are less concerned with embodying the motor-skills of the player in their avatar.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.405.

⁴⁷ Klevjer, R. *What is the Avatar? Fiction and Embodiment in Avatar-Based Singleplayer Computer Games*. PhD thesis, University of Bergen, 2006, p.87.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.116.

In contrast, platforming games, when the player's skills fail to overcome obstacles, so does the avatar, and the learning process of the player maps onto the learning process of the avatar. Role-playing games are characterised by having character's skills as well as a character's learning process separated from the player's actual skills at controlling an avatar; the playable character learns or improves a skill, not the player.

Bayliss' approach to distinguishing between avatar and character is similar to Klevjer's, choosing to define a character as "a separately embodied entity" where "both the character and the game-world in which they operate are consciously designed things, created to fulfil the specific purpose of providing a gameplay experience to the player."⁴⁹ Bayliss also formulated the term "locus of manipulation" to describe the "in-game position of the player's ability to assert control over the game world, whether this is a visible character, an implied avatar, or a graphical user interface cursor"⁵⁰. Like Klevjer, Bayliss believes it is possible for games to accommodate a relationship between player and locus of a manipulation that is both avatarial and character-based whereby "characterisation" is also made a central mechanic.

It is this relationship between the moldable aspects of avatars and users that this study is concerned with but it must also be recognised that elements of characterisation can influence the playing experience. Therefore, in terms of Kromand's categorisation, this study is interested in 'open' avatars, but also the 'closed' elements of those avatars that could influence how the player interacts with the game. The terms 'character' and 'characterisation' will be used as short hand for those closed elements, and when using the term 'avatar' it will be referring to 'open' avatars unless otherwise stated.

2.2.2 Avatars and the player experience

Several studies have theorised on the relationship between player and avatars (both close and open), often concentrating on the issue of identity, and representation of the self in digital games. In modern society, Giddens states that self-identity is an ongoing iterative

⁴⁹ Bayliss, P. *Beings in the Game-world: Characters, Avatars, and Players*. [Online proceedings of IE '07 4th Australasian conference on Interactive entertainment, RMIT University, Melbourne, December 3-5 2007, p.2], <<http://peterbayliss.edublogs.org/files/2008/02/bayliss-ie2007.pdf>>, 2007, [11/05/12].

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.1.

process, the “reflexive project of the self”⁵¹ on which individuals toil throughout their lives. An individual becomes aware of their identity through the narrative that accumulates, the biographies that fuel the construction and maintenance of self-identity. Embodiment, an issue raised in connection with technological affordances of digital games and virtual worlds, was also highlighted by Giddens as an important factor in self-identification.

*The self, of course, is embodied. Awareness of the contours and properties of the body is at the very origin of the original explorations of the world whereby the child learns the features of objects and others. Reality is grasped through day-to-day praxis. The body is thus not simply an entity, but is experienced as a practical mode of coping with external situations and events [...] Routinised control of the body is crucial to the sustaining of the individual’s protective cocoon in situations of day-to-day interaction [...] Regularised control of the body is a fundamental means whereby a biography of self-identity is maintained [...]*⁵²

In contrast to Giddens’s view, are the postmodern identity theorists, who celebrate the “decline of modernist institutions based on science, logic and reason that posit objective realities”⁵³. Postmodern theorists approach identity from the perspective that there is not a core identity, but instead it is fragmented and multiple; individual identity is actually individual identities⁵⁴. For example, Fuss claims that “identity is rarely identical to itself but instead has multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings [...]”⁵⁵.

Amongst postmodern theorists, there are several who posit that there is a performative aspect to identity. Kendall performed ethnographic research in the internet forum *BlueSky*, and from her experiences and other reports from online communities, Kendall believes that “the performative nature of identity there seems almost unavoidably obvious”⁵⁶. Butler argues that gender is a construction based on performance⁵⁷, whilst Friedman believes that identities are masks that can be taken and taken off at will: “the ability to be able to shift

⁵¹ Giddens, A. *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, pp.53-54.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.56.

⁵³ Côté, J.E & Levine, C.G. *Identity Formation, Agency, and Culture: A Social Psychological Synthesis*, 2002, p.222.

⁵⁴ Waggoner, ref. 15, p.24.

⁵⁵ Fuss, D. *Essentially speaking: feminism, nature & difference*, 1989, pp.98-104.

⁵⁶ Kendall, L. *Hanging out in the Virtual Pub*, 2002, p.8.

⁵⁷ Butler, J. *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, p.178.

from one identity to the next is a performative phenomenon”⁵⁸. Various game scholar and digital identity researchers have agreed with the notion of performative identity. Mackay also sees identity as performative, claiming that all identity boils down to role-playing:

*Social reality is experienced through the performance of life, the performance of the everyday. [...] In a world manifest meaningless, devoid of any sense of otherworldliness or metanarrative by which to understand the events around us, it is only through relishing the role one plays that a person can find any sense of satisfaction.*⁵⁹

Like Friedman, Mackay believes that individuals can switch roles, or ‘masks’, whenever they are bored of the current one. Mackay also speculates on the futility of endlessly swapping roles for entertainment, warning that the real self may be lost beneath the veneer of the accumulated masks.

Bressan compares the use of masks for entertainment to modern-day avatars, believing that avatars possess the transformative and prosthetic powers of masks, altering the ways we interact with and think about ourselves as when someone wears a mask in the theatre⁶⁰. We engage with and follow a different set of rules than in ordinary life which influence our behaviour. Both Bressan and Mackay theorise that masks, roles and avatars (both physical and digital prosthesis) can alter the behaviour of a user or wearer, but how, specifically can avatars do this, if at all?

Identity theorists have also been considering the role that technology has in shaping identities, and how they have been augmented and altered by the rise of pervasive computing. Turkle claimed that the early text-based virtual worlds (Multi-User Dungeons, or MUDs) allowed for experimentation with different identities, and that the users she interviewed were often connected to multiple MUDs, each application window representing a different identity

⁵⁸ Friedman, J. Global Crisis, The Struggle for Cultural Identity and Intellectual Porkbarrelling: Cosmopolitans Versus Locals, Ethnicities And Nationals In An Era of De-Hegemonisation. In: Werbner, P & Modood, T., eds. *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities And The Politics Of Anti-Racism*, 1997, p.76.

⁵⁹ Mackay, D. *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art*, 2001, p.154.

⁶⁰ Bressan, R.T. From masks to avatars: transformations through digital prostheses. *Digithum: Humanities in the Digital Era*, 12, 1-2.

<<http://www.uoc.edu/ojs/index.php/digithum/article/viewDownloadInterstitial/n12-teixeira/n12-bressan-eng>> 2012, [accessed 11.05.12].

which they switched between⁶¹. It can be argued that they were the earliest form of visual cues for causing users to alternate between multiple identities, although the case is much stronger with modern avatars. For example, Klevjer theorises on the avatar's ability to "discipline" and shape the learning paths of users through vicarious embodiment:

*The relationship between the player and the avatar is a prosthetic relationship; through a process of learning and habituation, the avatar becomes an extension of the player's own body. Via the interface of screen, speakers and controllers, the player incorporates the computer game avatar as second nature, and the avatar disciplines the player's body.[...] An avatar is interesting and playable not just because of what it makes us able to do or perform, but because of what happens to us in the world that the avatar lets us inhabit.*⁶²

Through the avatar players are exposed to a myriad of restrictions and affordances which Bayliss believes become embodied in the in the player's own intentions and actions⁶³. They realise the limits of what the avatar is capable of and act accordingly. A feedback loop between player and avatar allows the player to learn and improve their performance.

Gee is also a proponent of recognising the that avatars are not just shaped by the intentions of the user, having formulated a tripartite classification of identity in order to discuss the influences from games and his own identity that come together to create an avatar. Gee identified three distinct identities at play during the use of computer role playing games operating simultaneously. First, there is the virtual identity which Gee describes as "the virtual character Bead Bead acting in the virtual world (though I am 'playing/developing' her)"⁶⁴. Gee is responsible for the success and failures of his avatar (named Bead Bead), and at the same time he is not, as Bead Bead was formed in a world shaped by the developers of the game.

Second is the real-world identity (who the player is when they sit down to play the game; their own identity). Gee believes that individuals possess many different real-world

⁶¹ Turkle, S. *Life on the Screen*, 1995, p.12-14.

⁶² Klevjer, ref. 47, p.10

⁶³ Bayliss, ref. 49, p.3

⁶⁴ Gee, ref. 1, p.54.

identities, Gee being a “professor, a linguist, an Anglo American”⁶⁵, etc., and that these identities are accessed by being filtered through Gee’s identity as a digital game player playing *Arcanum* when they are needed.

The third identity at stake is what Gee calls ‘projective identity’. Projective in this case means “to project one’s values and desires onto the virtual character”⁶⁶ and “seeing the virtual character as one’s own project in the making, a creature whom I imbue with a certain trajectory through time defined by my aspirations for what I want the character to be and become (within the limitations of her capacities of course).”⁶⁷ Whilst this is the most nebulous of the three identities, it also appears to be the most relevant to the digital game and virtual world situation as it recognises that the avatar is a product of the users and the developer’s intentions. Projective identity is reminiscent of Giddens treatment of identity as an ongoing project, but unlike Holland et al.’s notion of identity as a perpetual work in progress⁶⁸, a projective identity will come to an end before the users real-world identity.

Gee notes that the failure state for this identity is when the player causes the virtual identity to do something that goes against what the projected identity would want. What would happen if a player projects their values onto an avatar or agent, and then the game makes their character do something that countermands those values? What happens if such a change impacts the virtual identity permanently? Would the projective identity change to accommodate this, or might a player refuse to carry on with the same level of investment that a projective identity requires? Does every player try to build a projective identity to the same extent Gee describes here? These are among a few of the questions that research into identities in digital games and virtual worlds need to answer. In his later reiterations of projective identity (which he has renamed the projective stance), Gee emphasises the inhabitation of players to an avatars affordances and the fictional goals that avatar might hold with the goals of the player⁶⁹.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.55.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.56.

⁶⁸ Holland, D., Lachicotte Jr., W., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*, 1998, p. vii.

⁶⁹ Gee, J.P. Video Games and Embodiment. *Games and Culture*, 3 (3-4), 258, <<http://gac.sagepub.com/content/3/3-4/253.abstract>>, 2008, [accessed 11.05.12].

The reflexive characteristics of Gee's model potentially provide a useful framework for examining the relationship between avatars and users, as Waggoner sought to prove in his phenomenological study of four gamers and their avatars conducted through observations of gameplay and interviews. Firstly, Waggoner argued that the distinction between "real-world" and "virtual" is problematic, implying that the stimuli and the results of that stimuli cannot actually be real. Waggoner argues:

*The term "non-virtual" is more accurate and sets up a more appropriate contrast to "virtual". This substitution would create a continuum that focuses on the technological and physical differences between virtual and non-virtual identities and experiences rather than on the authenticity or "realness" of those experiences.*⁷⁰

The phenomenological study of gamers highlighted the fragmented nature of avatar construction, it being possible to divide a player's multiple and incohesive customisation strategies into themes according to what part of the game system they are interacting with e.g. (initial avatar creation, exploration and narrative) and the orientation of their play (avatar ethics)⁷¹. The interview and observational results from those participants indicated at a complex relationship between the three identities (virtual, non-virtual, projective):

*Each participant's real-world identities heavily and consciously influenced the decisions made for their avatars both during the initial creation of the avatar and throughout their gameplay [...] neither of these gamers saw their avatar as a distinct, separate identity.*⁷²

Whilst the two *Morrowind* players were willing to admit that their non-virtual identities played a large role in the choices they made during avatar creation and game play, the other two participants (one of whom was less experienced with games, and the other was openly hostile towards games) were less willing to admit a connection between themselves and their avatars. The casual gamers did appear to make unconscious decisions that connected their non-virtual and virtual identities, such as assuming they could not steal from chests in

⁷⁰ Waggoner, ref. 15, p.163.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.158

public places and shouting out spontaneous remarks in response to an in-game character⁷³. Waggoner argues that these connections allow for easy identification between the participants and their avatars because the avatars were “imbued with the real-world identities’ characteristics, values and preferences”⁷⁴.

There have been few empirical studies that have sought to identify the approaches that players take to customising their avatars in service of a projective identity. Instead, most investigations focus on individual features of the avatar building experience (such as the motivations behind appearance customisation^{75 76}). Waggoner’s work can be treated as a starting point for those who wish to qualitatively study projective identity because there are several issues with his method that have limited the scope of his data. By only using four participants and games from one developer he presents a very narrow view of how players experience avatar customisation. It is also possible that gamers compare and contrast their past experiences with avatar development tools, as Waggoner briefly recognises when a participant was making assumptions of what was ‘allowed’ in *Morrowind* based on past experiences⁷⁷. It is therefore proposed that further investigation of the phenomenon of projective identity should take into account participants past experiences with games, and to see how their approaches to customisation changes across games including those that are not necessarily confined to the RPG genre.

The first aim of this research is “to determine the main features of projective identities through avatars in digital games”. The first objective is “to critically review the current literature to understand existing perspectives on avatar customisation and projective identity in digital games” which is fulfilled by this chapter. The second objective attached to

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.159

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Neustaedter, C & Fedorovskay, E. *Presenting Identity in a Virtual World through Avatar Appearances*. [Online Proceedings of Graphics Interface 09, Canadian Information Processing Society Toronto, Canada, May 21-25 2009, 1-8].

<<http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1555921&dl=ACM&coll=DL&CFID=82282825&CFTOKEN=14293412>> ,2009, [accessed 11.05.12].

⁷⁶ Ducheneaut, N., Wen, M.D., Yee, N & Wadley, G. *Body and Mind: A Study of Avatar Personalization in Three Virtual Worlds*. [Paper presented at CHI 2009, Boston USA, April 4–9 2009, pp.1-10].

<<http://www.nickyee.com/pubs/Ducheneaut,%20Wen,%20Yee,%20Wadley%20-%20CHI%202009.pdf>>, 2009, [accessed 11.05.12].

⁷⁷ Waggoner, ref. 15, p.81.

this aim is the identification of the main themes that gamers associate with projective identities. This will be achieved through the methods laid out in Chapter 3:.

The literature associated with interpretative phenomenological analysis (see Chapter 3:) recommends that researchers attempt to limit their exposure to the theoretical constructs associated with their area of study less it interfere with the questioning of their participants and interpretation of the results. Accordingly, the following sub-chapters are grouped according to themes derived from the results of the research and have been compiled after data collection and the first round of interpretation in order to facilitate discussion of these issues in relation to the field of Game Studies.

2.3 Customising avatar appearance

Within games and virtual worlds that feature avatar customisation, amongst the first things players usually get to do is to choose and shape their avatar's appearance. Depending on the game and platform, these chosen elements may last for the duration of the avatar's life cycle (e.g. *Dragon Age*), or may be regularly altered to fit the changing tastes and abilities of the user (e.g. *Second Life*)^{78 79}.

Newman has provocatively argued that the appearance of a player character (he does not distinguish between avatars in single-player or multiplayer games) has little to do with how much a player identifies with it⁸⁰.

While [player-character appearance] may retain significance on the box, in adverts, even in cut scenes and introductions within the game, during On-Line engagement, the appearance of the player's character is of little or no consequence. I mean to suggest that the level of engagement, immersion or presence experienced by the player – the degree to which the player considers themselves to "be" the character – is not contingent upon representation.⁸¹

Instead, characters are to be thought of as containers, or a set of characteristics. Players are embodied within the affordances lent to them by the game, and not by the seemingly meaningless outward appearance or representational traits of the avatar they control.

Upon reviewing the literature, however, it is clear that avatar appearance can mean a great deal of things to players, although this will differ depending on the game. For example,

⁷⁸ MacCallum-Stewart, E. & Parsler, J. Role-play vs. gameplay: the difficulties of playing a role in World of Warcraft. In: Corneliussen & Rettberg (Eds.), *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: a World of Warcraft Reader*, 2008, pp.225-246.

⁷⁹ Neustaedter, C. & Fedorovskay, E. *Presenting Identity in a Virtual World through Avatar Appearances*. [Online Proceedings of Graphics Interface 09, Canadian Information Processing Society, Toronto, Canada, May 21-25 2009, pp.1-8].
<<http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1555921&dl=ACM&coll=DL&CFID=82282825&CFTOKEN=14293412>>,2009, [accessed 11.05.12].

⁸⁰ Newman, J. The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame: Some thoughts on player-character relationships in videogames. *Game Studies [Online]*, 2(1),
<<http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/newman/>>, 2002, [accessed 11.05.12].

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Manninen and Kujanpää⁸² analysed the interaction forms in first person shooter Battlefield 1942, finding avatar appearance to have two main forms: providing visual team information to players (which team each avatar belonged to) and allowing players to identify different roles in the game (e.g. medic, anti-tank, scout). They believed that the static nature of these avatars limited self expression available to players, and that “the feeling of comradeship comes mainly from the actions and experiences, not from the visual appearance of a fellow squad member.”⁸³

In the context of MMORPGs, avatar appearance is described by MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler⁸⁴ as being one of the only ways that a player can lastingly affect their environment because it is often the only element in the game world that players can shape which is not reset for other players to experience. Such games are essentially time-locked theme parks where each player is offered a uniform experience. Players sometimes can have some minor impact on an MMO world where, for example, the implementation of instancing allows a new version of a dungeon to be generated for each new group of players or where different models and textures are loaded in a public area depending on the particular stage of a quest a player is on. The drawback is that environmental consequences are not usually visible to other players unless they have also completed the same quest so the only lasting visual impact a player can make in most MMOs is through choosing how their avatar looks.

2.3.1 Avatar appearance influencing confidence and health

Research has demonstrated the influence of avatar appearance on the behaviour of their users and on the other users they interact with. Yee and Bailenson⁸⁵ have shown that the attractiveness of an avatar randomly assigned to participants can increase self-disclosure, friendliness and extroversion in comparison to users of less-attractive avatars who were more likely to avoid social contact. Participants assigned taller avatars behaved more confidently in negotiations in comparison to those with shorter avatars. Whilst this was

⁸² Manninen, T. & Kujanpää, T. The Hunt for Collaborative War Gaming - CASE: Battlefield 1942. *The International Journal of Computer Game Research* [online], 5(1) <http://www.gamestudies.org/0501/manninen_kujanpaa/>, 2005, [accessed 11.05.12].

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler, ref. 78, p.230.

⁸⁵ Yee, N. & Bailenson, J.N. The Proteus Effect: Implications of Transformed Digital Self-Representation on Online and Offline Behavior. *Communication Research*, 36 (2), 285-312, <<http://crx.sagepub.com/content/36/2/285.refs>>, 2007, [accessed 11.05.12].

achieved with assigned avatars (and therefore not self-customised ones) it demonstrates the rapid effect the configuration of an avatar can have on users' behaviour, nearing instantaneous as opposed to hours or days of use.

Results from Fox and Bailenson⁸⁶ also appear to indicate the ability of avatars to influence human behaviour achieved by adapting avatars to reflect the appearance of participants and then making them perform a variety of activities from running to loitering. Participants who subsequently observed their self-representations exercising were more likely to report that they had exercised themselves over the following 24 hour period. Therefore, there are potentially some health benefits to be achieved through the use of avatars in teaching health and exercise, but once again these avatars were not self-assigned and are not necessarily accurate reflections of how someone may choose to represent themselves in a game or virtual world.

2.3.2 Real-life appearance and in-world/in-game appearance

In an effort to understand any connection between the size of avatar that SL residents chose for themselves and their real-life build, preliminary findings from Dean et al.⁸⁷ suggest that users were more likely to report higher real-life BMI or weight if they had created a heavier looking avatar than those with a thinner looking avatar. Body image also appears to provide a motivation for using virtual worlds, as indicated by Becerra and Stutts⁸⁸ who surveyed users of virtual worlds such as *Second Life* and *Activeworlds*. Their results showed that low body image or perceptions of attractiveness were linked to an increased desire to become someone else, which in turn increased participants' desires to use virtual worlds.

⁸⁶ Fox, J. & Bailenson, J.N. Virtual Self-Modeling: The Effects of Vicarious Reinforcement and Identification on Exercise Behavior. *Media Psychology*, 12, 1-25, <<http://vhil.stanford.edu/pubs/2009/fox-mp-selfmodeling.pdf>>, 2009, [accessed 11.05.12].

⁸⁷ Dean, E., Cook, S., Keating, M & Murphy, J. Does this Avatar Make Me Look Fat? Obesity and Interviewing in Second Life. *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*, 2(2), 1-11, <<http://journals.tdl.org/jvwr/article/viewArticle/621>>, 2009, [accessed 11.05.12].

⁸⁸ Becerra, E. P. & Stutts, M.A. Ugly Duckling by day, Super Model by Night: The Influence of Body Image on the Use of Virtual Worlds. *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*, 1(2), 1-19, <<http://journals.tdl.org/jvwr/article/view/346>>, 2008, [accessed 11.05.12].

Messinger et al.⁸⁹ found that SL residents reported making their avatars similar to themselves, but with some improvements over their real appearance. Residents were less inhibited in their virtual world behaviour compared to the real-world; those who were particularly low in extraversion and confidence in the real world rated their virtual selves as outgoing and confident. Echoing the results of Yee and Bailenson⁹⁰, this increase in extraversion was even more pronounced for residents whose avatars were more attractive than their real selves.

Kafai, Fields and Cook⁹¹ interviewed teens in the virtual world *Whyville*, many of whom reported reasons for choosing their avatars beyond wanting to create facsimiles of their real selves. Interviewees' motivations were largely artistic with their creativity giving rise to trends within the community which some interviewees tried to associate or distance their avatars from. Some interviewees also enjoyed the freedom the virtual world conferred, preferring clothes/haircuts they were not allowed in real life, using *Whyville* to explore looks they desired for their real-selves but could not obtain.

Participants in a study conducted by Ducheneaut et al.⁹² also used avatars to experiment with their appearance resulting in avatars that looked quite different from their physical appearance. The changes that they made generally conformed to Western standards of beauty, with older and high-BMI participants in particular creating idealized avatars and also happened to be more attached to these avatars than the average participant. The authors did not address the limitations of each virtual world in reflecting age and body mass, though *Maple Story* and *World of Warcraft (WoW)* do not feature body shape customisation options to the same extent as *Second Life*. *WoW* does, however, include the option to age an

⁸⁹ Messinger, P.R., Xin, G., Stroulia, E., Lyons, K., Smirnov, K. & Bone, M. *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*, 1(2), 1-16, <<http://journals.tdl.org/jvwr/article/viewArticle/352>>, 2008, [accessed 11.05.12].

⁹⁰ Yee & Bailenson. ref. 85.

⁹¹ Kafai, Y.B., Fields, D.A. & Cook, M. *Your Second Selves: Avatar Designs and Identity Play in a Teen Virtual World*. [Paper presented at DiGRA2007: Situated Play. University of Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan, September 24-28 2007, pp.1-9], <http://web.nmsu.edu/~jalmjeld/onlineidentity/readings/Your_Second_Selves.pdf>, 2007, [accessed 11.05.12].

⁹² Ducheneaut, N., Wen, M.D., Yee, N & Wadley, G. *Body and Mind: A Study of Avatar Personalization in Three Virtual Worlds*. [Paper presented at CHI 2009, April 4-9, Boston, USA, pp.1-10]. <<http://www.nickye.com/pubs/Ducheneaut,%20Wen,%20Yee,%20Wadley%20-%20CHI%202009.pdf>>, 2009, [accessed 11.05.12].

avatar's complexion, so it would have been possible for older participants to create an avatar that reflected this aspect of their appearance, although participants clearly desired the opposite in *WoW*. Some races are also heavier or lighter (an orc is proportionally broader than a blood elf) giving players a 'soft' option for choosing body shape.

From these studies it can be seen that the options available to players and the context these options are situated in play an important role in shaping the elements of an avatar that the user chooses. Vasalou and Joinson⁹³ demonstrated the role of context in the selection of avatar appearance using participants over several different platforms (blogging, gaming and dating) to see how they varied their avatars. Blogging avatars accurately reflected the participants' appearance, lifestyle and preference, whilst dating avatars were more idealised, and gaming avatars in an online murder mystery emphasised intellectual qualities.

Their findings relating to the detective game ran counter to the theories of Bruckman⁹⁴ and Riegelsberger et al.⁹⁵ who suggest that gamers would create avatars to strategically manipulate other players' behaviour, and to signal their gaming qualities. Instead, players chose to position their avatar relative to the role they were to adopt in accordance with the nature of the game. Despite the influence of context, participants primarily drew on their self-image when designing avatars, perceiving their avatars to be highly representative of themselves.

⁹³ Vasalou, A & Joinson, A.N. Me, myself and I: The role of interactional context on self-presentation through avatars. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 25, 510–520, <http://www.luminainteractive.com/pdfs/avatars_chb08.pdf>, 2009, [accessed 11.05.12].

⁹⁴ Bruckman, A. *Gender Swapping on the Internet*. [Paper presented at INET, San Francisco, CA. August 17-20, 1-5]. <<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/summary?doi=10.1.1.48.9963>>, 1993, [accessed 11.05.12].

⁹⁵ Riegelsberger, J., Counts, S. J., Farnham, S. D., & Phillips, B. C. *Sounds good to me: Effects of photo and voice profiles on gaming partner choice*. [Paper presented at the Computer Supported Cooperative Work Conference, Banff, Canada, November 4-8, pp.159-162]. <http://research.microsoft.com/en-us/um/people/counts/pubs/sounds_good_to_me.pdf?q=rated-profiles>, 2006, [accessed 11.05.12].

Based on Turkle's⁹⁶ notion of the ideal self being expressed through avatars, and Bartle's⁹⁷ typology of personas/characters that users of virtual worlds adopt, Neustaedter and Fedorovskaya⁹⁸ create their own based on interviews with SL residents.

Table of the 'Patterns of appearance and identity'

Table 1 – Patterns of appearance and identity.⁹⁹

'Realistics' are users who want their virtual world and real life identities to be one and the same, life in the virtual world simply being an extension of their real one. Their virtual activities overlap with their real life activities, and they maintain continuity with this identity so that it stays with them over time. Similarly they create an avatar with an appearance similar to theirs as possible. 'Ideals' mostly did not desire realism in their avatar, preferring to emphasise the qualities only attainable within a virtual world. They retain the same personality across the virtual world and real world, but make idealised adjustments to their real appearance in the virtual world.

'Fantasies' desire two separate identities, expressed strongly through the differences between their virtual and real appearances in the form of unrealistic features. They establish continuity over their virtual world identity in order to establish and maintain relationships. 'Roleplayers' constantly desire new experiences and new identities they could not achieve in real life, with little or no thought to continuity of identity. Some roleplayers harbour primary and secondary identities that they switch between, whilst others constantly change their avatar to fulfil different fantasies.

Neustaedter and Fedorovskaya's typology is important because it categorises the different types of players whilst recording their motivations for choosing to express themselves the way they do. This will allow us to compare the behaviour of users of different virtual worlds

⁹⁶ Turkle, S. *Constructions and Reconstructions of Self in Virtual Reality: Playing in the MUDs. Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 1(3), 158-167, <<http://web.mit.edu/sturkle/www/constructions.html>>, 1993, [accessed 11.05.12].

⁹⁷ Bartle, R. A. *Designing Virtual Worlds*, 2003, p.130.

⁹⁸ Neustaedter & Fedorovskaya. ref. 79, p.1.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.5.

and even single-player RPGs in order to highlight changes in how people choose to represent themselves.

A theory that might influence how the appearance of an avatar is received by players is that of the, “Uncanny Valley”, developed by Mori as a response to the advances in the field of robotics¹⁰⁰. The theory proposed a relationship between human likeness and familiarity, alternatively labelled as comfort (Figure 4).

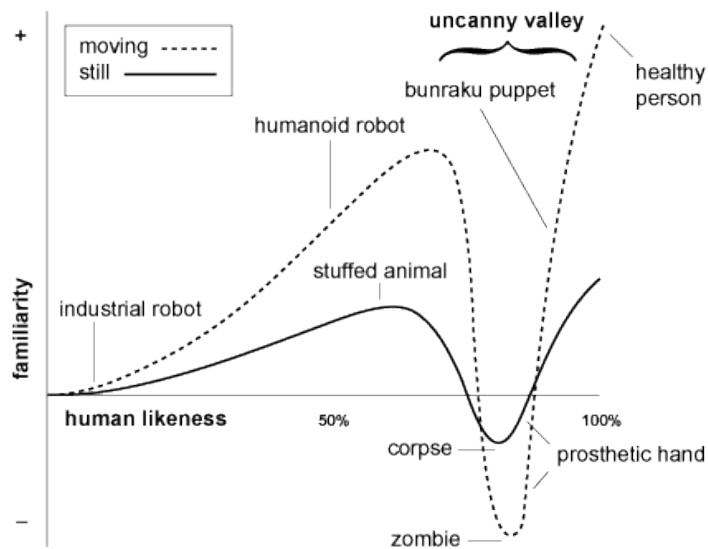


Figure 4 – The Uncanny Valley¹⁰¹.

As robots become more human looking they become more sympathetic, however once their likeness gets to a certain level, the subtlest error in design can lead to feelings of disgust or disassociation. This theory has recently been re-examined in the context of computer-generated movies, where *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* and the *Polar Express* were criticised for their ‘creepy’ character designs¹⁰². These movies aimed for photo realism in their character designs but fell short, prompting negative feedback from critics and

¹⁰⁰ Mori, M. The Uncanny Valley (Translated by Karl F. MacDorman and Takashi Minato). *Energy* [online], 1970, 7(4), 33-35, <<http://www.androidscience.com/theuncannyvalley/proceedings2005/uncannyvalley.html>>, 2005, [accessed 22/02/11].

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² MacDorman, K. F., et al. Too real for comfort? Uncanny responses to computer generated faces. *Computers in Human Behavior* [online]. 29. 695–71. <<http://www.macdorman.com/kfm/writings/pubs/MacDorman2009TooRealForComfort.pdf>>, 2008, [accessed 22/02/11].

audiences alike. Thompson believes that as the capabilities of consoles continue to approach photorealism more avatars will slide into the Uncanny Valley¹⁰³.

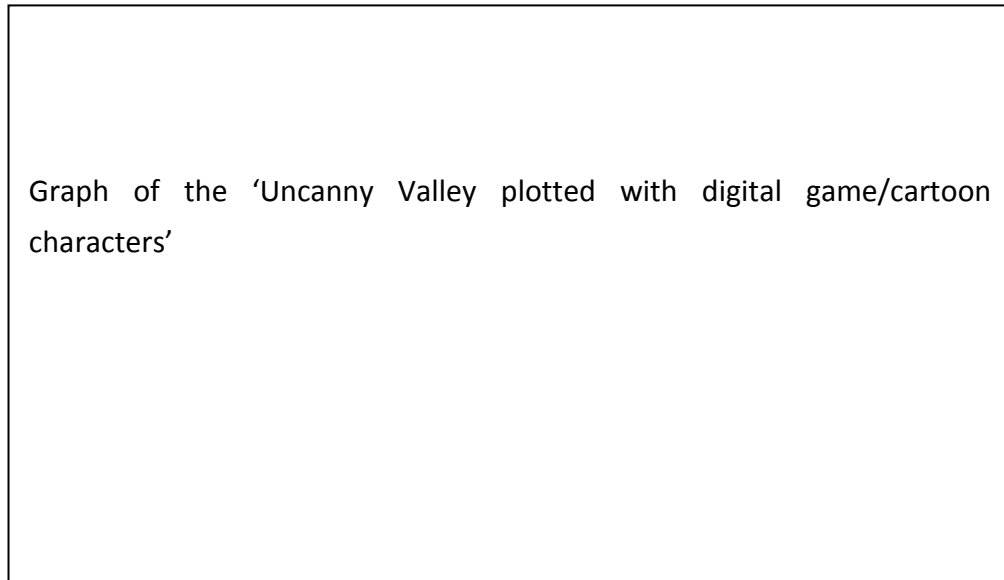


Figure 5 – The Uncanny Valley and digital game/cartoon characters¹⁰⁴

Schneider, Wang and Yang investigated the application of Mori's theory to digital games using digital game characters¹⁰⁵. After having their participants rank the human-like qualities of characters, along with their attractiveness the researchers observed the lowest average attractive scores being given to human-like creatures. These creatures had properties that were distinctly human but also had features that strongly suggested non-human, creating a dip in the data as visible when plotted on a graph (Figure 5).

2.3.3 Respect, status and fashion

The appeal of both closed and open avatars appearance in single-player games can be crucial to their marketability and subsequent sales, which is why Isbister¹⁰⁶ argues for the use of

¹⁰³ Thompson, C. *Monsters of Photorealism*.

<<http://www.wired.com/gaming/gamingreviews/commentary/games/2005/12/69739>>, 2005, [accessed 01/06/12].

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.548.

¹⁰⁵ Schneider, E., Wang, Y & Yang, S. Exploring the Uncanny Valley with Japanese Video Game Characters. [Paper presented at DiGRA2007: Situated Play. University of Tokyo, Tokyo. September 24-28 2007, 546-549] <<http://www.digra.org/dl/db/07312.11004.pdf>>, 2007, [accessed 01/06/12].

¹⁰⁶ Isbister, K. *Better game characters by design: a psychological approach*, 2006, p.13.

psychological principles of the design of player-characters. She argues that “people unconsciously make use of visual cues to come to quick judgments about a person’s role and abilities”¹⁰⁷ and whether these signs are accurate or not, people are still influenced by factors such as height, hair thickness, dress sense, posture, and facial features.

Isbister proposes that stereotypes and over-generalisations based on these factors also apply to avatars and that designers should learn to recognise the character elements that people interpret as relating to the possession of leadership qualities and features that instill respect (designing a player-character with baby faced features would make a poor leading character design as they rarely inspire respect and would prove divisive amongst gamers).

The composition of an avatar’s appearance, including the body structure, accessories and other visual signifiers can be interpreted as symbols of one’s status in the social hierarchy of virtual worlds. The possession of particular items can signal group membership, or having achieved a feat of skill, whilst the lack of such items can make one unremarkable or an unattractive prospect for socialisation. For example, Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell & Moore¹⁰⁸ found that the choice of race and faction in *World of Warcraft* is interpreted by experienced players as being one that is frequently lead by western notions of beauty, leading ‘newbie’ players to choose conventional looking races from the alliance faction. Subsequently, experienced players were likely to choose the Horde faction to avoid these inexperienced players¹⁰⁹.

The items that one possesses in a virtual world can also play a large part in signifying your status, as evidenced by the status anxiety reported by participants in Klastrup & Tosca’s¹¹⁰ study of fashion in *World of Warcraft*. Participants described working hard to stay current with the latest armour sets available through raiding and PvP and checked the profiles of other players to figure out what items are desirable.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Ducheneaut, N., Yee, N., Nickell, E & Moore, R. J. Building an MMO With Mass Appeal A Look at Gameplay in *World of Warcraft*. *Games and Culture*, 1(4), 281-317. <www.nickyee.com/pubs/Mass%20Appeal%202006.pdf>, 2006, [accessed 11.05.12].

¹⁰⁹ At the time of their study (2006) it was true; however, subsequent expansions have added the Blood Elves to the horde faction who are similar in build to the alliance Night Elves.

¹¹⁰ Klastrup, L & Tosca, S. "Because it just looks cool!" Fashion as character performance: The Case of WoW. *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*, 1(3), 3-17, <<https://journals.tdl.org/jvwr/article/view/305>>, 2009, [accessed 11.05.12].

A minority of items in the game are desirable for those wishing to become powerful, MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler¹¹¹ argue that role-players attempt to counterbalance this rat-race with alternative clothing. Wearable and usable items can also be an outlet for the preferences and desires of players, even though in games such as *WoW*, practicalities must often be considered first. Nevertheless, *WoW* offers opportunities for experimentation with different item combinations, and Klastруп and Tosca highlight this as being one of the only ways players can try to differentiate their avatars from each other¹¹². Participants reported compiling outfits composed of clothes that did not necessarily confer attention-worthy stats bonuses, but did make their character stand out in cities (e.g. a tuxedo, a wizard's hat, and an expensive tailored robe). Some of these items were only available by doing obscure quests or by killing many enemies, adding to the rarity value and perceived attractiveness of those items in the community as fashion accessories.

Such items, however, are finite and in *WoW* they cannot be edited by the player. The possibilities that role-players want to realise in-game are therefore constrained by the items developers provide. MacCallum-Stewart highlighted that the *Lord of the Rings Online* goes further than *WoW* in facilitating role-play and aesthetic avatar development¹¹³. It allows players to customise their clothing with dyes and cosmetic extensions can be worn over armour without negatively impacting the attribute-boosting aspects of the armour. Such options that help players identify themselves as being unique contribute to role-playing activity but also helps the occurrence of what MacCallum-Stewart calls "quiet role-play", where players are experiencing a moment of immersion, and imagination and fantasy is triggered without the presence of others¹¹⁴.

Clothing can also act as a barrier for female players and their construction of avatars that they can identify with; a piece of clothing that fully covers male avatars is often designed to be more revealing on female avatars¹¹⁵. Female players of *WoW* and *Age of Conan*

¹¹¹ MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler, ref. 78.

¹¹² Compared to the amount of players per server, there is a limited amount of cosmetic options for avatar facial features and other physical attributes meaning players are very likely to encounter clones of their own avatar.

¹¹³ MacCallum-Stewart, E. The place of role-playing in massively multiplayer online role-playing games. In: Krzywinska, MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler (Eds.), *Ring Bearers: The Lord of the Rings Online as intertextual narrative*, 2011, pp.70-92.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.86.

¹¹⁵ MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler, ref. 78, p.231.

interviewed by Consalvo and Harper¹¹⁶ attest to this, claiming that they often eventually learn to tolerate or ignore such items, concentrating on the stats benefits, not aesthetics.

The appearance and clothing an avatar adopts is also an indicator of group membership as evidenced by Martey and Consalvo's¹¹⁷ review of the habits of 211 *SL* users, and how (if at all) they adapted their avatars whilst playing a steampunk-themed point-and-click game created in *SL*. Findings indicate that despite the myriad of creative possibilities that *SL* offers, the most common options conformed to a typical humanoid shape, Caucasian skin colours and facial features. Although users could change their appearance at a moment's notice, and sometimes did so to adapt to their environment (participants adopted symbols and clothing from the steampunk game), they retained symbols signaling membership of their respective communities. Similarly to the results of Neustaedter and Fedorovskaya¹¹⁸, this demonstrates the balance residents of *SL* often strike between their desires, and the societal demands placed upon them for fitting into a community.

2.3.4 Appearance and projective identity

This literature review demonstrates a variety of factors that influence the projective identity of users of avatars and their choice of appearance:

- **Sense of self** – Messinger et al.¹¹⁹ demonstrated that the sense of self intrudes on the decision making process, although Ducheneaut et al¹²⁰, Kafai, Fields and Cook¹²¹, and Neustaedter and Fedorovskaya¹²² show that the balance between the real identity and the virtual identity varies from person to person.

¹¹⁶ Consalvo, M. & Harper, T. The sexi(e)st of all: Avatars, gender and online games. In: Panteli, N., ed. *Virtual social networks: Mediated, massive and multiplayer sites*, 2009, pp.98-113.

¹¹⁷ Martey, R.M & Consalvo, M. Performing the Looking-Glass Self: Avatar Appearance and Group Identity in Second Life. *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture*, 9(3), 165-180, <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15405702.2011.583830>>, 2009, [accessed 11.05.12].

¹¹⁸ Neustaedter & Fedorovskaya, ref. 79.

¹¹⁹ Messinger et al, ref. 89.

¹²⁰ Ducheneaut et al, ref. 92.

¹²¹ Kafai, Fields & Cook., ref. 91.

¹²² Neustaedter & Fedorovskaya., ref. 79.

- **Context** – Vasalou and Joinson¹²³, and Martey and Consalvo¹²⁴ showed that social pressures and group context can also act to modify a projective identity, although they will not necessarily remove mainstays and the main themes connected to an avatars identity, including evidence of community membership.
- **Options available** – Accordingly, the appearance options developer implement will act to shape, constrain and sometimes damage the identification users feel with their avatars¹²⁵.
- **Appearance influences behaviour** – Studies by Yee and Bailenson¹²⁶ and Fox and Bailenson¹²⁷ have shown that assigned avatar appearance can influence the behaviour of both the user and the people they interact with.
- **Pragmatics** – The perceived utility of an item can override the dissatisfaction in aesthetics that users feel in connection with it, particularly in stat-driven games such as *World of Warcraft*¹²⁸.
- **Fashion** – Despite the perceived dominance of pragmatism in choices of clothing in game-oriented virtual worlds, some players try to differentiate their avatars by combining items not necessarily appropriate for combat situations. Klastrup & Tosca¹²⁹ and Neustaedter and Fedorovskaya¹³⁰ have shown that users pay attention to the newest trends in virtual worlds and MMORPGs in order to address social anxieties, although trends in Second Life are shaped by the users, whilst fashions in World of Warcraft are predominantly defined by the latest content added by the developer.

Merola and Pena¹³¹ observe how little is known about how a customisable avatar might influence the behaviour of the users of virtual worlds, but the same can be said for our knowledge of non-virtual world avatar platforms as well. All of the aforementioned

¹²³ Vasalou & Joinson, ref. 93.

¹²⁴ Martey & Consalvo, ref. 117.

¹²⁵ MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler, ref. 78.

¹²⁶ Yee & Bailenson, ref. 85.

¹²⁷ Fox & Bailenson, ref. 86.

¹²⁸ Consalvo & Harper, ref. 116.

¹²⁹ Klastrup & Tosca, ref. 110.

¹³⁰ Neustaedter & Fedorovskaya, ref. 79.

¹³¹ Merola, N & Pena, J. The Effects of Avatar Appearance in Virtual Worlds. *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*, 2(5), 1-12, <<http://journals.tdl.org/jvwr/article/view/843>>, 2009, [accessed 11.05.12].

literature is focused on virtual worlds (with the exception of first-person shooter *Battlefield 1942* in Manninen and Kujanpää¹³²), highlighting the dearth of research concerning avatar appearance in single-player games. Indeed, evidence may be found that supports Newman's¹³³ argument for the inconsequence of avatar appearance in single-player games despite the aforementioned literature on virtual worlds showing players can and do care about how their avatar is presented to other human-controlled avatars.

¹³² Manninen and Kujanpää, Ref. 82.

¹³³ Newman, ref. 80.

2.4 Narrative, bleed and avatars

This subchapter briefly examines some of the literature concerning the relationship between avatar and the narrative mechanics of digital games. In traditional entertainment media, the relationship between audience and text is primarily linear, with the audience being unable to change or reconstruct the content of books or movies¹³⁴. Lee, Park and Jin describe digital games as being fundamentally different from traditional media, interactivity between game and player has blurred the line between audience and creator. Murray believes the transformational capabilities of digital media outstrip the narrative capabilities of books and movies because individuals interpret events in digital media as personal experiences¹³⁵. Through participating in stories rather than passively consuming them, individuals can experience narrative that is more powerful than through traditional media.

Consequently, there has been some work on the types of narratives that games can offer and their unique properties. Salen and Zimmerman noted that games can contain embedded or emergent narrative structures¹³⁶. Embedded narrative is defined by Whitehead as the “pre-generated narrative content that exists prior to a player’s interaction with the game” and is “often used to provide the fictional background for the game, motivation for actions in the game, and development of story arc”¹³⁷. This covers apparent narrative content such as back-story and cutscenes, and also the text used in menus, character dialogue, item descriptions, and anything else that was designed to convey part of the story to players.

According to Whitehead, emergent narrative “arises from the player’s interaction with the game world, designed levels, [and] rule structure”, is the “moment-by-moment play in the game that creates this emergent narrative” and “varies from play session to play session, depending on [the] user’s action”¹³⁸. For example, although players in *Fallout 3* spend a lot of time engaging with pre-written quests (embedded narrative), the story the player creates whilst wandering between those quests, fighting and overcoming the obstacles they

¹³⁴ Lee, M.L., Park, N. & Jin, S. Narrative and Interactivity in Computer Games. In: Bryant, J. & Vorderer, P. *Playing Video Games: Motives, Responses and Consequences*, 2006, 304-322.

¹³⁵ Murray, ref. 31 p.171.

¹³⁶ Salen, K & Zimmerman, E. Ref. 20, pp.382-385.

¹³⁷ Whitehead, J. *Narrative in Game [slides]*.

<<http://classes.soe.ucsc.edu/cmpps080k/Winter07/lectures/narrative.pdf>>, 2007, [accessed 31.10.11].

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

encounter are examples of emergent narrative. The playing experience combines both of these types of narrative as they are present in most games to different degrees.

Emergent narratives suggest choice and flexibility, something researchers have come to associate with projective identity. For example, Waggoner's results also uncovered his participants' attitudes to narratives in games. Participants experienced with RPGs prioritised exploring the emergent properties of the narrative that *Morrowind* offers; as opposed to following the main quest, they decided to shape their own adventure¹³⁹. Such freedom baffled the expectations of a less experienced participant when faced with the wide open world of *Oblivion*. He followed the main quest; although he did not care about the narrative as such, he just wanted to "advance the game."¹⁴⁰

Narratives can provide players with a powerful emotional motivation to play games; according to Klimmt and Vorderer, compelling narratives and player investment in characters encourages the player's desire to succeed¹⁴¹. The role of open avatars, closed avatars and non-player characters in game narrative have been championed by scholars and game developers, including TV writer/producer and game designer Sheldon who argues that player-controlled characters and non-player characters can function as a focus for the emotions of the player and provide the conflict needed to drive players forward¹⁴². In her analysis of role-playing games *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Mass Effect 2*, Jorgensen agreed with Sheldon that both player characters and other characters serve to progress narratives, though companion non-player characters have a more important role¹⁴³. The characters Alastair and Morrigan in *DA: O* both have their own motivations for helping the player character, with their reactions to key events shaping the choices available to the player. Narrative control is removed from the player without making the player feel powerless.

¹³⁹ Waggoner, ref. 15, pp.91-92.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.122.

¹⁴¹ Klimmt, C. & Vorderer, P. Media psychology "is not yet there": introducing theories on media entertainment to the presence debate. *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments - Fourth international workshop on presence*, 12(4), 346-359. <<http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/105474603322391596>>, 2003, [accessed 11.05.12].

¹⁴² Sheldon, L. *Character Development and Storytelling for Games*, 2004, pp.42-59.

¹⁴³ Jørgensen, K. Game Characters as Narrative Devices: A Comparative Analysis of *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Mass Effect 2*. *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture [online]*, 4(2), 315-331, <<http://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/viewArticle/vol4no2-13/192>>, 2010, [accessed 11.05.12].

In *Mass Effect 2* the non-player character companions the player character picks up on their preparations for a suicide mission tell their stories delivering micro-narratives describing major life events and their motivations. Jorgensen argues that due to the positioning of the player characters in the narrative, and the affordances granted to them by the interface to shape the narrative (e.g. dialogue options), there is room for players to interpret the characters they control. Jorgensen believes *DA: O* presents the avatar as a blank canvas inviting the player to become emotionally invested and more personally involved than in *ME2* where the character can be seen as a defined individual set apart from the player.

Waern also examined *DA: O*, this time through the online writings of players who discuss their experiences of the romance narrative options associated with various non-player character companions. She argues that narrative design choices in the game promote bleed-in and bleed-out (where players experience the emotions of their characters)¹⁴⁴. Bleed is a term used in the Nordic Live-Action Role-Playing (LARP) scene, defined by the Vi åker jeep designer collective to describe when players bring elements of their personality into the portrayal of their character:

*Bleed is experienced by a player when her thoughts and feelings are influenced by those of her character, or vice versa. With increasing bleed, the border between player and character becomes more and more transparent. [...] Bleed is instrumental for horror role-playing: It is often harder to scare the player through the character than the other way around. [...] A classic example of bleed is when a player's affection for another player carries over into the game or influences her character's perception of the other's character.*¹⁴⁵

This form of identification with a character during role-play is supported by projective identity which Waern believes creates a ground for bleed to take place in¹⁴⁶. In Waern's findings, bleed-in (a player's identity affects the role they are playing) is encouraged by players being able to choose which character to romance, and by tying the two primary wooable characters into the main plot line. Combined with a vaguely sketched player-character allowing for players to fill with their own voice, Waern believes this is what lead to some

¹⁴⁴ Waern, A. "I'm in love with someone that doesn't exist!!" *Bleed in the Context of a Computer Game*. [Paper presented at the Nordic DiGRA Conference, Stockholm, August 16-17, p.6] <<http://www.digra.org/dl/db/10343.00215.pdf>>, 2010, [accessed 11.05.12].

¹⁴⁵ Vi åker jeep. *Jeep form*. <<http://jeepen.org/dict/>>, 2007, [accessed 11.05.12].

¹⁴⁶ Waern, ref. 144.

players “falling in love” with certain companions. Some of Waern’s participants refused to date the same character twice in two separate playthroughs because they felt like it would be cheating on their first character, revealing how the emotions of player and character become blurred.

Previous research has shown that narratives and non-player characters can evoke strong reactions in players, although there is a great deal of variance in how they approach and interpret narrative elements. It is through interacting with dialogue interfaces and non-player characters that players get to influence narratives in RPGs, developing their projective identities and providing the catalyst for bleed-in and bleed-out in the process.

2.5 The ethics and morality of avatars

2.5.1 Introduction

There are many ways to approach the question of ethics and morality of digital games, it is a subject that looms large over game-oriented academic research and generates interest from psychologists, philosophers, game developers and news outlets. Firstly, the definition used in this study follows that of digital games philosopher Sicart, who defines ethics as “a system or set of moral values, and the tools for analysing these values”¹⁴⁷, whilst morals are “the right or wrong of actions or objects”¹⁴⁸. These terms are often used interchangeably in the literature as is the case in this study. Secondly, in order to evaluate participant insights into moral management the following review features existing literature on the moral development of players.

In the 1980s digital games were added to the list of catalysts for moral panic alongside *Dungeons and Dragons*¹⁴⁹, television¹⁵⁰ and Elvis Presley’s hips¹⁵¹. The allegedly deleterious effects of violent games on society and tragic events in which digital games are implicated continue to generate controversy. In order to explore the concerns over the potential influence digital games may have over children and adults, there is a growing body of research devoted entirely to assessing how gaming environments are perceived, and the mechanisms behind player aggression in games.

There is currently no consensus on the effects of violent games on the aggression and moral development of users, with some scholars such as Anderson and Bushman¹⁵² claiming their meta-analysis of the literature is conclusive proof that games have a harmful effect. On the

¹⁴⁷ Sicart, M. *The ethics of computer games*, 2009, p.4.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ Waldron, D. Role-Playing Games and the Christian Right: Community Formation in Response to a Moral Panic. *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture [online]*, 9, <<http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art9-roleplaying-print.html>>, 2005, [accessed 08.02.12].

¹⁵⁰ Thompson, K. *Moral Panics*, 1998, p. 128.

¹⁵¹ Garland, D. On the concept of moral panic. *Crime Media Culture*, 4(9),13, <<http://cmc.sagepub.com/content/4/1/9>>, 2008, [accessed 08.02.12].

¹⁵² Anderson C. A., & Bushman B.J. Effects of violent video games on aggressive behavior, aggressive cognition, aggressive affect, physiological arousal, and prosocial behavior: a meta-analytic review of the scientific literature. *Psychological Science*, 12(5). 353-359. <<http://www.soc.iastate.edu/sapp/VideoGames1.pdf>>, 2001, [accessed 08.02.12].

other hand, Ferguson¹⁵³ vehemently rejects the findings of Anderson and Bushman, and also Huesmann¹⁵⁴, as “inconsistent and hampered by poor methodologies and the intrusion of ideology and scientific dogma”¹⁵⁵.

Players of violent games continue to play regardless of the debate, and according to Jansz, do not feel guilt over virtual acts of violence they have committed, enjoying the experience instead¹⁵⁶. When faced with justifying the violence and crime committed in *Morrowind*, *Oblivion* and *Fallout 3*, Waggoner’s participants chose to make a distinction between the game world and the real one in order to justify their avatar’s behaviour. This is not a new strategy, with the excuse that it “is just a game”, and therefore set apart from reality, being a popular justification amongst players^{157 158}.

Such justifications do not preclude moral or psychological repercussions and researchers are keen to examine what players are really feeling whilst playing games. Findings from Weber, Ritterfeld and Mathiak demonstrated an aggressive response to violence in games measured by monitoring participants in a functional magnetic resonance imaging scanner as played were playing a mature rated first person shooter. On the basis of their results, they argued that virtual aggression stimulates the brain in the same manner as real-life aggression¹⁵⁹.

¹⁵³ Ferguson, C. J. Video games and youth violence: a prospective analysis in adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 40(4), 377-391, <<http://www.tamtu.edu/~cferguson/Video%20Games%201%20Year.pdf>>, 2011, [accessed 08.02.12].

¹⁵⁴ Huesmann, L. R. The impact of electronic media violence: Scientific theory and research. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 41, S6-S13. <<http://www.rcgd.isr.umich.edu/aggr/articles/Huesmann/2007.Huesmann.ImpactOfElectronicMediaViol.JofAdolesHealth.pdf>>, 2007, [accessed 08.02.12].

¹⁵⁵ Ferguson, C. J. Blazing angels or resident evil? Can violent video games be a force for good? *Review of General Psychology*, 14(2), 68-81. <<http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/gpr-14-2-68.pdf>>, 2010, [accessed 08.02.12].

¹⁵⁶ Jansz, J. The Emotional Appeal of Violent Video Games for Adolescent Males. *Communication Theory*, 15(3), 219–241, <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2005.tb00334.x/abstract>>, 2005, [accessed 08.02.12].

¹⁵⁷ Hartmann, T., Toz, E. & Brandon, M. Just a Game? Unjustified Virtual Violence. *Media Psychology*, 13(4), p.354, <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15213269.2010.524912>>, 2010, [accessed 08.02.12].

¹⁵⁸ Waggoner, ref. 15, p.82.

¹⁵⁹ Webber, R., Ritterfeld, U. & Mathiak, K. Does playing violent video games induce aggression? Empirical evidence of a functional magnetic resonance imaging study. *Media*

Evidently there is an aggressive response happening in gamers, even though supposed relationships between in-game aggression and real-life violence have not been demonstrated. Scholars are currently working to ascertain the psychological mechanisms behind the aggression, to explain the attraction of violent games and also to ascertain how players commit virtual violence without regret¹⁶⁰.

2.5.2 Moral management in digital games

Firstly, how do players perceive characters in games? One perspective is that players perceive characters as social entities as opposed to 'inventory', game components or mere obstacles to be overcome as Ladas' participants claimed¹⁶¹. Another perspective comes from a multitude of studies that suggest game users respond to game characters as social actors. Nass and Moon reviewed a number of experimental studies on how users treated their computers, revealing that a broad range of social behaviours (such as ascribing human traits and characteristics to a computer) are automatically employed¹⁶². Yee et al. found that users of *Second Life* were replicating the same eye movements in their social interaction with other avatars that one would expect from a real-life meeting¹⁶³.

Garau et al's experiments in virtual environments showed that although participants knew they were not really dealing with people, they unconsciously respected some social

Psychology, 8(1), 39-60,

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1207/S1532785XMEP0801_4>, 2006, [accessed 08.02.12].

¹⁶⁰ Klimmt, C., Schmid, H., Nosper, A., Hartmann, T. & Vorderer, P. 'Moral Management': Dealing with Moral Concerns to Maintain Enjoyment of Violent Video Games, In Jahn-Sudmann, A. & Stockmann, R., eds. *Computer Games as a Sociocultural Phenomenon: Games Without Frontiers War Without Tears*, 2008, p.108-118.

¹⁶¹ Ladas, M. Brutale Spiele(r)? Wirkung und Nutzung von Gewalt in Computerspielen. <<http://www.ladas.de/computerspiele/abstract.htm>>, 2002, [accessed 08.02.12].

¹⁶² Nass, C. & Moon, Y. Machines and mindlessness: Social responses to computers. *Journal of Social Issues*, 56(1), 81-103, <http://ldt.stanford.edu/~ejbailey/02_FALL/ED_147X/Readings/nass-JOSI.pdf>, 2000, [accessed 08.02.12].

¹⁶³ Yee, N., Bailenson, J.N., Urbanek, M., Chang, F. & Merget, D. The unbearable likeness of being digital: The persistence of nonverbal social norms in online virtual environments. *CyberPsychology & Behaviour*, 10(1), 115-121, <<http://vhil.stanford.edu/pubs/2007/ye-nonverbal.pdf>>, 2007, [accessed 08.02.12].

norms¹⁶⁴. Bailenson et al. found that users of a virtual environment would keep their distance from avatars in accordance with established observations (e.g. keeping further away from a human when approaching their front as opposed to their back), whilst keeping their distance from avatars that gazed directly at them¹⁶⁵. They propose that for low level responses (e.g. reflexes) users treat the virtual environment as they would a real environment, yet for high level processes such as conversation they are aware of the differences.

In accordance with player testimonies referring to their awareness of the artificiality of their environments, and the automatic responses observed in the literature, Hartmann and Vorderer propose that players perceive non-player characters as social on some level, despite never entirely forgetting entirely that the characters are not real¹⁶⁶. A player successfully entertaining themselves in a violent RPG co-mingles their automatic social and moral processes with an awareness of the artificiality of their situation (although this awareness may change as automatic responses override this knowledge).

In an attempt to uncover the limits of acceptable virtual violence whereby the automatic moral response of guilt is elicited in players, Hartmann, Toz and Brandon conducted two studies¹⁶⁷. The first (also reported by Hartman and Vorderer¹⁶⁸) used a modified version of *Operation Flashpoint* where players were cast as either UN soldiers tasked with liberating a torture camp (the justified virtual violence), or as a soldier from the paramilitary forces operating the camp who must defend against the UN (unjustified virtual violence). Players

¹⁶⁴ Garau, M., Slater, M., Pertaub, D.P. & Razzaque, S. 2005. The responses of people to virtual humans in an immersive virtual environment. *Presence*, 14(1), 104-116. <<http://eprints.ucl.ac.uk/688/1/688.pdf>>, 2005, [accessed 08.02.12].

¹⁶⁵ Bailenson, J.N., Blascovich, J., Beall, A.C., & Loomis, J.M. 2003. Interpersonal distance in immersive virtual environments. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 29, 819-833. <<http://www.recveb.ucsb.edu/pdfs/BailensonBlascovichBeallLoomis-02.pdf>>, 2003, [accessed 08.02.12].

¹⁶⁶ Hartmann, T. & Vorderer, P. It's Okay to Shoot a Character: Moral Disengagement in Violent Video Games. *Journal of Communication*, 60(1), p.96-97, <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2009.01459.x/full>>, 2010, [accessed 08.02.12].

¹⁶⁷ Hartmann, Toz & Brandon, ref.157.

¹⁶⁸ Hartmann & Vorderer, ref.166.

who engaged in unjustified virtual violence reported higher levels of guilt whilst players with higher trait empathy appeared to experience this guilt more keenly¹⁶⁹.

A second study using a custom-built FPS tested if shooting an NPC whose social background is known results in higher levels of guilt than shooting those whose background is not known¹⁷⁰. Participants who were briefed on the social background of their targets reported higher levels of guilt upon killing them than participants who did not see the whole briefing. Again, players with higher trait empathy scores reported higher levels of guilt than those with lower scores. Such guilt responses match previous studies on real world violence which demonstrate empathic people feel more guilt over violence¹⁷¹, whilst moral justification of violence can reduce associated guilt¹⁷².

These results show that if players have an automatic reaction to certain violent acts, the discomfort and self-condemnation initially experienced cannot be immediately reasoned away. Moral reasoning could therefore threaten the pleasurable experience of playing a digital game if such reasoning triggered feelings of guilt and remorse. This has given rise to moral management theory by Klimmt et al¹⁷³, who apply Bandura's theory of moral disengagement¹⁷⁴ in real life aggression to the context of digital games in order to explain why virtual violence is enjoyable despite any moral concerns it may raise.

Moral disengagement is a theory where "moral reasoning is linked to moral action through affective self-regulatory mechanisms by which moral agency is exercised"¹⁷⁵. Bandura describes moral standards as guides and deterrents for conduct, where people monitor their "conduct and the conditions under which it occurs, judge it in relation to their moral

¹⁶⁹ Hartmann, Toz & Brandon, ref.157, p.348.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.350.

¹⁷¹ Bandura, A. Selective Moral Disengagement in the Exercise of Moral Agency. *Journal of Moral Education*, 31(2), 103-104, <<http://www.des.emory.edu/mfp/Bandura2002JME.pdf>>, 2002, [accessed 08.02.12].

¹⁷² Lamek, S. Individual Violence Justification Strategies. In: Heitmeyer, W. & Hagan, J., eds. *International handbook of violence research*, Vol 2, 2003, pp.1113-1128.

¹⁷³ Klimmt, et al., ref. 160.

¹⁷⁴ Bandura, ref. 171.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.102.

standards and perceived circumstances, and regulate their actions by the consequences they apply to themselves.”¹⁷⁶

Negative self sanctions are associated with self condemnation for violations of moral code, whilst following moral code provides satisfaction and a sense of self worth. Bandura concludes that “morality is thus rooted in a self-reactive selfhood rather than in dispassionate abstract reasoning”.¹⁷⁷ He also theorises that moral standards are changeable, as self sanctions can be disengaged from actions through the use of various disengagement strategies at different points in the self-regulatory process (see Figure 6)¹⁷⁸.

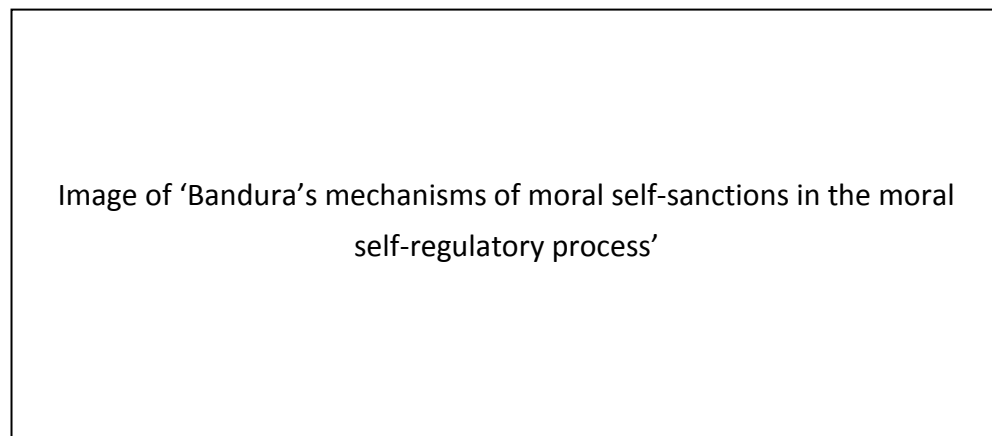


Figure 6 – Bandura's mechanisms of moral self-sanctions in the moral self-regulatory process¹⁷⁹

It is apparent from the findings of Hartmann et al. that games have the capacity to reduce or increase guilt in players, even in those who score highly on trait empathy. According to Klimmt et al, there a variety of cues that can be used to trigger the mechanisms of moral disengagement.

- Games often provide *moral justification* for violence in a narrative framework.
- Euphemistic labelling of violent action used by military forces to stimulate moral disengagement in soldiers are also used in games e.g. 'surgical strikes' for bombing, 'collateral damage' for civilian casualties, 'friendly fire' for targeting one's own troops.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.103

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

- *Advantageous comparison* in games allows players to compare their own actions to those of another social agent. Games are full of violent characters and creatures which make the actions of players often look moderate.
- Games also employ the *diffusion of responsibility* strategy through using higher powers (intelligence agencies, government figures) to relay orders that require violent action on to players.
- Violent games also sidestep guilt by *disregarding injurious consequences* by not representing the family and friends of fallen enemies.
- *Dehumanisation of victims* in violent games can occur in many ways, typically through monstrous disfigurement, or anonymisation and homogenisation of enemy troops.
- The *attribution of blame* strategy works through establishing situations where the player had no other choice but to defend themselves and where enemies are portrayed as committing unjustified violence¹⁸⁰.

Out of these strategies, dehumanisation in games has received the most attention. Greitemeyer and McLatchie report that dehumanisation of “other people” is more likely to occur immediately after playing violent video games¹⁸¹. Unfortunately, they conflate any deindividuation inherent in the act of judging social groups and anonymous revenge against an unknown critic (which according to them is interpersonal interaction), with dehumanisation on an individual-to-individual level which their research data does cover. Bastian and Haslam take a different approach, examining the dehumanisation inherent in the violent gameplay experience rather than in real-world interactions¹⁸². Their results indicate that players not only dehumanise their virtual opponents, but also rate themselves lower on qualities such as empathy and openness.

¹⁸⁰ Klimmt et al., ref. 160, p.116.

¹⁸¹ Greitemeyer, T. & McLatchie, N. Denying Humanness to Others: A Newly Discovered Mechanism by Which Violent Games Increase Aggressive Behavior. *Psychological Science*, 22(5), 659-665, <http://kent.academia.edu/NeilMcLatchie/Papers/596599/Denying_Humanness_to_Others>, 2011, [accessed 08.02.12].

¹⁸² Bastian, B., Jetten, J. & Radke, H.R.M. Cyber-dehumanization: Violent video game play diminishes our humanity. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* [in press], <<http://www2.psy.uq.edu.au/~uqbbast1/Bastian%20et%20al%20JESP%20in%20press.pdf>>, 2012, [accessed 08.02.12].

2.5.3 Conclusions

The results so far indicate that physiologically there is an aggressive response from gamers in response to violent situations in games, that players use moral management to somehow regulate their responses to virtual violence, and that individuals can perceive themselves and their 'human' qualities as different when playing compared to how they behave outside of games. There are also suggestions in the literature that ethical digital game content can be designed to elicit a particular response from players.

Sicart argues that game designers instil their creations with their own values and ethics through their narrative writing and the mechanics they implement¹⁸³. This is directly relevant to Gee's concept of projective identity because anything the designer puts into the game will contribute towards the virtual identity of the avatar, which the player then interacts with to create a projective identity¹⁸⁴. The player can only make the ethical choices afforded to them by the game system, which is dictated by the game designer. They must also negotiate and concede aspects of their real life identity through moral disengagement in order to continue to identify with the ethics of the game itself.

Aside from Waggoner's brief examination of the in-game moral decisions of his participants from a phenomenological perspective¹⁸⁵, the lived experience of moral management and its influence on the formation of a projective identity has been under-reported, meaning there is an opportunity to address the mechanics of disengagement in a larger group of people and to see what commonalities or differences emerge in their strategies.

¹⁸³ Sicart, M. The Ethics of Computer Game Design. [Paper presented at *DiGRA 2005 Conference: Changing Views – Worlds in Play*. Vancouver: University of Vancouver, June 16-20 2005, 1-15] <<http://www.digra.org/dl/db/06276.55524.pdf>>, [accessed 08.02.12].

¹⁸⁴ Gee, ref. 1, p.55.

¹⁸⁵ Waggoner, ref. 15.

2.6 Information practices, building avatar attributes and projective identity

2.6.1 Introduction

According to Salen and Zimmerman¹⁸⁶, information is pervasive in the operation of digital games, yet this is a poorly understood area in terms of its application to the development and progression of avatars and characters. The main argument is that the research community should consider the information seeking habits of gamers as constituting a crucial part of the activities that contribute to the production of projective identities.

2.6.2 Information practices for leisure pursuits

Reviewing the information seeking associated with a leisure pursuit takes us into the field of Every-day Life Information Seeking (ELIS) as originally defined by Savolainen as “the ways in which people acquire information in non-work contexts”¹⁸⁷. This also includes every-day information practices, defined as “a set of socially and culturally established ways to identify, seek, use, and share the information available in various sources such as television, newspapers and the Internet.”¹⁸⁸ Traditionally, studies on information seeking focused on work-related contexts, however, ELIS is representative of a movement towards investigating how social and physical worlds shape the information seeking habits of group/community members. Major life events such as pregnancy¹⁸⁹ or illness¹⁹⁰ were amongst the first issues to be investigated concerning ELIS, however, recently leisure pursuits and their associated information practices are starting to be investigated. Existing studies cover information seeking related to paranormal investigation¹⁹¹, knitting¹⁹², backpacking¹⁹³ and gourmet cooking¹⁹⁴.

¹⁸⁶ Salen & Zimmerman, ref.20, p.204.

¹⁸⁷ Savolainen, R. *Everyday Information Practices*, 2008, p.v.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.2-3.

¹⁸⁹ McKenzie, P. J. A model of information practices in accounts of everyday-life information seeking. *Journal of documentation*, 59(1), 19-40.
<http://publish.uwo.ca/~pmckenzi/McKenzie_J.Doc_2003.pdf>, 2003, [accessed 11.05.12].

¹⁹⁰ Carey, R.F., McKechnie, L.E.F. & McKenzie, P. Gaining access to everyday life information seeking. *Library & information science research*, 23(4), 319-334.
<<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0740818801000925>>, 2001, [accessed 11.05.12].

¹⁹¹ Kari, J. *Information seeking and interest in the paranormal*. PhD Thesis, University of Tampere, Finland, <<http://acta.uta.fi/pdf/951-44-5134-1.pdf>>, 2001, [accessed 11.05.12].

Many of the studies that have touched upon information seeking and use for digital games do so in an attempt to inform librarians and educators on the information literacy of adolescents so that they might design information literacy games. For example, Gumulak and Webber found that adolescents perceived that they could learn from playing digital games and they used a variety of sources to solve gaming problems¹⁹⁵. With the possibility that games can be used to teach information literacy, Schiller made the case that lessons used in the development of levels for first-person puzzle game *Portal* can be used by librarians and teacher to develop their own games¹⁹⁶, and Kirriemur reports on games being developed for use in North American libraries¹⁹⁷. Markey et al., however, have shown that librarians do not always meet with success in implementing such games¹⁹⁸.

¹⁹² Prigoda, E. & McKenzie, P.J. Purls of wisdom: A collectivist study of human information behaviour in a public library knitting group. *Journal of Documentation*, 63(1), 90-114, <<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/journals.htm?articleid=1589319>>, 2007, [accessed 11.05.12].

¹⁹³ Chang, S. & Su, H. The concepts of task and sources of information in leisure activities: a case study of backpackers. *Proceedings of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 44, 1-8, <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/meet.1450440263/abstract>>, 2008, [accessed 11.05.12].

¹⁹⁴ Hartel, J. *Time as a framework for information science: insights from the hobby of gourmet cooking*. Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on Conceptions of Library and Information Science—"Unity in diversity" — Part 2. Published in *Information Research*, 15(4), <<http://informationr.net/ir/15-4/colis715.html>>, 2010, [accessed 11.05.12].

¹⁹⁵ Gumulak, S. & Webber, S. Playing video games: learning and information literacy. *Aslib Proceedings: New Information Perspectives*, 63(2/3), 241-255, <<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/journals.htm?articleid=1923904>>, 2011, [accessed 11.05.12].

¹⁹⁶ Schiller, N. A portal to student learning: what instruction librarians can learn from video game design. *Reference Services Review*, 36(4), 351-365, <<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/journals.htm?articleid=1752411&show=abstract>>, 2008, [accessed 11.05.12].

¹⁹⁷ Kirriemur, J. Teaching information literacy through digital games. In: Godwin, P & Parker, J. Eds. *Information Literacy Meets Library 2.0*, 2008, pp.153-164.

¹⁹⁸ Markey, K., et al. The effectiveness of a web-based board game for teaching undergraduate students information literacy concepts and skills. *D-Lib Magazine [online]*, September/October 2008, 14(9), <<http://www.dlib.org/dlib/september08/markey/09markey.html>>, 2008, [accessed 11.05.12].

Adams conducted the first study to use models developed in the area of everyday-life information seeking and apply them to digital games¹⁹⁹. In trying to establish how players get the information they need to succeed in a game, Adams applied McKenzie's²⁰⁰ model of information practices to her observations of superhero-themed MMORPG *City of Heroes*.

1. *Active seeking* being the most directed phase of McKenzie's model, involving users specifically seek out a previously identified source and also enact pre-planned questioning strategies. Adams observed players asking questions on forums, consulting non-player characters, and checking the manual.
2. *Active scanning* involves semi-directed browsing or scanning likely locations. In MMORPGs, this might include scanning the in-game environment, or reading through forums.
3. *Non-directed monitoring* is serendipitously encountering and recognising sources. This accounted for much of Adams' understanding of the mechanics and user interface of *City of Heroes*.
4. *By proxy* is where another individual identifies you as an information seeker and directs you to a source. Adams found that non-player characters often fulfilled the role of the proxy.

Progress through games therefore requires players to recognise and process information embedded in the user-interface, game world environment and through interacting with non-player characters²⁰¹.

2.6.3 Information use for avatar and character creation

The few studies that concern information practices and digital games do not focus on avatar and character creation, or on developing that character over the course of their life cycle. To see how paratexts (terminology for the texts that surround and support games, films, books that aid with or may change a reader's interpretation of the text that is the subject of the

¹⁹⁹ Adams, S. A. What Games Have to Offer: Information Behavior and Meaning-Making in Virtual Play Spaces. *Library Trends*, 57(4), 676-693, <<https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/13655/57.4.adams.pdf?sequence=2>>, 2009, [accessed 11.05.12].

²⁰⁰ McKenzie, ref. 189.

²⁰¹ Adams, ref. 199.

paratext)²⁰² might be used for such a purpose, the work on other game platforms will be examined. Bowman's ethnographic treatment of role-playing games focuses predominantly on table-top RPGs and Live Action RPGs, finding that gamers use paratexts in a variety of ways to develop their character concept and perhaps achieve a deeper understanding of the character they seek to portray²⁰³. Such gamers used journals to collect together information and develop a biography for their characters using a variety of sources such as photographs of models of celebrities for reference, alternate versions of myths and history books to gather background for the relevant time period. Fine also noted that participants in his research also used magazine articles to refine the technical features of game mechanics (e.g. the progression of lycanthropy or the weight of medieval armour). Bowman, in agreement with Fine²⁰⁴, noted that players do not necessarily always put a large amount of research into their character concepts, instead preferring to "throw together"²⁰⁵ the bare bones of a personality and background.

In maintaining the role-playing persona players must also distinguish between the information they are ordinarily aware of and what their character has access to by choosing to ignore or suppress certain items²⁰⁶ ²⁰⁷. Restrictions on information considered appropriate within a game influence the power of individual players within table-top and live-action RPGs²⁰⁸, but status and power is not entirely determined by a game master; a player who volunteers arcane knowledge and uses this to their advantage may gain authority in the eyes of others²⁰⁹. Digital single-player RPGs and MMORPGs lack the

²⁰² Consalvo, M. *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*, 2009, pp.8-9.

²⁰³ Bowman, S. L. *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity*, 2010, pp.161-163.

²⁰⁴ Fine, G. A. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*, 1983, p.216.

²⁰⁵ Bowman, ref. 203, p.161.

²⁰⁶ Waskul, D. & Lust, M. Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing. *Symbolic Interaction*, 27(3), 333–356, <<http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.1525/si.2004.27.3.333?uid=3738032&uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=56172033603>>, 2004, [accessed 11.05.12].

²⁰⁷ Fine, ref. 204.

²⁰⁸ Montola, M. The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing: the Social Framework of Role-Playing Process. *The International Journal of Role-Playing*. 1(1), 22-36, <http://marinkacopier.nl/ijrp/wp-content/uploads/2009/01/montola_the_invisible_rules_of_role_playing.pdf>, 2009, [accessed 11.05.12].

²⁰⁹ Henry, L. *Group Narration: Power, Information, and Play in Role Playing Games*. <<http://www.darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/theory/liz-paper-2003/>>, 2003, [accessed 11.05.12].

collaboratively-defined structure of table-top RPGs, but locating and utilising information is still one of the main components of gaming capital, a concept defined by Consalvo²¹⁰. Gaming capital is “being knowledgeable about game secrets and releases, and passing it on to others”²¹¹, and as such is more than just about being able to play a game well. It is the pursuit of reputation and status that compels much of the industry behind theory crafting, one of the most understood aspects of game-related ELIS.

2.6.4 Power gamers and theory crafting

Taylor’s ethnographic investigation of *EverQuest* highlighted the goal oriented play style of power gamers, describing them as “particularly attuned to making the most of their time in the game and so undertake actions to produce efficient reward paths.”²¹² The power gamer mentality is oriented towards a quantitative efficiency that drives players to learn from their mistakes, and produces what are often considered the best guides on the internet full of “rich accounts of how to handle a monster or zone that specify down to the very pacing of the encounter how to proceed”²¹³. Because such players are constantly evaluating, planning and organising their game sessions, a broad knowledge base has developed including message boards, walkthroughs and websites that act as catalogues for in-game items and monsters²¹⁴.

This power gaming mindset has given rise to “theorycrafting”, where strategies for gaming are constructed through analysis of the rules and responses of a game. Christian likens it to “using math to guide your choices, instead of simply playing from your gut”²¹⁵ whilst Paul defines it as the process by which strategies are “designed around the mathematical analysis of *WoW*, is a discursive construct predicated on advising players how to optimally ‘play’ *WoW*, suggesting what equipment to wear, what talents to choose, and an order in which to

²¹⁰ Consalvo, ref. 202, p.18.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² Taylor, T. L. *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*, 2006, p.73.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p.74.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.81.

²¹⁵ Christian, C. *Encrypted Text: The fuzzy math of theorycrafting*.

<<http://wow.ioystiq.com/2008/10/22/encrypted-text-the-fuzzy-math-of-theorycrafting/>>, 2008, [accessed 11.05.12].

cast spells”²¹⁶. Like many of the terms that began through internet culture, the origins of “theorycraft” is unclear, with WoWWiki²¹⁷ and Urban dictionary²¹⁸ claiming it as beginning with the analysis by competitive players over the mechanics of Starcraft, and was born from an amalgamation of “Starcraft” and “theory”. What is clear, however, is that it is a large driving force behind the metagaming scene associated with *World of Warcraft*, and motivates the production of many of the game’s paratexts²¹⁹. The discussion of the mechanical processes of *WoW* in such paratexts have ultimately lead to change in how the game itself is approached by new and experienced players.

The need to develop a system for the fair distribution of stat-boosting equipment as a result of long-term group effort has lead to the development and the evolution of dragon kill points (most commonly referred to as DKP in-world)²²⁰. Once the “end-game”, or the end of the levelling process has been reached for players, their focus shifts to developing their avatars by gaining new items, and displaying such equipment is a sign of rank and privilege in the gaming world. How often, though, do gamers pursue such efficiency, and how avatars can be viewed almost entirely in terms of their base numerical elements?

2.6.5 Attribute development and resource management for projective identities

Although stats-building coupled with resource management emerged as a major theme in the research, numerous searches have failed to produce as substantial a body of literature on this aspect of avatar development as compared to the other major themes of the research. References that have been found suggest that this theme might be one of the main drivers for game-related information-seeking, hence the themes being subsumed into the information practices section of the literature review.

²¹⁶ Paul, C. A. Optimizing Play: How Theorycraft Changes Gameplay and Design. *The international journal of computer game research*, 11(2), <<http://gamestudies.org/1102/articles/paul>>, 2011, [accessed 11.05.12].

²¹⁷ WoWWiki. *Theorycraft*. <<http://www.wowwiki.com/Theorycraft>>, 2011, [accessed 11.05.12].

²¹⁸ Urban Dictionary. *Theorycraft*. <<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=theorycraft>>, 2011, [accessed 11.05.12].

²¹⁹ Paul, ref. 216.

²²⁰ Silverman, M. & Simon, B. Discipline and Dragon Kill Points in the Online Power Game. *Games and Culture*, 4(4), 353-378, <<http://gac.sagepub.com/content/4/4/353.short>>, 2009, [accessed 08.02.12].

Ernest Adams believes that avatars in games can have their attributes divided into functional (those that affect the gameplay) and cosmetic (those that do not affect the gameplay) attributes²²¹. Functional attributes “influence the gameplay through interactions with the core mechanics”²²², and can be divided into characterisation attributes (define fundamental aspects of a character, changing slowly or not at all) and status attributes that give the current status of a character and change frequently²²³. Classic RPG characterisation attributes include strength, dexterity, intelligence, wisdom, charisma and constitution. They each have an impact on a particular facet of the avatars capacity to deal damage, influence NPCs, take damage, carry items, and so on. Therefore, when a player chooses how to balance their starting attributes, it can determine the strengths and weaknesses of their character, and may influence the types of items they prefer to outfit their avatar with in order to boost those base attributes.

According to the strategies adopted by power gamers, players would choose attributes, class systems and equipment to maximise their efficiency, however Waggoner’s research suggests that a variety of motivations can come into play²²⁴. Gamers may choose to emphasise traits they ascribe to their real personalities or ones they aspire to, and select equipment without entirely considering the equipment not for their functional attributes, but for their aesthetic attributes. The existing literature paints many gamers as either casual or number-obsessed and efficiency driven with entirely rational thought processes when it comes to their avatars statistical development. In any examination of projective identity, the statistical development of avatars must therefore be considered, but the non-rational and impulsive decisions of gamers that do not necessarily contribute to their characters efficiency must also be paid attention to in order for us to attain a balanced view of player habits.

2.6.6 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that information plays a key role in gaming society and the playing of games, and avatars can be viewed as reducible to attributes and formula. It is also the quantitative information associated with avatars attributes that much of the power

²²¹ Adams, E. *Fundamentals of Game Design*, 2010, p.116.

²²² *Ibid.*

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ Waggoner, ref. 15, p.146.

gaming mindset revolves around, which in turn fuels the need for paratexts that enable players to maximise their efficiency.

The focus on the information consumption of power gamers and their numbers-oriented play-style has overlooked the nuances possible in player identity construction hinted at by Waggoner²²⁵. This thesis contributes towards a greater understanding of the factors that inform the construction of projective identities by analysing the information practices participants described, along with their chosen strategies for the statistical development of avatars.

This literature review has been carried out in response to the main themes that emerged from participants' interviews so that the findings can be discussed in relation to the existing body of literature. Issues relating to avatar appearance, attribute customisation and resource management, morality and ethics in digital games, narrative mechanics and information practices have been highlighted that will give context to the findings of this project presented in later chapters.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

Chapter 3: Research methodology

3.1 Introduction

In the first year of this study, a gap in the literature was identified concerning the customisation of avatars and the meaning of these options to game players. From this review, the research aims and objectives were derived. This chapter describes how the research was conducted, detailing the philosophy, research design and techniques used to collect and analyse data. The research techniques used were interviews and thematic analysis. Matters surrounding the pilot study, validity of data, research sampling, and ethics will also be discussed.

3.2 Research philosophy

Amongst the research community there is much debate over the nature of the world, the manner in which individuals acquire knowledge and the impact these matters have over the rules and procedures used to carry out research. The difference in opinion has led to different 'worldviews'²²⁶ or 'paradigms'²²⁷. Creswell defines these world views as "a general orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher holds"²²⁸. The worldview was dissected into three aspects by Lincoln and Guba: the ontological, the epistemological, and the methodological²²⁹. These components have been defined as the following by authors who have sought to explain methodology and theory:

Epistemology:

- The nature of knowledge and the relationship between the knower and the would-be known²³⁰.
- The relationship of the knower to the known; the nature of knowledge and its justification²³¹.

²²⁶ Creswell, J. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 3rd ed., p.6.

²²⁷ Mertens, D. *Research and Evaluation in Education and Psychology: Integrating Diversity with Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methods*. 2nd edition., 2004, p.7.

²²⁸ Creswell, ref. 226, p.6.

²²⁹ Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E.G. *Naturalistic Inquiry*, 1985, p.18.

²³⁰ Mertens, ref. 227, p.8.

²³¹ Teddlie, C. & Tashakkori, A. *Foundations of Mixed Methods Research: Integrating Quantitative And Qualitative Approaches In The Social And Behavioral Sciences*, 2008, p.86.

- How individuals know things and what can be regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline²³².
- What human knowledge is, what it entails, and what status can be ascribed to it²³³.

The common elements of these definitions indicate that epistemology is primarily concerned with what knowledge is, how it is perceived and how knowledge can be assessed.

Ontology:

- The nature of reality²³⁴
- The nature of reality, being, and truth²³⁵.
- It is concerned with 'what is', with the nature of existence, with the structure of reality as such²³⁶.

These definitions appear to share the view that ontology is concerned with assumptions made about the nature of reality. Teddlie and Tashakkori, and Crotty elaborate on this, adding that ontology also concerns the state of existing in this reality, whilst they appear to differ on whether ontology includes how the truth is discerned, or how reality is structured.

Methodology:

- How the knower can go about obtaining knowledge and understanding²³⁷.
- A broad approach to scientific inquiry specifying how research questions should be asked and answered. This includes worldview considerations, general preferences for designs, sampling logic, data collection and analytical strategies, guidelines for making inferences, and the criteria for assessing and improving quality²³⁸.
- A body of methods, rules and postulates employed by a discipline²³⁹.

²³² Walliman, N. *Social Research Methods*, 2006, p. 15.

²³³ Crotty, M. *The Foundation of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process*, 1998, p.2.

²³⁴ Lincoln & Guba, Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences, *In: Lincoln, Y.S & Guba, E.G., eds. Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed., p. 168.

²³⁵ Teddlie & Tashakkori, ref. 13, p.86.

²³⁶ Crotty, ref. 233, p. 10.

²³⁷ Mertens, ref. 227, p. 8.

²³⁸ Teddlie & Tashakkori, ref. 235, p.21.

²³⁹ Merriam-Webster, Inc. *Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary*, <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/methodology>>, 2011, [accessed 22.01.10].

These three aspects are interrelated: decisions made regarding one of these three aspects can impact on the other two. According to Walliman, ontological issues inform the epistemological, because “philosophical positions and their attendant methodologies [...] hold a view about social reality [...]. This determines what can be regarded as legitimate knowledge. Thus the ontological shapes the epistemological”²⁴⁰. In turn both the ontological and epistemological influence the methodological approach^{241 242}.

Commonly used epistemological positions used by researchers are positivism and interpretivism. Walliman implies that the ontological position of objectivism is partnered with the epistemological position of positivism. Objectivism is defined as:

The belief that social phenomena and their meanings have an existence that is not dependent on social actor. They are facts that have an independent existence”²⁴³.

Positivism acknowledges that the world exists independently of people and can be defined as:

The application of the natural sciences to the study of social reality. An objective approach that can test theories and establish scientific laws. It aims to establish causes and effects.²⁴⁴

Positivism’s assertion that the social world may be examined in the same fashion as the natural world was discredited before World War II before being amended into post-positivism²⁴⁵. According to Crotty, post-positivism is much more modest, seeking only to approximate truth and does not aspire to absolute objectivity and certainty²⁴⁶.

Constructionism is another ontological position:

[It is] the belief that social phenomena are in a constant state of change because they are totally reliant on social interactions as they take place. Even the

²⁴⁰ Williams & May 1996, p.69 In: Walliman, ref. 232, p. 15.

²⁴¹ Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. *Research Methods in Education*, 5th ed., p. 6.

²⁴² Beynon-Davies, P. *Information Systems: an Introduction to Informatics in Organisations*, 2002, p.559.

²⁴³ Walliman, ref. 232, p.15.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.15.

²⁴⁵ Mertens, ref. 227, p.8.

²⁴⁶ Crotty, ref. 233, p.29.

*account of researchers is subject to these interactions, therefore social knowledge can only be indeterminate.*²⁴⁷

Its perspective of the world as being a subjective place with the possibility for people to assign different meanings to the same thing mean that constructionism can be paired with the epistemological position of interpretivism:

*The recognition that subjective meanings play a crucial role in social actions. It aims to reveal interpretations and meanings.*²⁴⁸

Ultimately, it is the research design which determines the rationale behind the methods chosen, and for this research that stance is interpretivism²⁴⁹.

3.2.1 Interpretivism

Bryman defines interpretivism as “the view that a strategy is required that respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action”²⁵⁰. Interpretivism is the anti-positivism epistemological position which holds the tenet that “our knowledge of reality is a social construct by human actors”²⁵¹. Therefore, it is associated with the belief that the social world requires a “different logic of research procedure”²⁵².

It is concerned with “the empathic understanding of human action rather than with the forces that are deemed to act on it.”²⁵³ According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison, theory does not precede interpretivist research, but follows it²⁵⁴. Therefore, interpretivism is inductive rather than deductive. There is no universal theory to be reached through

²⁴⁷ Walliman, ref. 232, p.15.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.15.

²⁴⁹ Crotty, ref. 233, p.7.

²⁵⁰ Bryman, A. *Social Research Methods*, 2008, p.16.

²⁵¹ Walsham, G. The Emergence of Interpretivism in IS Research. *Information Systems Research*, 6(4), p.376,

<<http://gkmc.utah.edu/7910F/papers/ISR%20emergence%20of%20interpretivism%20in%20IS%20research.pdf>>, 1995, [accessed 22.01.10].

²⁵² Bryman, ref. 250, p.15.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.15.

²⁵⁴ Cohen, Manion & Morrison, ref. 241, p.22.

interpretivism; instead there are only “multifaceted images of human behaviour as varied as the situations and contexts supporting them”²⁵⁵.

3.2.2 Phenomenology

This study uses a phenomenological approach called Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Before IPA is discussed in further detail, the evolution and properties of phenomenology will be explored. Creswell defines phenomenology as “a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants”²⁵⁶. It is generally recognised that phenomenology was started as a philosophical movement by 20th century philosopher Husserl^{257 258}. According to Smith, Flowers and Larkin, phenomenology was intended to help identify the “core structures and features of human experience”²⁵⁹. Husserl aimed to achieve this by going beyond the quantitative approaches that were dominating psychological investigation^{260 261}. He saw science as a second-order knowledge system that should depend upon first-order personal experience as documented in a phenomenological account. In Husserl’s opinion, phenomenological research was required before scientific investigation could begin²⁶².

There were several concepts key to executing phenomenology as Husserl prescribed it. The *natural attitude*, the everyday experience of researchers, needs to be *bracketed* so that the researcher might look beyond their outward prejudices and biases and adopt the *phenomenological attitude*²⁶³. This requires researchers to shift their view from the objects in the world to reflect inward “towards our perception of those objects”²⁶⁴ whilst attempting to perceive the “taken-for-granted experience of it”²⁶⁵. Husserl’s phenomenological inquiry focuses on what is experienced in the consciousness of the individual, and uses the concept of *intentionality* to describe the “relationship between the process occurring in

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.22.

²⁵⁶ Creswell, ref. 226, p.13.

²⁵⁷ Moran, D. *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 1999, p.60.

²⁵⁸ Langdrige, D. *Phenomenological Psychology: Theory, Research and Method*, p.10.

²⁵⁹ Smith, J., Flowers, P. & Larkin, M. *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*, p.13.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.12.

²⁶¹ Langdrige, ref. 258, p.11.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, p.15.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.12.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.12.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.13.

consciousness, and the object of attention for that process”²⁶⁶. The meaning of the term is best described by Smith, Flowers and Larkin:

*Note that the term intentionality is being used in a different way to its everyday meaning in English. If I say that my memory has an intentional relation to a car, I mean that my memory is oriented towards the car, that is, I am remembering it. I do not mean that I am mentally striving for that car to come into existence.*²⁶⁷

For the purpose of phenomenology, individuals are always conscious of something such as an object in the real world or through memory and imagination.

Another key theme of Husserl’s system was the use of *eidetic reduction* which followed bracketing. This involved using a series of lenses (different ways of thinking and reasoning) to consider the phenomenon. This sequence of reductions is intended to “lead the inquirer away from the distraction and misdirection of their own assumption and preconceptions, and back towards the essence of their experience of a given phenomenon”²⁶⁸. Through this process, Husserl hoped to get at the essence of an experience, to reach a set of properties that were invariant and could bypass the subjective perceptions of individuals. Ultimately, with few guidelines left behind, his philosophy was difficult for non-experts to implement. Other researchers, however, have taken up the mantle of phenomenology and have further developed it to suit their own perspectives on science and philosophy.

Heidegger, a student of Husserl, diverged from Husserl’s approach to phenomenology in order to provide some structure to phenomenology which in his view was too theoretical and too abstract²⁶⁹. He was concerned with the “ontological existence itself, and with the practical activities and relationships which we are caught up in, and through which the world appears to us, and is made meaningful”²⁷⁰. For Heidegger, the human condition is inextricably situated within the real world and the people, objects, language and culture within it²⁷¹. Another key concept of Heidegger’s phenomenology (similar to Husserl’s intentionality) is that human existence is always “perspectival, always temporal, and always

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.13.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.13.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.14.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.16.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.17.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.17.

in relation to something”²⁷² and, therefore, interpretation of people’s meaning-making activities is central to phenomenological inquiry.

One of Heidegger’s main contributions to phenomenology, however, was the use of the hermeneutic lens. Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation and Heidegger connected it to phenomenology by asserting that the interpretation of a text is the correct method for finding meaning²⁷³. Breaking down “phenomenology” in order to obtain an etymological definition, he obtained phenomena (which when translated from Greek could mean “show” or “appear”) and logos (“to make manifest what one is talking about in one’s discourse”²⁷⁴). Heidegger posits that appearance has a dual quality – things have visible meanings but can also have hidden meanings. The logos aspect of phenomenology requires analytical thinking which helps facilitate the showing of meaning. Therefore, phenomenology is concerned with examining and analysing something that is hidden whilst also paying attention to how it appears on the surface²⁷⁵.

The second important contribution of Heidegger’s work to phenomenology is his expression of the relationship between the interpretations individuals make and the preconceptions held: “an interpretation is never a pre-suppositionless apprehending of something presented to us”²⁷⁶. This forces researchers using phenomenology to confront the idea that they may truly never be able to completely bracket their own experiences out of any interpretation of qualitative data. Smith, Flowers and Larkin recommend that researchers should aim to continually improve their ability to bracket their own experiences during the process of data collection by reflecting on how prior conceptions may have influenced their interactions with participants²⁷⁷. Researchers can prepare for interviews in this manner; however, during an interview the most positive way of putting bracketing into practice is by paying full attention to a participant, rather than worrying about influencing the outcome with preconceptions.

Merleau-Ponty is another researcher who contributed to phenomenology. In line with Heidegger’s views, Merleau-Ponty emphasises the situated and interpretive quality of the

²⁷² *Ibid.*, p.18.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.24.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.24.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.24.

²⁷⁶ Heidegger, M. *Being and Time*, pp. 191-192.

²⁷⁷ Smith, Flowers & Larkin, ref. 259, p.35.

knowledge individuals hold about their world²⁷⁸. Instead of emphasising the worldliness of human existence, Merleau-Ponty describes the embodied nature of our relationship which informs our individual perspective of reality. He argues that the experiences people have are situated within their own frame of reference, as such these experiences can never truly be understood but at the same time should not be ignored or overlooked²⁷⁹.

Sartre's works on phenomenology lead him to emphasise the continuing evolution of the self whilst echoing Heidegger's views on experience being informed by the context of the world. He also developed the roles personal and social relationships have in this; our "experiences as contingent upon the presence and absence of our relationships to other people"²⁸⁰.

Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre helped develop phenomenological philosophy. Husserl established the importance of the experience and the possible common essences that can be identified. His work was transcendental, whilst the other three moved to a more existential viewpoint which took into account our relationships with the world and its content, and how these influence our experiences. In summary, phenomenology is an interpretive process and the meanings generated are influenced by the relationships individuals have with the world.

3.2.3 Interpretive phenomenological analysis

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a qualitative research approach in keeping with the evolution of phenomenological theory espoused by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. Compared to Husserl's approach which aimed to capture the general essences of experiences, IPA tries to capture "particular experiences as experienced for particular people"²⁸¹.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin describe IPA as being derived from the contributions of all four philosophers, as together, the existential, embodied and intrapsychic natures of these versions of phenomenology form a "mature, multi-faceted and holistic phenomenology"²⁸² in IPA. The researcher that uses IPA aims to adopt a hermeneutic of questioning and a

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.18.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.19.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.21.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.16.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, p.34.

hermeneutic of empathy. They want to see what it is like from the participants view whilst also being able to consider the situation from a different perspective and to query the accounts of participants²⁸³. Smith, Flowers and Larkin describe it as “attempting to understand, both in the sense of “trying to see what it is like for someone” and in the sense of “analysing, illuminating, and making sense of something”²⁸⁴. The hermeneutics is a necessary part of the process for IPA, as without it, the phenomenological approach would only help in getting close to the experience of the participant; thus, hermeneutics interprets what phenomenology finds²⁸⁵.

The main reason for choosing IPA over a purely phenomenological investigation is that IPA focuses on “personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context, for people who share a particular experience”²⁸⁶ whilst phenomenology focuses on singling out the main features of a particular experience. Because this study is looking at individuals’ motivations, opinions and habits regarding avatar customisation (the shared context/experience in this being the avatar customisation), and does not aim to derive a common structure of their experience, it is more suited to interpretive phenomenological analysis. The following sections of the methodology highlight how the choice of IPA influenced data collection and analysis.

3.3 Research design

The research design provides a framework for the collection and analysis of data²⁸⁷, indicating which research methods are appropriate²⁸⁸. De Vaus compares research design with the fundamental planning of a building project, i.e, deciding what sort of building is being constructed before deciding on the tools or methods necessary²⁸⁹. The research design must take into account the type of evidence required to answer the research aims and objectives²⁹⁰.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, p.36.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.36.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.37.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.45.

²⁸⁷ David, M. & Sutton, C. *Social Research: The Basics*, p.369.

²⁸⁸ Walliman, ref. 232, p.42.

²⁸⁹ de Vaus, D. *Research Design in Social Research*, pp. 8-9.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.9.

The aim of this study is to investigate the phenomenon of projective identity in the players of digital games and it was judged that IPA was the most appropriate way of doing so. The choice of IPA has a number of implications in that it is primarily associated with qualitative research methods, and has its roots in the ontological position of constructionism, and the epistemological position of interpretivism. Therefore; qualitative research methods and the interpretive epistemological stance will be discussed.

3.3.1.1 Research methods

Research methods are general techniques employed to collect, analyse and interpret data²⁹¹. There are two broad categories of research methods: qualitative and quantitative. A piece of research can draw on multiple methods from one category or even use methods from both (mixed methods). Predominantly qualitative methods were used for this research.

3.3.1.2 Qualitative research methods

Bryman describes qualitative research as intuitivist, constructionist and interpretive, and claims that it rejects positivism as its epistemological position²⁹². Qualitative research is distinguished from quantitative research by its heavy reliance on words and language for interpretation of its meaning²⁹³. It deals with data obtained through interviews, observations, focus groups, and the collection and analysis of texts, documents and audio visual materials²⁹⁴ (such as historical narratives, firsthand accounts, video, photographs, biographical and autobiographical materials²⁹⁵). In contrast, quantitative research primarily deals with mathematical models and statistics²⁹⁶.

Qualitative researchers value such methods as they are more concerned with securing rich descriptions of the social world from the individual's points of view from a closer perspective. In comparison, quantitative researchers believe such detail "interrupts the

²⁹¹ Creswell, ref. 226, p.233.

²⁹² Bryman, ref. 250, p.19.

²⁹³ Walliman, ref. 232, p.212.

²⁹⁴ Bryman, ref. 250, p.369.

²⁹⁵ Denzin, K.N & Lincoln, Y.S. *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd Edition, 2000, p.12.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

process of developing generalisations”²⁹⁷ and the interpretive methods used to collect them are “unreliable, impressionistic, and not objective”²⁹⁸.

Mäyrä describes qualitative methods as being useful for studies that seek to gain an understanding of game players and their play behaviours as they “deal with the experiences and meanings attached to phenomena, and therefore take cultures and real-world contexts into account”²⁹⁹. Denzin and Lincoln also promote the role of qualitative research in making sense of meaning:

*[...] qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them*³⁰⁰.

Therefore, it seems appropriate that qualitative methods were used to gather and analyse the data needed to investigate the phenomena of projective identity.

Creswell describes qualitative research as typically featuring a relatively small number of cases with many variables to consider in comparison to quantitative research which relies on many cases with fewer variables³⁰¹. In digital games there are many options and opportunities to customise avatars/characters, multiple paths that users can take through narratives, and a virtual environment to explore, all of is controlled through a context-sensitive user interface. Within this framework is a multitude of variables whose impact on the player must be considered. The only practical way of examining them is with a limited number of cases. This study, therefore, meets Creswell’s criteria for the use of qualitative methods.

3.4 Literature review

In order to help clarify the opening research question and assess gaps in the research, a critical review of the literature was performed. Creswell states that the role of the literature

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁹ Mäyrä. ref. 29, p.160.

³⁰⁰ Denzin, & Lincoln, ref. 295, p.12.

³⁰¹ Creswell, J. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions*, 1998, pp.15-16.

review is to help determine whether the topic is worth studying, and to provide insight into ways in which the researcher can limit the scope to a needed area of inquiry³⁰². The role of the literature review is smaller in the beginning of an IPA study compared to other types of qualitative inquiry though it still aims to help identify a gap for a research question to fill, and inform on the basic strengths and weaknesses of existing studies^{303 304}.

For the purposes of this study, the researcher does not want to be unduly biased by the results of previous studies during questioning and data interpretation to allow the important elements of participants' experiences to emerge. As Creswell states regarding qualitative research, researchers aim to "to listen to participants and build an understanding based on what is heard"³⁰⁵. It is still necessary, however, to have a detailed understanding of the literature concerning various parts of the avatar customisation experience in order to discuss the present study's findings in terms of the wider body of research, and so the literature review was divided into two chapters.

The first stage of the literature review was performed in order to identify methodological approaches that had been used in previous exploratory studies as well as to clarify the gap in the literature. The second stage of the literature review was for familiarising with the research associated with the themes found in the research for the discussion chapter.

The first step taken was to identify a range of keywords that could be used for the first part of the literature review. The list of keywords grew into those detailed in Appendix 1a although these terms were kept purposefully broad in order to avoid focusing on too much on aspect of the player experience. This stage of the review helped to identify journals and conferences that would also be of use during stage two. The searches were conducted with terms from column one of the relevant tables used either on their own or accompanied with other terms from column one, two, three and four.

The first stage of the review revealed that there was little exploratory and interdisciplinary research on the relationships between avatar, player and developer; most studies prefer to focus on one aspect of the avatar experience. Studies by Gee and Wagonner had already

³⁰² *Ibid.*, p.23.

³⁰³ Smith, Flowers & Larkin, ref. 259, p.42.

³⁰⁴ Creswell, ref. 226, p.26.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

been identified during the initial assessment of the viability of this topic and continued to serve as the basic framework for this study. They had already served as a guide towards how to approach avatar customisation from an exploratory perspective, signposting phenomenology as a suitable method for studying lived experience. Studies uncovered by this first review included some theoretical papers on defining avatars that helped clarify terminology relating to the types of avatars this study was aiming to research.

The terms used during the second stage of the literature review (Appendix 1b) are derived from the themes generated from the data analysis. Focusing on more specific subjects, this stage of the literature review produced many more results, although information behaviour/practices and usage in connection with digital games did not produce many pieces of substantial research on the subject.

As a new keyword was identified it was first used to search Loughborough University's collections before moving onto to search engines, academic journals and the main conference proceedings in Game Studies. The Journal of Virtual Worlds Research was included as a reference journal; even though it deals with online games and virtual worlds, it features some of the only detailed studies on avatar appearance which needs to be compared to the results of this study.

In order to take into account the professional experience of game developers Gamasutra, the online free version of Game Developer Magazine, was often referred to in addition to Game Career Guide. These sources proved to be vital in offering insights into the difficulties of implementing avatar customisation, along with practical reasons for how and why certain design elements are chosen over others (subjects that academic research struggle to enlighten). Resources used in the literature search are summarized in Appendix 1.c.

3.5 Research methods

Research methods were defined earlier as general techniques employed to collect, analyse and interpret data³⁰⁶. The techniques specifically used for this study will now be explored.

³⁰⁶ Creswell, ref. 226, p.233.

3.5.1 Semi-structured interviews

Interviews are defined as “a verbal interaction between two or more people where one (or occasionally more than one) person implicitly directs the flow of information”³⁰⁷. As Robson points out there are advantages and disadvantages to using interviews to probe participants for information³⁰⁸. One advantage is that being able to talk to participants face-to-face offers more flexibility than self-administered questionnaires. An interviewer can modify their line of enquiry in order to follow up responses and investigate underlying motives. Face to face interviews also allow direct observation of interviewee behaviour during responses so the interviewer can follow up on changes in body language or other non-verbal cues³⁰⁹. There are also disadvantages to using interviews in that they are time consuming, require a lot of preparation and analysis, and there are many ways for bias to be introduced³¹⁰. Oppenheim believes that the interviewer can introduce bias through the use of poor prompting, mismanagement of difficult interviewees, poor impression management on greeting the participant, unreliable field notes, inaccurate recording of responses and poor maintenance of rapport³¹¹. The risk of introducing bias can be mitigated by being aware of these factors and by practising and reviewing interview technique.

Robson indicates that there are three broad types of interviews, separated by their degrees of structure or standardisation:

- Fully structured interview – characterised by predetermined questions and fixed wording delivered in a pre-set order³¹².
- Semi-structured interview – characterised by some predetermined questions whose wording and order may be altered depending on the interviewer’s judgment³¹³.

³⁰⁷ Emerald Group Publishing. *How to... conduct interviews*.

<<http://info.emeraldinsight.com/research/guides/interviews.htm>>, [n.d], [accessed 22.01.11].

³⁰⁸ Robson, C. *Real World Research: a resource for social scientists and practitioner-researchers*, 2002, p.273.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.272-273.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.273.

³¹¹ Oppenheim, A. N. *Questionnaire design, interviewing and attitude measurement*, pp.96-97.

³¹² Robson, ref. 308, p.270.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, p.270.

- Unstructured interview – characterised by a lack of predetermined questions, and a general area of interest which serves as the starting point for the conversation³¹⁴.

The semi-structured and unstructured interviews are indicated as being qualitative research interviews by King, who wrote guidelines on when to use them³¹⁵. One of these criteria is that when the meaning of a phenomenon to the participants involved is under scrutiny, a qualitative research interview is most appropriate³¹⁶. This criterion is applicable to this study, given that the subjects that the interview questions aim to uncover the meaning of projective identities in games to the participants.

According to Smith, Flowers and Larkin believe that IPA requires data collection methods that provide “rich, detailed, first-person account of their experiences”³¹⁷. They count in-depth interviews and diaries as being among the best methods for doing so as they elicit “stories, thoughts and feelings about the target phenomenon”³¹⁸. This ‘rich’ data is a requirement for IPA, and unobtainable through questionnaires which elicit and record limited responses not associated with acquiring detailed accounts of an experience. Open ended questions are also a feature of semi-structured interviews as they are designed to facilitate the discussion of topics and avoid the possibilities of single-word answers³¹⁹. Therefore, semi-structured interviews have been chosen, as their interview schedules support the researcher with regards to the themes that must be covered and the open-ended structures allow themes to be thoroughly explored³²⁰.

Interviews in this study have been carried out with people who are currently playing games, the structure and execution of which are described in Section 3.5.1.1 and Section 3.9.1.

3.5.1.1 Interview design

The interview schedule had 15 questions and was broken up into three sections. The questions were designed to be open-ended, although all of the set questions were

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*

³¹⁵ King, The Qualitative research interview, *In*: Robson, ref. 308, p.271.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

³¹⁷ Smith, Flowers & Larkin, ref. 259, p.56.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.56.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.58.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.58-59.

essentially for warm up purposes and the majority of the interviews were spent prompting or following up on leads given by participants. See Appendix I for the full interview schedule.

The first two sections (Background and Gaming Literacy) were designed as questions for getting background information and ‘warming up’ the participant to giving detailed responses on their gaming habits and getting into the rhythm of the interview. The first seven questions are for gauging the participants’ general tastes in games and would, therefore, flow in sequence until the avatar related questions. However, participants would frequently bring up their opinions on avatar/character games early in the interview, and those themes were then pursued. The background questions would still be revisited, however, as these provide valuable information that helped build a profile on participants’ preferences. The third section, which constituted the bulk of the interview, focused on getting the participant to explore their experiences and preferences relating to avatar and character development.

3.6 Research sampling

Samples for qualitative studies are usually selected purposively, as opposed to through probability methods, due to the need for participants that can help the researcher study a particular experience³²¹.

Langdridge describes IPA as being suited towards purposive and homogenous sampling:

*Participants are recruited who shared the experience at the heart of the investigation and, if possible, do not vary significantly across demographic characteristics. The aim is to recruit a sample of people such that the researcher can make claims about these people and their particular shared experience [...] the aim is not to maximise variation in the hope of uncovering the invariant structural properties of the phenomenon but instead to develop detailed descriptions of the experience of a small number of people who all shared that experience.*³²²

The sampling strategy for this research was purposive, but only homogenous to the extent that only gamers who use character customisation options are being targeted for their

³²¹ *Ibid.*, p.48.

³²² Langdridge, ref. 258, p.58.

experiences. Due to the exploratory nature of the study it was felt that no other demographic characteristics should be chosen to limit the selection. The sampling included people from various ages and professions, but the aim was not maximum variation, it was simply to interview or observe anyone who was available. The length of this study allows for the luxury of a larger and a more diverse sample than a smaller IPA project would normally allow. The implications for this are that the lengthy process of data familiarisation and analysis that accompanies a smaller project becomes lengthier still as the volume of data grows. This comes with the risk of the researcher using multiple quotes with little analysis to accompany them, or providing too many quotes that all say the same thing and coming across as overly defensive of their interpretation of the results³²³. It is necessary to balance the desire for an accurate and evidenced analysis with the need for a concise and limited selection of quotes.

The potential population for players who develop projective identities is large; however the aim of this research is not to be representative, but to explore a range of motivations relating to one phenomenon. The transcription and analysis of interview transcripts is a lengthy process, limiting the manageable number of participants; the standard sample size for an undergraduate or Masters-level IPA study is three which lends itself to a detailed analysis of each case³²⁴. A higher number of participants are not necessarily a sign of quality in an IPA study and given the time allotted to data collection in a PhD, it was estimated that between 25 and 30 interviews would offer results beyond the scope of smaller studies.

3.6.1 Participants

In order to find enough participants for the study, a mixture of purposeful sampling methods was used. With regard to criterion sampling, the criterion was that all participants are gamers who use character customisation options. Snowball/chain sampling was used to get participants from the numerous societies and departments at Loughborough University, as well as recommendations from participants of friends who were suitable for interviewing. Convenience plays a role in this study, as it was practical to meet and observe face-to-face only those participants within 30-40 miles range of Loughborough. One exception was the family member of a participant who was recommended as a candidate but lived in Scotland.

³²³ Smith, Flowers & Larkin, ref. 259, p.116.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.52.

This family member was subsequently interviewed using voice-over internet protocol software (Skype) and web cameras in an attempt to preserve the body language cues normally present in face-to-face interviews.

Due to the sampling methods used, some participants were first contacted by e-mail after their details were given by acquaintances, others volunteered following posts on message boards (recruitment messages were posted on the Loughborough University Computer Society³²⁵ forum and the Gamer Dads³²⁶ forum) and others agreed to do the interview in-person. All participants were given the same information regarding what they could expect from the interview either verbally or electronically i.e. what the questions would consist of, how long it could last, what was an appropriate venue and when one could be organised. A template was developed for use on message boards and e-mails so little personalisation was required, reducing the amount of effort it took to recruit people online and by e-mail. This allowed potential participants to make an informed decision on whether to take part or not. Likewise, participants were asked whether the interview could be recorded, and reassured their answers were to be treated confidentially.

3.7 Reliability and validity

According to Kvale and Brinkman, reliability is the degree to which research findings are trustworthy and consistent; it is concerned with whether a finding is reproducible at a different time and with another researcher³²⁷. External reliability (the degree to which a study can be replicated) is difficult to achieve in qualitative research. LeCompte and Goetz state that the physical, social and interpersonal contexts behind a study can influence the results and chances of achieving consistency³²⁸. Reproducing these factors exactly will be impossible in most cases making it difficult for a qualitative study to achieve replicability in a traditional sense. There are, however, other ways in helping a qualitative study approach

³²⁵ Isucs. *Isucs*. <<http://www.isucs.org.uk/>>, 2011, [accessed 22.02.11].

³²⁶ GamerDads. *GamerDads network portal*. <<http://www.gamerdads.co.uk/>>, 2011, [accessed 22.02.11].

³²⁷ Kvale, S. & Brinkmann, S. *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, 2nd ed, 2009, p.245.

³²⁸ LeCompte, M. D. & Goetz, J. P. Reliability and validity in ethnographic research, *Review of Educational Research* [online], 52(14), pp.37-40, <http://www.colorado.edu/education/faculty/margaretlecompte/Docs/LeCompte_Goetz_Problems_of_Reliability_Validity_in_Ed_Research.pdf>, 1982, [accessed 22.01.10].

(but not necessarily achieve) replicability. Gibbs recommends several such procedures, including:

- Transcription checking - ensure transcripts do not contain obvious mistakes made during transcription
- Definitional drift in coding – material coded later in a project may be done so slightly different than at the start. Checking and also writing memos about the codes and their meanings will help combat definitional drift.³²⁹

For this study, transcripts are checked after completion and a log detailing the meaning of codes has been kept since data analysis began.

Interviewer reliability is also an issue when the interviewer may inadvertently use leading questions, especially in semi to open structured interviews. During transcription, if it is evident that a leading question was used, the resulting data is expurgated. This is wasteful but necessary, so it is more prudent for the researcher to be mindful of what constitutes a leading question, especially when formulating questions on the fly.

It can be argued that in discussing their approach to character customisation over multiple games with an interviewee participant, this study may achieve greater reliability than by observing and questioning the decisions from just one game session. By the end of an interview, it is aimed for the interviewee to have thought about all the times they have been able to make a projective identity and about the strategies they had employed.

If reliability refers to consistency then validity refers to the truth, the correctness and strength of a statement³³⁰. LeCompte and Goetz break validity up into internal validity (does a researcher actually observe or measure what they think they are observing and measuring) and external validity (to what extent are results generalisable)³³¹. Whilst there are strategies that can be adopted to help with internal validity, it is arguable that for a qualitative study (particularly a phenomenological one) it is much harder to ensure external validity.

For boosting the validity of an IPA study, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin suggest the adherence to Yardley's four broad principles for assessing the quality of qualitative research:

³²⁹ Gibbs, G. *Analysing Qualitative Data*, 2007, p.98.

³³⁰ Kvale, & Brinkmann, ref.327, p.246.

³³¹ LeCompte & Goetz, ref. 328, p.40.

1. Sensitivity to context – researchers should show sensitivity to the social environment/culture the study is situated in, to the existing literature and to material obtained from participants³³². Sensitivity to the context entails good interview technique in managing the power balance between researcher and participant. Sensitivity to the material entails “giving participants a voice in the project and allowing the reader to check the interpretations made [...] Interpretations are presented as possible readings and more general claims are offered cautiously.”³³³
2. Commitment and rigour – with regards to IPA, commitment is demonstrated by arranging a good environment for participants to contribute in and paying attention to what they have to say. Rigour refers to the “thoroughness of the study [...] the appropriateness of the sample to the question in hand, the quality of the interview and the completeness of the analysis undertaken”³³⁴. A sample should match the requirements of the research question and be reasonably homogenous. Again, interviewing technique plays a role as the researcher must maintain a balance between closeness and separateness, digging deeper and picking up on cues. An IPA study must also move beyond being descriptive to interpreting some meaning of the findings.
3. Transparency and coherence – transparency refers to “how clearly the stages of the research process are described in the write-up of the study”³³⁵. The transparency of this study will be enhanced by discussing how participants were selected, how the interview schedule was fashioned and the steps used in the analysis. Coherence refers to the “degree of fit between the research which has been done and the underlying theoretical assumptions of the approach being implemented”³³⁶. An IPA study should be consistent with the underlying principles of IPA as opposed to those of a different qualitative approach.
4. Impact and importance – in addition to validity being determined by how well a piece of research is conducted, Yardley also believed that valid research should have an impact on the research field by conveying something interesting, important or useful

³³² Smith, Flowers & Larkin, ref. 259, p.180.

³³³ *Ibid.*, pp.180-181.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.181.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.182.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.182.

for readers³³⁷. In relation to phenomenology, Langridge states that this criterion is not as important as Yardley believes it to be. Just because the impact of research may be indirect, or may not have practical implications does not mean it is not worth conducting³³⁸.

To achieve validity, this study aimed to follow these recommendations as closely as possible.

3.8 Pilot

Pilot interviews were conducted between April and June 2010. Before commencing with main phase of data collection, piloting was conducted to ensure that the research instrument as a whole worked well. In the case of the semi-structured interviews, this was to ensure that none of the questions made participants feel uncomfortable, confused, or offended³³⁹. It also provided valuable experience in conducting interviews.

First, the interviews were piloted with five participants, all of whom were different types of gamers. Two dedicated much, if not most of their free time to gaming and played a mix of genres. Two participants had slightly less time-intensive gaming habits, one of which predominantly played Japanese role-playing games and the other spent most of their gaming time on shooters. The last participant played mostly social/browser-based games for less than half an hour per day. This mixture of participants with different gaming habits was necessary to see how the interview questions were received by gamers with varying tastes and commitments. All participants were students at Loughborough University, four were postgraduates, and one was an undergraduate.

The first interview lasted over two hours and gave some indication on how much data one interview could produce. The rest of the pilot interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All but one other interview proceeded in this fashion. It soon became clear that there was no optimum layout for the schedule: the topic lent itself to the semi-structured nature of these interviews as participants would invoke different themes (that would lead to the researcher asking a question related to that theme) at different times.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.183.

³³⁸ Langridge, ref. 258, p.157.

³³⁹ Bryman, ref. 250, pp.247-248.

3.9 Data collection

Following completion of the pilot, data collection commenced in July 2010, the first round of which lasted until December 2010. How the data collection methods were used is explained below.

3.9.1 Interviews

Interviews using the schedule in Appendix I were conducted between July and December 2010. The interviews were carried out in a variety of places arranged at the convenience of participants. Bookable study rooms at Loughborough University library were used in some cases, as were rooms in other departments such as the Physics Department, Information Science and Mechanical Engineering. One pub was used, but the majority of interviews were conducted at participant's homes.

Only a handful of problems arose during the interviews. Occasionally interviews had to be rescheduled out of illness and other unforeseen complications. Acoustics and limited choice of venue occasionally meant interview recordings have high levels of background noise. An external microphone was purchased to help mitigate such circumstances.

In total, 30 interviews were conducted including the four pilot interviews. It was deemed appropriate to include them as the pilot interview schedule did not change. All participants belonged to the demographic of the university educated. Their wealth and class cannot be commented on as the researcher was not privy to that information. Six of the participants were undergraduate students, 15 were research students studying for a PhD, two were masters students and eight were professionals (non-students). Six of the participants were female, 24 were male which means it will be difficult to compare play styles between male and female participants (though the focus of this study is not on these differences). The participants were aged between 18 and 49 with the majority (21 participants) being in their early to mid-twenties. Six of the participants (3, 6, 9, 14, 16, 27) were already known to the researcher as colleagues, however, their gaming and avatar customisation habits had not been extensively discussed prior to them volunteering for the study. Therefore, it was decided that such limited prior knowledge would not influence selection of interview topics.

3.10 Data analysis

The process of qualitative data analysis involves making sense out of narrative data through a variety of inductive and iterative techniques³⁴⁰. This can involve preparing data for analysis before subjecting it to an analysis scheme. Although there is no strict analysis scheme for IPA there are a variety of strategies for researchers to draw on whilst maintaining an analytic focus on participants' attempts to make sense of their experiences. Smith, Flowers and Larkin suggest the following strategies which were used in this research:

- Data familiarisation - the close, line-by-line analysis of the experiential claims, concerns, and understandings of each participant.
- Theme identification - the identification of the emergent patterns (i.e, themes) within this experiential material, emphasising convergence and divergence, commonality and nuance, usually first for single cases, and then subsequently across multiple cases.
- Interpretation - the development of a 'dialogue' between the researchers, their coded data, and their knowledge, about what it might mean for participants to have these concerns, in this context, leading in turn to the development of a more interpretive account.
- Illustration - the development of a structure frame or gestalt which illustrates the relationships between themes.
- Material arrangement - the organisation of all of this material in a format which allows for analysed data to be traced right through the process, from initial comments on the transcript, through initial clustering and thematic development, into the final structure of themes.
- Write-up - the development of a full narrative, evidenced by a detailed commentary on data extracts, which takes the reader through this interpretation, usually theme-by-theme, and is often supported by some form of visual guide (a simple structure, diagram or table).
- Conclusions - reflection on one's own perceptions, conceptions and processes.³⁴¹

³⁴⁰ Teddlie & Tashakkori, ref. 231, p.250.

³⁴¹ Smith, Flowers & Larkin, ref. 259, pp.79-80.

As is often the case with qualitative data analysis, it is an iterative process where there is no clear distinction for when one phase begins and no indication if the earlier stages ever end.

3.10.1 Transcription and data familiarisation

Data familiarisation started as soon as the interview audio files were reviewed and transcribed. Each audio recording were listened to several times to check for mistakes in the transcription. During this process an effort was made to transcribe verbatim at a semantic level, preserving pauses in speech, and including descriptions of hand gestures and changes in facial expression taken from notes made during interviews. Once the transcriptions were typed up, they were reviewed several times on paper for spelling mistakes and also to start the process of commenting on participants' responses and identifying possible codes and themes.

3.10.2 Initial noting

Hard copies were made of transcripts with wide margins either side of the transcription. The left margin was used for these initial notations and comments, whilst the right side was reserved for developing the emergent themes (as detailed in section 3.10.3) beginning with writing down codes that identify what each passage is about and seeing what words and ideas are occurring repeatedly (both with converging and diverging opinions). Comments were also made on the transcripts regarding possible explanations or interpretations of a participant's responses or actions, thereby beginning the interpretive phase of the analysis.

The comments began as being purely descriptive in an effort to help highlight the key parts of the experience, objects or decisions for the participant. The intention was to highlight the objects which structure the participant's thoughts and experiences by taking their comments at face value. It involves thinking about participants' experience in relation to the important avatar systems that occupy the game. This level of comments often contained descriptions, assumptions, sound bites, acronyms, idiosyncratic figures of speech and emotional responses", as suggested by Smith, Flowers and Larkin³⁴².

Linguistic comments were also made which focused on how content and meaning was presented by participants. Items highlighted included use of metaphors, repetition, pauses, tone, degree of fluency, laughter and pronoun use.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, p.84.

Conceptual comments are the next level of annotation this study used, being more interpretative than descriptive or linguistic comments. These comments are often in the form of questions concerning how or why participants are making the claims in the transcription, but some conceptual comments are operating on a more abstract level. These comments can move away from the claims of the participant, bringing in interpretations of the meanings of the avatar experience based on the researchers experiential and professional understandings.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin state that at this stage, despite the overall goal of bracketing the researchers experiences away from data collection, it may be necessary for the researcher to draw on their own experiences in developing conceptual comments³⁴³. This is done in order to help the researcher make sense of the participant although care must be taken during this process not to shift the analytic focus away from the participant to the experiences of the researcher. There is always the risk of interpretative claims moving too far away from the meaning the participants were trying to express, which is why extra care was taken to back up interpretative claims with multiple quotations which were checked for other more likely interpretations.

3.10.3 Developing emergent themes

This stage marks a shift from working with the transcript to working with the notes in an attempt to reduce the volume of detail, but not the level of complexity. This stage involves mapping interrelationships, connections and patterns between notes, preserving the meaning of the data in short hand form³⁴⁴. This process looks beyond the narrative flow of the transcript so that chunks that are related to each other are identified and the manner in which the chunks are related is clarified. Smith Flowers and Larkin describes turning notes into themes as “an attempt to produce a concise and pithy statement of what was important in the various comments attached to a piece of transcript.”³⁴⁵ As such, the themes in this research reflect both the participants’ transcripts and the researcher’s interpretation of what are the key avatar systems and how they influenced participants’ experiences.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp.88-90.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.91.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.92.

3.10.4 Searching for connections across emergent themes

Once a transcript had been reviewed and its themes developed, several strategies were then used in the search for connections between those emergent themes whilst identifying cluster themes (or code families as they would become when transferred to ATLAS.ti) and superordinate themes.

One strategy the researcher used was abstraction which relies on grouping similar themes into a 'super-ordinate' theme. A superordinate theme is "a construct which usually applies to each participant within a corpus but which can be manifest in different ways within the cases"³⁴⁶. This strategy involves placing like with like and developing a name for this family.

Subsumption was also used where an existing theme becomes a super-ordinate theme that helps to bring together a series of related themes. Polarisation is another strategy where transcripts are examined for oppositional relationships which focus on difference instead of similarity. From this different sets of themes might emerge from transcripts, some detailing the positive aspects of an experience associated with a particular avatar system whilst others detail the negative aspects.

Contextualisation involves focusing on the temporal, cultural and narrative elements in order to study the connections between themes³⁴⁷. This led to some themes being categorised as occurring before, during and after avatar creation. Some themes have been highlighted as being formative experiences on the players' views on avatar customisation, and also what they considered to be their key gaming life events. Some themes were also shaped by participants' cultural backgrounds and society memberships.

Numeration involves looking at the frequency with which a theme occurs. The researcher has tried not to over-emphasise the role of the numeration as an indicator of important in this study as there have been several themes which have only occurred once or twice that have given valuable insight into how individuals have perceived their avatar experience. Still, it has been useful to look at the relative importance of themes and to emphasise just how often they occur between cases.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.166.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.98.

3.10.5 Moving to the next case and looking for patterns across cases

Smith recommends that given IPA is strongly idiographic, analysis should focus on one case until some form of closure has been achieved before moving onto the next case, and so on³⁴⁸. It is necessary to treat each participants account separately so that the findings of one transcription do not overly influence the interpretation of another. It is inevitable for the existing themes to somewhat change how a researcher views new material but in this case an open mind was kept regarding possible new themes that could emerge with each transcription.

3.10.6 Searching for patterns across cases and the use of CAQDAS

Following the development of emergent themes and the search for connections between them, this study has aimed for a portrayal of results that shows the individualistic nature of participants whilst highlighting how they all share similarities under super-ordinate themes. The comparison of cases has been greatly aided by the use of computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS).

Once the all transcripts had been commented on, preliminarily coded and the main systems of avatar customisation were beginning to emerge, spelling corrections were made to the transcripts and were uploaded to ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software package. The choice of this particular software package over others such as NVivo is due to its availability at the Department of Information Science, recommendations by students working on similar projects and the prohibitive pricing of alternatives.

Some of the advantages in the use of CAQDAS in research include being able to develop a coding schema, to search and interrogate the database of codes and transcripts, to organise and compare large amounts of data and to offer tools for visualising the relationships between codes³⁴⁹. For this research, a large portion of the coding and super-ordinate themes had already been developed on paper but taking the time to work with ATLAS.ti

³⁴⁸ Smith, J. A. Reflecting on the development of interpretative phenomenological analysis and its contribution to qualitative research in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1(1), 41, <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1191/1478088704qp004oa>>, 2004, [accessed 01.09.12].

³⁴⁹ Silver, C & Lewins, A. *Using Software in Qualitative Research: a Step-by-Step Guide*, 2007, pp.10-13.

allowed for another stage of reflection on the findings and themes. The comparison of cases through ATLAS.ti helped highlight duplicated themes across cases in the coding schema which could be safely merged without losing detail. This extra step of familiarisation and reflexivity helped highlight quotations and relationships previously overlooked.

CAQDAS also has its critics who claim that the use of such software can distance researchers from their data and can encourage researchers to switch to a quantitative focus due to the ease of accessibility to statistics on the application of codes within the data set^{350 351}. Despite these potential drawbacks the ease with which data can be coded and annotated through CAQDAS, the potential for organising all data and notes into one place organising data by codes and exporting that data into separate text files has made ATLAS.ti an invaluable part of this study. Quotes grouped together by codes were often printed out in order to help the researcher take the analysis from an individual level to that of multiple participants and the resulting notes and annotations were fed back into ATLAS.ti. By organising the transcripts, associated codes and memos into one hermeneutic unit, ATLAS.ti also contributes to the arranging of material in a traceable fashion for validation.

The ability to use network views in ATLAS.ti which allows the relationships between families of code to be mapped out visually helped with looking for patterns across cases. The network tool was used to produce several visual representations of the main superordinate themes relating to avatar systems (see appendix three).

3.10.7 Presentation of results

Constructing an account of the results has been difficult considering the sheer amount of themes, quotations and individual narratives to choose from. The final word count for the primary documents (minus memos and other annotations) came to 179,584 words, 2415 quotations, 8 superordinate themes, 174 codes and 412 memos. Even with the aid of the coding schema and superordinate themes which had reduced the data down considerably, reducing the narrative account down to the most illustrative quotations whilst retaining a focus on the quirks of individual participants was challenging.

³⁵⁰ Taylor, C., Lewins, A. & Gibbs, G.R. *Debates about the software*. <[http://onlineqda.hud.ac.uk/Intro CAQDAS/software debates.php](http://onlineqda.hud.ac.uk/Intro_CAQDAS/software_debates.php)>, 2005, [accessed 06.09.12].

³⁵¹ Grbich, C. *Qualitative Data Analysis: an Introduction*, 2007, p.234.

The results chapters focus on what were judged to be the five key superordinate themes in avatar systems. The write up seeks to present quotations and interpretations that demonstrate the thoughts and experiences of participants with regards to using avatar-related systems. Descriptions of the super-ordinate themes by which the write-up has been shaped along with their constituent codes are introduced in Appendix Three along with explanations for how each super-ordinate theme was identified.

3.11 Ethical considerations

Given the methods chosen and the resulting contact with human participants, ethical issues had to be considered. At the end of year one, before data collection could begin, an ethics checklist and clearance form was completed which prompted compliance with the Loughborough University Ethical Advisory Committee's Code of Practice:

- Full, informed and voluntary consent was obtained from all participants who were aware of the purpose of the research. They were briefed on the topics that were going to be covered during interviews.
- Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the investigation at any point if in hindsight they felt extremely uncomfortable or embarrassed with anything they had said or done during their contribution.
- No participants from vulnerable groups were recruited, eliminating the need to apply for further ethical clearance.
- No financial incentive was offered for people to take part in the investigation.
- Full records were kept of all procedures carried out along with a register of participants.
- The confidentiality of the participant was maintained, as were their rights under the Data Protection 1998. Although the advisory committee requires a register kept of participants, these details are divorced from the collected and published data.

3.12 Emergent themes

The emergent codes from the preliminary analysis were clustered together depending on which part of the player-avatar system they were interpreted as belonging to. The main themes have emerged as “stats building and resource management” (Appendix 3.a), “appearance customisation” (Appendix 3.b), “morality and ethics” (Appendix 3.c), “narrative” (Appendix 3.d) and “information practices” (Appendix 3.e). Codes that were related to how gameplay and mechanics were approached by participants that were too broad to be included in any other themes were clustered under “Gameplay” (Appendix 3.f), whilst gameplay preferences were grouped together under “Gameplay preferences” (Appendix 3.g). Codes relating to the emotions participants experienced are grouped under the theme “Emotions” (Appendix 3.h), whilst Appendix 3.i features codes that did not easily fall within the themes, or codes that were so general that they were applicable to more than one theme. Codes relating to personal details (anonymised) and the impact games had on lives were grouped together in Appendix 3.j.

The themes of “stats building and resource management”, “appearance customisation”, “morality and ethics”, “narrative” and “information practices” were chosen as representing the main features of avatar customisation and projective identity because they represented parts of the avatar which participants had developed the most distinct strategies of creation and development. There is some overlap between themes, such as how participants reacted to the presentation of moral and ethical dilemmas through narrative mechanics (chapter six). This topic is also covered in chapter seven which illustrates the how moral and ethical dilemmas are solved by participants.

Information practices was chosen as an additional superordinate theme because the data showed how closely information practices inform the development of avatars and keeps participants connected to avatar development when not able to play. The gathering and use of information was an important extension of many participants’ gaming experiences, determining how they developed their projective identities and how they communicated their progress to friends.

Chapters 4 - 9 of the analysis will concentrate on analysing projective identities in terms of these themes. Network diagram interpretations of the five main superordinate themes associated with avatar systems are available in Appendix 4. The relationships between the multiple code families who constitute one superordinate theme are based on connections inferred by participants in addition to the researcher’s interpretation of their accounts.

3.13 Games referenced by participants

Participants have mentioned several different games which are listed below with background information concerning the elements and mechanics they employ.

3.13.1 City of Heroes

Developed by *Cryptic Studios*³⁵² and published by NCSOFT, *City of Heroes* is inspired by super hero comic books allowing players to create their own super hero with unique abilities and costumes³⁵³. Alongside a cast of 'signature heroes' (the non-player super-characters made by the developers), players will fight villains and monsters in the crime-infested streets and hide outs of Paragon City. *City of Heroes* was closed down in November 2012 after eight years of crime fighting.

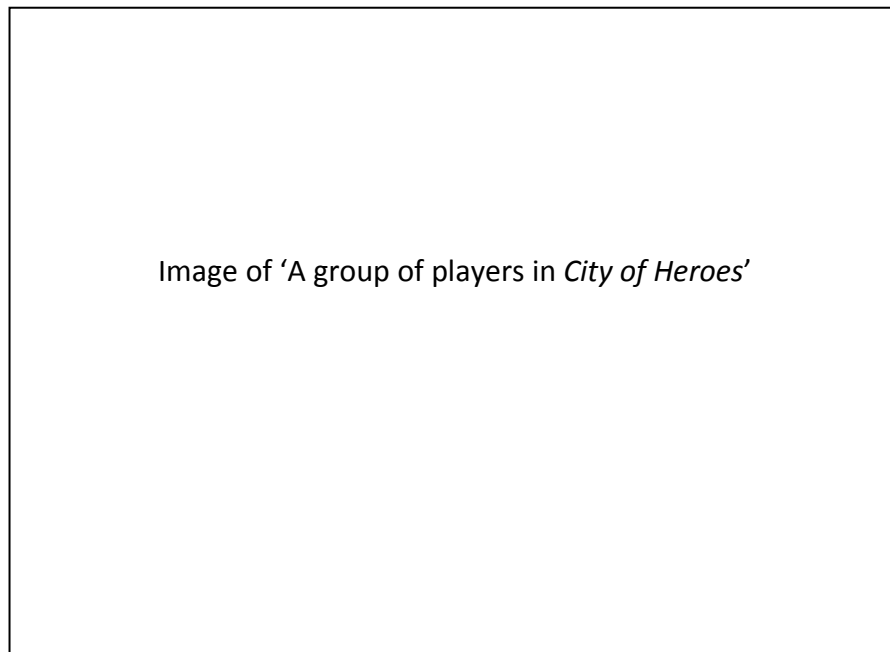


Figure 7 – A group of players in *City of Heroes*³⁵⁴.

³⁵² Cryptic Studios. *Cryptic Studios – Home*. <<http://crypticstudios.com/>>, 2010, [accessed 01/02/10].

³⁵³ Cryptic Studios. *Quick Start*. <http://eu.cityofheroes.com/en/game_guide/>, 2009, [accessed 01/02/10].

³⁵⁴ NCSOFT. *Welcome to City of Heroes!* <http://www.cityofheroes.com/game_info/welcome_to_city_of_heroes/welcome_to_city_of_heroes.html>, 2009, [accessed 01/02/10].

3.13.2 Dragon Age: Origins

Published by Bioware and realised in 2009, *Dragon Age: Origins (DA: O)* is the spiritual successor to classic role-playing titles such as *Baldur's Gate* and *Icewind Dale*. Both were played from a top-down perspective and involved the management of several characters in combat whilst progressing through a story (Figure 8). In *DA: O* the player is tasked with defeating the armies of the darkspawn through rallying factions to their cause and prowess on the battlefield. The 'Origins' in the title refers to the feature where players, depending on their selection of race and class will experience one of several possible openings to the game, equating to an hour's worth of gameplay.

The player explores cities and the wilderness, occasionally talking to non-player characters to gather clues as to their next objective or to help with their current quest. The game can be played from an over-the-shoulder or top-down perspective. In addition to their own avatar, every character in the player's party can be individually controlled during combat or their actions automated depending on the tactics required. Time in this game is automatically paused during interactions with non-player characters so that players have an unlimited amount of time to choose their response to situations. Battles can be fought in real time, but players may also pause time to queue orders for their party members.



Figure 8 – The over-head camera mode for combat³⁵⁵.

Although *DA: O* was released for the PC, PS3 and Xbox 360, general consensus was that it was poorly optimised as a console experience. The sequel, *Dragon Age 2*, was released in March 2011 and has dropped many of the avatar creation options of *Origins*. Instead, it follows the adventures of a character called Hawke who, much like Shepard in the *Mass Effect* series, has extensive voice overs unlike the mute character of *DA: O*.

³⁵⁵ Jkdmedia. *E3 2008 Preview*.

<http://pc.gamezone.com/previews/item/dragon_age_origins_pc_preview>, 2008, [accessed 05/02/2011].

3.13.3 EVE Online



Figure 9 – A space station in EVE Online³⁵⁶.

*EVE Online*³⁵⁷, developed by Icelandic development studio CCP Games³⁵⁸, is the premier space MMO and proves that science fiction can be a successful basis for a virtual world. *EVE Online* is set in a science fiction universe where humans have settled the New Eden galaxy. Players are given control over a ship for exploring the 5000 + star systems that make up the galaxy and must trade and fight to survive the often harsh player culture of corporations and pirates³⁵⁹.

EVE was originally released as a digital download title in 2003 to average reviews from critics. Since then, the developers have worked on eliminating bugs and adding new

³⁵⁶ Rossignol, J. *Evolution and Risk: CCP on the Freedoms of EVE Online*. <http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20050923/rossignol_01.shtml>, 2005, [accessed 01/02/10].

³⁵⁷ CCP. *EVE Online*. <<http://www.eveonline.com/>>, 2010, [accessed 01/02/10].

³⁵⁸ CCP. CCP. <<http://www.ccpgames.com/>>, 2010, [accessed 01/02/10].

³⁵⁹ EVElopedia. *Star Map*. <http://wiki.eveonline.com/wiki/Star_Map>, 2009, [accessed 01/02/10].

features. Now the game has 300,000 subscribers who are estimated to have generated around \$50 million in revenue during 2009³⁶⁰.

3.13.4 Fable

Originally released in 2004 for the Xbox, *Fable* was re-released with some additional content on the PC in 2005. Created by British game developers Lionhead Studios, they desired to create a game which drew on English mythology and that allowed players to see the consequences of their actions in the world (Figure 10). The player's actions also influence how non-player characters treat them, and how their hero physically develops.

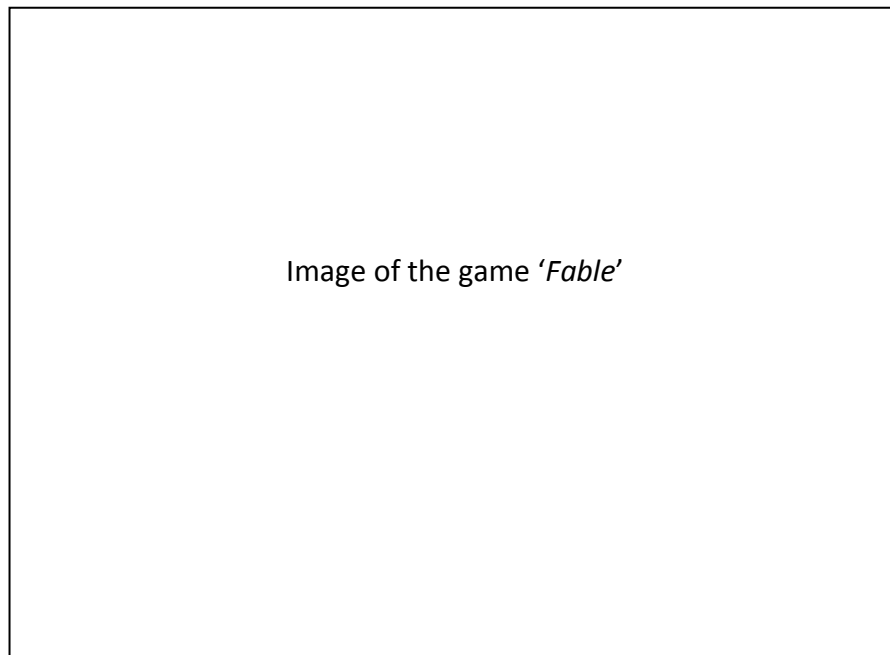


Figure 10 – Overlooking Oakvale village in Fable³⁶¹.

Like *Dragon Age: Origins*, gameplay involves fighting, navigating environments, talking to villagers and managing equipment. The camera perspective is also over-the-shoulder. Unlike *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Fallout 3*, *Fable* is entirely synchronous and does not allow players to pause combat to assign tasks. It does, however, allow players to interact with non-player characters in an unconventional manner. The art style is also more colourful and painterly than the 'gritty' graphics of *DA: O* and *Fallout 3*.

³⁶⁰ Carless, S. *GDC Europe: Hilmursson On The History Of CCP*. <http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=24887>, 2009, [accessed 01/02/10].

³⁶¹ ImageShack. *Fable Oakvale*. <<http://img141.imageshack.us/i/21112006135011pg3.jpg/>>, [n.d.], [accessed 05/02/2011].

3.13.5 Fable II

Released in 2008, *Fable II* is set several hundred years on from the events of *Fable II* and Lionhead Studios had almost completely remodeled Albion. With a wide variety of clothes, make-up, hair dyes, tattoos, weapons and other options, *Fable II's* avatar was highly customisable. Like the first *Fable*, it offers players the chance to make a lasting impact on the game world and to see the consequences of their actions; good or evil (Figure 11). The game was criticised for its weak story and repetitive combat, but praised for the wide variety of options for interacting with residents of Albion, and the freedom it offers players.

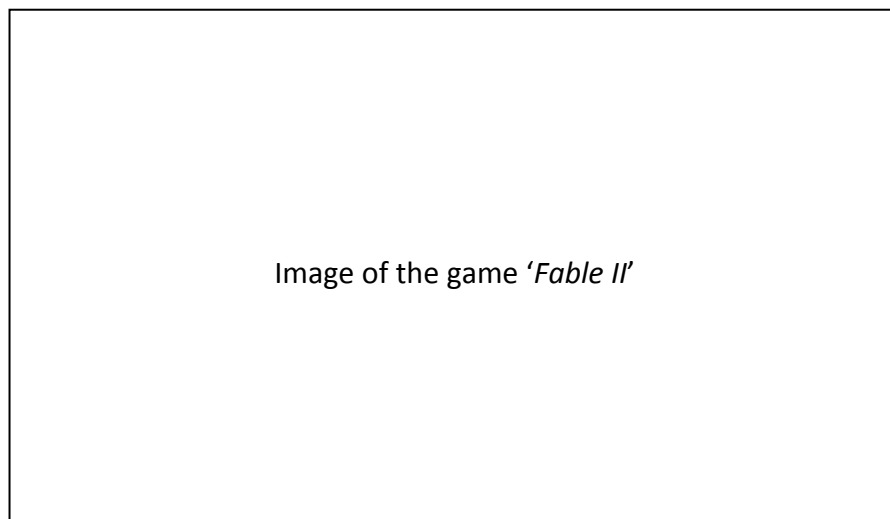


Figure 11 – Bowerstone graveyard in Fable II³⁶²

3.13.6 Fable III

Released in 2010 on the Xbox 360 and 2011 on the PC, the third *Fable* simplified its gameplay mechanics in an attempt to appeal to audiences ordinarily intimidated by the complexity of RPGs. Lionhead Studios stopped describing their game as an RPG and positioned it as an action adventure, the emphasis being less on manipulating statistics and menus, and more on the gameplay (Figure 12).

³⁶² Visogames [YouTube username]. *Fable 2 trailer*.
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTVzJZCVV4>>, 2009, [accessed 05/02/2011].

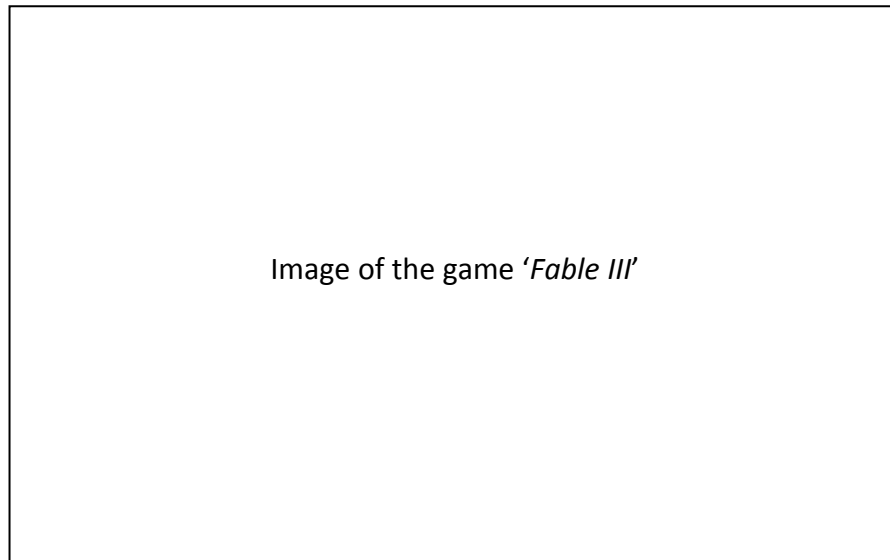


Figure 12 – A library in Fable III.

Traditional menus were removed from the game. When the player presses pause, they are instead transported to a 'sanctuary' where they have access to 3D maps, changing-rooms where their clothes are displayed, an armoury for selecting weapons and a treasury for keeping track of their fortune and achievements. Having hired new writers, the game was praised for its story and voice cast, however, it has come under criticism for repetitive avatar expressions and equipment systems and being too buggy on release. At the time of the game's launch there were numerous bugs that can render a save file inaccessible, forcing gamers (including one participant) to start a new game.

3.13.7 Fallout 3

Bethesda followed *Oblivion* with the 2008 release of *Fallout 3*. The setting is a post-apocalyptic Washington DC set in an alternate timeline where the promise of nuclear-powered cars (like the real-life *Ford Nucleon* concept car) came true, and the resulting world is a pastiche of 1950s technological optimism, retro science fiction and *Mad Max* (Figure 13).



Image of the game 'Fallout 3'

Figure 13 – Megaton Town in Fallout 3³⁶³

The player's avatar starts out in an underground shelter called a Vault where survivors have stayed for generations. Venturing out to find their father, the player must explore the large map, fight with raiders, talk with other survivors and manage their character's statistics. The game is set primarily in the first-person (through the avatar's eyes), although the camera does occasionally use third-person angles. Time is asynchronous in this game as players can freeze combat in order to select targets and queue up their shots. The emphasis in this game is on long-range combat, though there are melee weapons they play less of a role than in *Fable* or *DA: O*. Released for the PC, Xbox 360 and PS3, *Fallout 3* was a major success for Bethesda and resurrected the *Fallout* franchise. *Fallout: New Vegas* was released in October 2011, and a *Fallout* MMO is in development.

3.13.8 Fallout: New Vegas

After the success of *Fallout 3*, Bethesda moved onto develop *Skyrim*, giving Obsidian Entertainment permission to work on another game in the *Fallout* franchise. *Fallout: New Vegas* uses the same engine as *Fallout 3* and shares many of the game mechanics but is not a direct sequel, establishing a separate story on the west coast of America where the bombing was not as severe. The player takes the role of a courier who at the beginning of the story is seemingly killed for the package he was delivering. Rescued from a shallow grave and nursed back to health, the courier goes in search of why he was attacked. The player

³⁶³ Bethesda Softworks [YouTube username]. *E3 2008 Fallout 3 Trailer*. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYZpR51XgW0>>, 2008, [accessed 05/02/2011].

decides if he or she is simply pursuing the truth or is out to take revenge on all who wronged him, if he will help *New Vegas* achieve independence from the warring factions that would have control over it, or if they will champion the rise to power of one group over the others.



Figure 14 – Combat in New Vegas makes use of the same mechanics as Fallout 3³⁶⁴

3.13.9 Guild Wars

Guild Wars is an MMORPG for the PC developed by ArenaNet and published by NCsoft in 2005. It is not subscription based (unlike many of its peers at its time of launch) but earned money for its continued development and maintenance through frequent expansion packs. It made extensive use of instanced content for players to co-operatively playthrough without the interface of other parties, and had many competitive player-versus-player modes. The class system was unconventional in that it allowed players access to thousands of skills, but only allowing players access to eight at any given time.

3.13.10 Mass Effect

Developed by Bioware and released on the *Xbox 360* in 2007 and the PC in 2008, *Mass Effect* is a science-fiction RPG shooter. Following the story of Commander Shepard, players must fly around the galaxy, investigating the actions of a rogue special forces agent. Although Shepard is a pre-defined character, players can change his/her appearance and also decide how he goes about fulfilling his mission. It is up to the player to decide if Shepard will play by

³⁶⁴ Bethesda Softworks [YouTube username]. *Fallout: New Vegas TV Spot*. <<http://youtu.be/QfVYZTx6AAI>>, [accessed 13.12.11].

the book or adopt a more ruthless approach to saving the galaxy? The game follows the typical RPG formula, except combat borrows heavily from third-person shooters such as *Gears of War* with its cover mechanics and over-the-shoulder camera view (Figure 15). During combat, players can pause the action to issue orders to their squad members and activate special abilities or switch ammo types. Selling well, the game earned a sequel, however the console version was criticised for poor controls and poorly designed menus.



Figure 15 – Combat in Mass Effect.

3.13.11 Mass Effect 2

The sequel to *Mass Effect* was released in January 2010. If someone had played through *Mass Effect*, *Mass Effect 2* can read their saved game and take into account their decisions, incorporating them into the story. Therefore, depending on the player's choices in the first game, mankind may be in charge of the Galactic Council or still be co-operating peacefully with other species (Figure 16).



Figure 16 – A cutscene in Mass Effect 2³⁶⁵.

The RPG mechanics have been toned down for this sequel. Players do not pick up loot from each enemy they kill, reducing the amount of time they need to spend in their inventory screen. The importance of talking to squad members whilst aboard your spaceship is increased. As the stakes were high for the final mission, gaining total commitment from your crew members is necessary to increase their (and Shepard's) likelihood of surviving. This usually involves a side mission to resolve some conflict from your squad members' past. The game is unique in that if you do not prepare for the final mission by upgrading your ship and doing the side missions, your entire squad can be wiped out, and even though the threat may be successfully defeated, Shepard can die permanently. The outcome of the mission will have a consequences on how the final installment in the trilogy unfolds (if players have kept their *Mass Effect 2* saved game, that is).

3.13.12 RuneScape

Launched in 2001 and developed by British-based Jagex Games Studio, several participants played *Runescape* whilst in secondary school, investing many hours into developing the skills and equipment of their avatars. Originally being a mix of two dimensional and three dimensional elements, *Runescape* made the move to full three dimensional graphics in 2004 and has continued to evolve to include social media integration, and offers both free to play and subscription options. Players of the advertisement-supported free version have access

³⁶⁵ DarkGem2. *Mass Effect 2: Commander Shepard Is Still A Jerk*. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PjTuSQNLI4>>, 2010, [accessed 05/02/2011].

to many hours of content, but are unable to explore all areas of the world map and have fewer skills than subscribers do.



Image of the game 'Runescape'

Figure 17 – The user interface of Runescape³⁶⁶.

3.13.13 The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind

Developed by Bethesda and released in 2002 for the PC, *Morrowind* is a critically acclaimed RPG that set the standard for providing a large fantasy world and giving players unparalleled freedom to explore it at their own pace. Using a first-person perspective, players could follow the lengthy main quest line or could choose to ignore it and explore the map and do the side quests that appealed to them (Figure 18). The game continues to garner praise for its eccentric art direction which depicts a landscape with exotic fauna and flora. The levelling, item and magic systems also drew praise for their flexibility, allowing players to create avatars that could eventually leap over mountains, be impervious to damage and generally exploit the mechanics of the game. *Morrowind* was supplemented by two expansions (*Tribunal* and *Bloodmoon*) and also released on the Xbox.

³⁶⁶ Jeterocks [Imageshack username]. *Horses*.
<<http://img21.imageshack.us/img21/7797/horses.jpg>>, 2004, [accessed 13.12.11].



Figure 18 – A shop in Morrowind³⁶⁷.

3.13.14 The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

Set in the Imperial City and the surrounding countryside, *Oblivion* was estimated to have 100 hours of game play (Figure 19). Like *Morrowind*, the player character starts out in prison with no knowledge of their past. Players can then follow the main quest, become a member of a guild and complete faction missions, or wander the environment. The free-form nature of questing has encouraged participants to play through multiple times with different avatars. *Oblivion* and its expansion the *Shivering Isles* was a critical and commercial success on the PC, Xbox 360 and PS3.

³⁶⁷ Veriax [YouTube username]. *Lets Interactively Play Morrowind Part 9: The Lords Mail (part 2 of 5)*. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHvm59kizdM&feature=related>>, 2009, [accessed 05/02/2011].

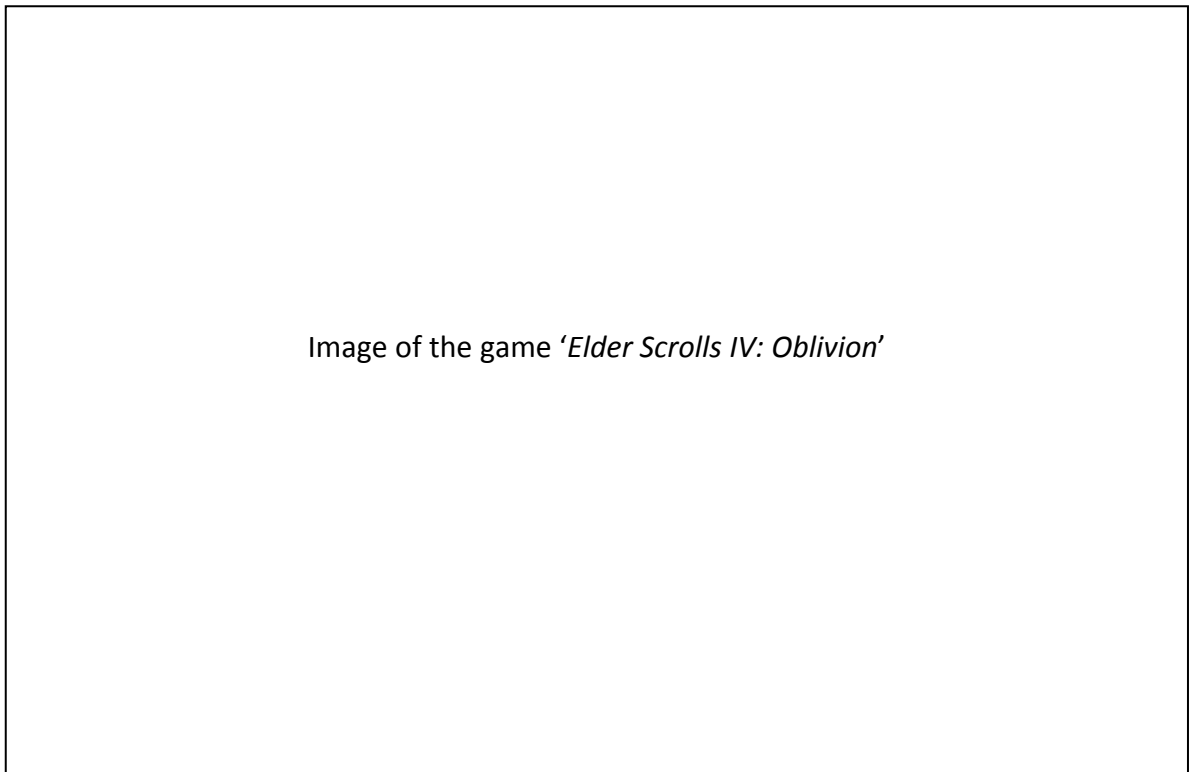


Figure 19 – A dockyard in Oblivion³⁶⁸.

3.13.15 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

The long awaited sequel to *Oblivion*, once again developed by Bethesda, is set in the Nordic lands of Skyrim where Dragons have returned to enslave all races. Offering several hundreds of hours worth of content, Skyrim was critically acclaimed and won many game of the year titles for 2011. This game was only mentioned by participants in anticipation of its release, given it was not released at the time of interviews.

³⁶⁸ Bethesda Softworks. *Oblivion Screenshot*.

<<http://tamrielchronicles.com/screenshots/OblivionX18.JPG>>, 2005, [accessed 05/02/2011].

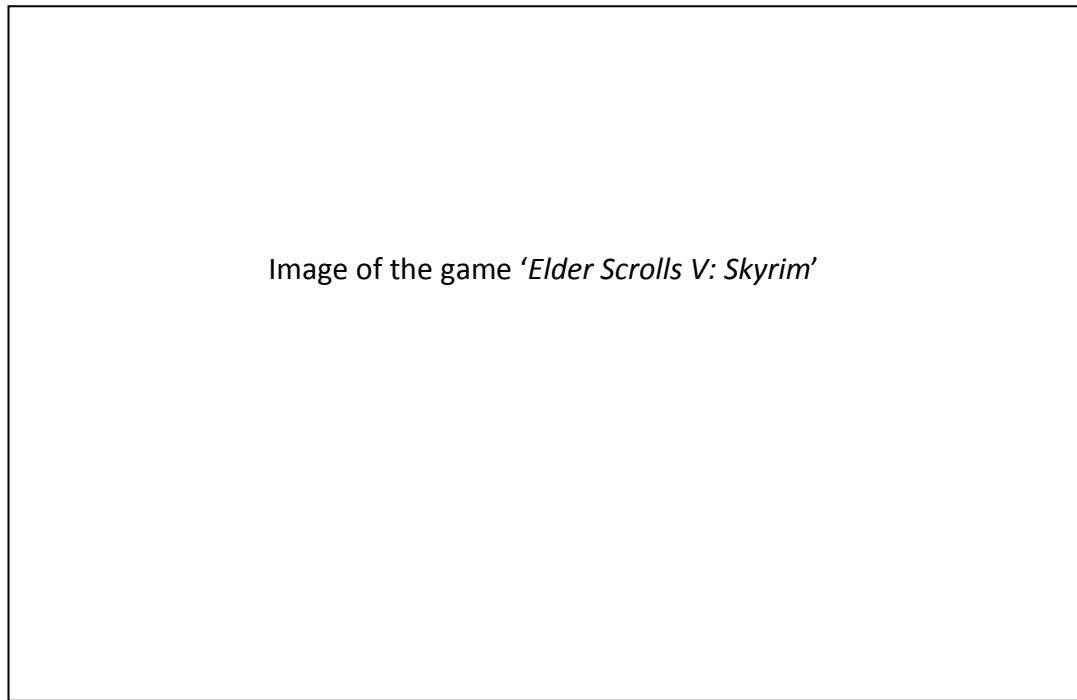


Figure 20 – A nord warrior prepares for battle in the forests of Skyrim³⁶⁹.

3.13.16 The Sims 3

Developed by *Maxis* and released in 2009, *The Sims 3* is a simulation game that allows players to create and control a family of 'Sims'. Players can micromanage their Sims relationships and activities or leave them to get on with their lives. When creating a Sim, a player needs to choose several personality traits and ambitions that determine how they will react to other Sims, the interests they get the most satisfaction from and their goals in life (Figure 21). Working towards fulfilling these ambitions will unlock perks which may boost a Sim's practical skills, career prospects and social skills (Figure 22).

³⁶⁹ Bethesda Softworks. *Nord Male*.

<<http://cms.elderscrolls.com/sites/default/files/tes/screenshots/NordMalewlegal.jpg>>, 2011, [accessed 13.12.11].



Figure 21 – Sims remember previous encounters with other Sims³⁷⁰.



Figure 22 – Part of the Sims gameplay is the building and maintenance of houses³⁷¹.

Compared to the other games mentioned by participants, *The Sims 3* is low on violence and fatalities are rare, although your Sims do age and eventually die. *The Sims* franchise is a core part of Electronic Arts (publisher of *The Sims*) and expansions are released every few months adding new gameplay elements such as pets, more career choices, new towns, items and

³⁷⁰ Burkinshaw, R. Kev and Rhoda. <<http://aliceandkev.wordpress.com/2009/09/21/kev-and-rhoda/>>, 2009, [accessed 05/02/2011].

³⁷¹ Noom, N. *A look through 14 beautiful video game HUD designs*. <<http://feedgrids.com/originals/post/a-look-through-14-beautiful-video-game-hud-designs>>, 2010, [accessed 05/02/2011].

holidays. *The Sims 3* is available on all major platforms (PC, Mac, Nintendo DS, Nintendo Wii, Microsoft Xbox 360 and the Sony PlayStation 3).

3.13.17 World of Warcraft

Blizzard released *World of Warcraft* (WoW) in 2004 and it quickly became the most popular massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) and still holds that title with 12 million subscribers worldwide³⁷². WoW took an iterative approach to game design, borrowing the best features from several generations of MMORPGs and making the game as accessible as possible (Figure 23).



Figure 23 – A party of adventurers raiding a dungeon in World of Warcraft³⁷³.

Whilst the game is easy to pick up, it is hard to master and lends itself to many hours of play in levelling up your avatar, exploring the world and getting the best equipment. Finding the highest tier equipment requires co-operation or interaction with other players, even if it is only by stabbing them in the face (during player-versus-player combat).

³⁷² Blizzard Entertainment. WORLD OF WARCRAFT® SUBSCRIBER BASE REACHES 12 <<http://eu.blizzard.com/en-gb/company/press/pressreleases.html?101007>>, 2010, [accessed 05/02/2011].

³⁷³ Markee Dragon. *World of Warcraft Screenshot*. <<http://www.markeedragon.com/screenshots/world-of-warcraft-player-made-screenshots/p9625-world-of-warcraft-screenshot.html>>, 2005, [accessed 22/02/11].

3.13.18 WWE SmackDown vs. Raw 2011

The *WWE* has been licensing games based on its wrestling matches since the 1980s. The most recent ones published by *THQ* allow gamers to play as a real wrestler or create their own. This involves a highly detailed sequence of appearance and move customisation. The game largely takes part in the ring with a variety of match types being available replicating what a fan might expect to see (Figure 24).

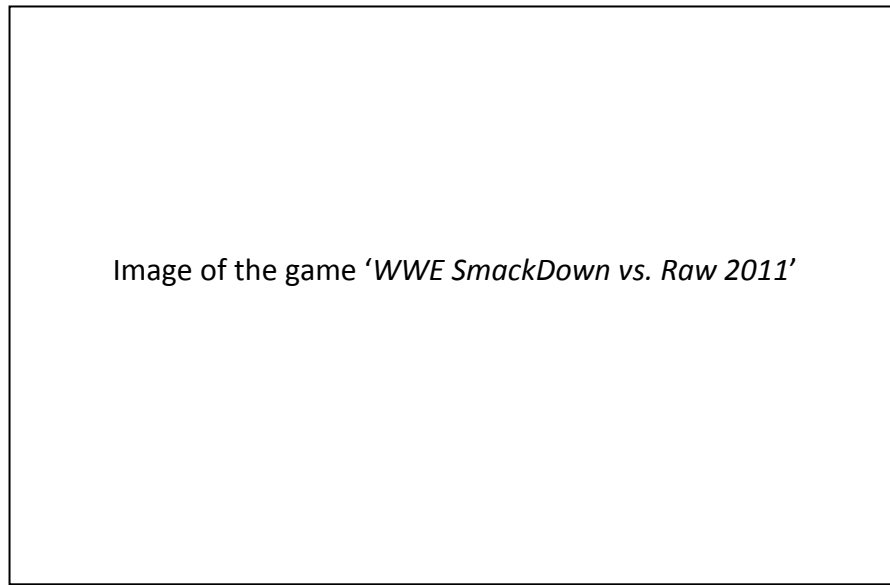


Figure 24 – A multiplayer match in WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2011³⁷⁴.

The series uses online multiplayer modes, but also allows friends to play co-operatively or against each other on the same console. Although there have been twelve games in the *Smackdown vs. Raw* series, they still receive critical praise for the minor innovations each game makes, and they sell well enough to guarantee more sequels.

³⁷⁴ Sanchez, D. *WWE Smackdown vs Raw 2011*.
<<http://www.gamezone.com//index.php/reviews/item/wwer-smackdown-vs-raw-2011-review1//item/wwer-smackdown-vs-raw-2011-review1/>>, 2011, [accessed 22/02/11].

3.14 The participants

Participant 1

A female full-time Information Science masters student in her early thirties, she often played puzzle games such as *Pikmin*, as well as real time strategy games (e.g. *Theme Hospital*). She has also played some role-playing games with her partner (participant 2); although she preferred that he controlled the games himself. She dislikes first-person shooters, and would rather be elsewhere when her partner plays them. She also used to call herself a “Warcraft widow” but is happier now a balance has been struck between her partner’s gaming and other leisure activities.

Participant 2

A male systems analyst in his early thirties, he has played many massively multiplayer online role-playing games including *EverQuest*, *Star Wars Galaxies*, *World of Warcraft*, *Aeon* and *Star Trek Online*. He has a group of friends based locally in and around Nottingham who play these games together, moving from MMO to MMO as they come out. He also plays single-player RPGs and first-person shooters. In addition to a high-specification gaming PC, he owns an Xbox 360, Nintendo Wii and Sony PSP.

Participant 3

A male physics PhD student in his mid-twenties, he classes playing digital games as his main hobby, his preferred platform being the PS3, although he had recently acquired a laptop capable of running games. His main genre is role-playing games, although he also plays first-person shooters, puzzle games, along with some sports and. He has a very ordered approach to avatar customisation and games in general, preferring to research and plan out the major decisions he will have to make.

Participant 4

A male physics PhD student in his mid-twenties at Loughborough University, participant 4 plays role-playing games in all their forms, being an active member of table-top role-playing club WarSoc, and also plays MMORPGs, single-player RPGs. and enjoys historical re-enactment.

Participant 5

A male customer services data administrator in his early forties living in Nottingham, this participant first started playing games in the nineteen eighties including arcade fighting titles such as *Gauntlet*. He did not play much during the nineteen nineties because he did not like the manner in which the games were developing. After this he preferred playing table-top role-playing games with friends until he picked up survival horror *Resident Evil* games on the Xbox 360, before encountering *Fable II* on sale in a local supermarket. He has now played through many RPGs several times each and juggles his newfound hobby with a long held interest in archaeology, history and re-enactment.

Participant 6

A male chemistry physics PhD student in his mid-twenties at Loughborough University, his preferred platform is the PS3, although he has owned gaming PCs in the past. He enjoys experimenting with all the possible options in sandbox games (including the likes of *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, *GTA*, and *Fallout 3*), and has played wrestling games in the past. His other hobbies include martial arts and football.

Participant 7

A male systems analyst in his early thirties, he owns an Xbox 360 and plays many games online with his friends from work. He also enjoys single-player role-playing games where he will try to playthrough a game from as many different moral standpoints and character classes as possible. Another of his hobbies is historical re-enactment.

Participant 8

A female physics students at Loughborough University in her mid-twenties, participant eight owns an Xbox 360 and plays a variety of genres, including survival horror (e.g. *Dead Space*), role-playing games (*Fallout 3*), real-time strategy games (*The Sims*) and open-world titles such as *GTA*.

Participant 9

A female Information Science PhD student in her early forties who has recently started to play PC single-player role-playing games after watching her partner play similar titles on his Xbox 360.

Participant 10

Also a physics male PhD student in his mid-twenties and living in Leicester, participant ten mostly plays single-player real-time strategy games and role-playing games. He owns an Xbox 360 and a PC, although when he often loans his Xbox out to his friends when he is not playing it. His play style is slightly chaotic, although when he makes plans regarding the trajectory of a character he will stick to them unless challenged.

Participant 11

Having just finished a masters engineering course, this 23 year old male gamer was looking forward to spending more time on his PC and Xbox 360. He has dreams of developing his own games, and takes a broad interest in the industry and the different genres. He tries to stay up to date with the newest developments, and will watch other gamers playthroughs on YouTube when he cannot afford a game or does not have time to play.

Participant 12

Studying for a PhD in engineering, this 28 year old female participant uses gaming to stay in touch with her friends at home in China. Owning both an Xbox 360 and PS3, she is a fan of Japanese RPGs, but does not enjoy their western equivalents due to their more realistic character designs and presentation. She also likes some first-person shooters with strong narrative elements (e.g. *Bioshock*), and Japanese fighting/hack and slash games such as *Bayonetta* and *Devil May Cry*.

Participant 13

This 29 year old male German student chose Loughborough University to do an engineering PhD, and enjoys role-playing games such as *Fable II* and *Mass Effect*.

Participant 14

This 23 year old female Information Science PhD student owns a PS3 and Wii and enjoys Japanese role-playing games and platforming games.

Participant 15

A 21 year old male undergraduate engineering student and member of Loughborough University's Computer Society, playing online and offline role-playing games. He shares many of his experiences with his gaming house mates and plays some shooters with them as a team.

Participant 16

This 32 year old male Dutch Information Science PhD student has been part of a competitive clan of gamers, focusing on particular first-person shooters. He now plays real-time strategy games, and role-playing games.

Participant 17

A 30 year old male physics PhD student who owns an Xbox 360, PS3 and gaming PC. He plays team based first-person shooters (*Team Fortress 2*, *Left 4 Dead*), and RPGs. He also practices martial arts.

Participant 18

A twenty year old male engineering undergraduate student and member of CompSoc who plays team based shooters with his housemates and single-player role-playing games such as *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*. The MMORPG *Runescape* was his main gaming interest whilst in secondary school. Whilst playing *RuneScape* he took pride in being perceived as an expert on the game at his school but now avoids such games because he wants to focus on studying.

Participant 19

Nineteen year old male computer science student with a strong preference for real-time strategy games, management simulations and some role-playing games. He also used to play *RuneScape*, where he enjoyed trolling its inhabitants whilst making sure they had to come for him for advice.

Participant 20

A male graduate of Loughborough University in his mid-twenties who still goes to WarSoc in order to play table-top role-playing games. He does not play many current digital games,

preferring the pen-and-paper equivalents, but has played some *Bioware* and *Lionhead* single-player RPGs.

Participant 21

A male engineer in his fifties, he was an early adopter of home computers including the Spectrum ZX and the Amiga on which he has fond memories in relation to sandbox space simulator *Elite*. He owned a PlayStation and PlayStation 3, and has played many role-playing games including the *Final Fantasy* series, but open-world RPG *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* is the game he spent the most time on recently. He also plays real-time strategy games.

Participant 22

Another male former student of Loughborough University in his late twenties who attends WarSoc in order to play table-top role-playing games. He also plays MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft*, and only rarely plays single-player RPGs.

Participant 23

A twenty four year old second year male engineering PhD student and member of CompSoc with which he regularly attends the LAN parties. He plays MMOs (space trading and warfare game *EVE*), real-time strategy games and single-player RPGs.

Participant 24

A twenty one year old male engineering degree finalist and member of CompSoc. He did not start gaming until he was in high school when he was given a PlayStation, and when he could afford to do so he built his first gaming PC, which he cites as one of his most memorable gaming achievements. He still plays some console games but prefers his PC. His favourite genres include single-player RPGs real-time strategy games.

Participant 25

A nineteen year old male in the second year of his aeronautical engineering degree, he shares his spare time between computer gaming and the officers training corps. Whilst he enjoys real-time strategy games, first-person shooters and single-player RPGs, he is a devotee of MMOs such as *World of Warcraft* and *Guild Wars*. All of his house mates have a similar taste in games, and they play these MMOs together.

Participant 26

Surrounded by computers from a young age due to his dad being in the electronics industry, this male physics PhD graduate has played many home computers and video game consoles. He currently owns an Xbox 360, and predominantly plays action-adventure games and single-player RPGs.

Participant 27

In the final year of a physics PhD, this twenty six year old male participant enjoys survival horror games (particularly the Resident Evil series before they became more action oriented), some single-player RPGs (*Fallout 3*) and sports games (*FIFA*). He likes to collect as many achievements as possible in each of the games he plays, and feels that he can become quite competitive during online matches of *Call of Duty*.

Participant 28

This 24 year old male physics PhD student has been playing digital games on and off since he was a child, when he shared his brother's console, and eventually moved onto PC gaming during his earlier university years and the first-person shooters that were popular then. At the time of interview he had borrowed a friend's PS2 and was playing through Japanese RPG *Final Fantasy XII*.

Participant 29

This 20 year old male information science student took a great interest in communication technologies, familiarising himself with old enterprise quality hardware purchased from eBay in his bedroom. He predominantly played first-person shooters with his friends, and often tries to employ exploits in such games in order to see what he can get away with.

Participant 30

A female final year PhD student in her mid thirties, she used to play PlayStation titles with her house mates at university, however, now she prefers the accessibility and low time requirements of web-browser puzzle games.

Chapter 4: Data analysis: strategic management of resources and development of avatar attributes

Corresponding objective: To gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings that players assign to the numerical development and management of avatars in digital games.

4.1 Introduction

Digital games give participants the chance to make moment-to-moment decisions over how various types of resources are used to influence how an avatar develops. Being granted the affordance to upgrade or alter an avatar in some way is often used as a reward in digital games in return for a player expending effort in some way. This chapter explains the perceptions that participants attached to their interactions with reward frameworks, along with their motivations for the choices they made within these schema.

The categories that emerged from the research reflect the types of rewards players received (items, skill points, attribute modifiers) and the basis for measuring their avatar's progression (levelling up). This is not a complete review of all possible reward or measures, but these categories reflect the ones most commonly mentioned by participants. The frequency with which these decisions can be made differs from game to game, restricted by the availability of resource management menus and options during gameplay modes, and also by the quantity of resource units possessed by the player³⁷⁵. Items may be dropped by a defeated enemy, acquired by searching the game environment or given by an NPC. Skill upgrades can depend on the player having enough money or experience points to purchase them and can be restricted based on an avatar's level. This chapter of the analysis begins with participants' comments relating to the usage of experience points and levels as a measure of progress towards acquiring more resource units.

4.2 Ding! - Levelling up³⁷⁶

There are several ways of implementing 'levelling up' in a digital game, one of the most common being through the accumulation of experience points through achieving certain

³⁷⁵ With several *WWE* games, changes to a characters skill set can only be made in-between matches, whilst the *Elder Scrolls* series allows players to change equipment and skills at any time apart from during conversations.

³⁷⁶ "Ding!" is the time worn call made by MMO players into their chat boxes to inform others they have levelled up. Ritualistically responded to with "grats" (congratulations) or "Dong!"

feats until a threshold is reached whereby the level of a player's avatar is increased. The player may then get to make further choices as to how their avatar develops. For example, when an avatar increases by a level in *World of Warcraft*, some of their base attributes (see chapter 4.3) increase, a talent point is awarded (chapter 4.4), more abilities are available to learn from NPCs (also chapter 4.4) and they can equip new items (section 4.7). This process of progression and growth is the framework through which players experience many games, and the cessation of rewards can determine when some games lose appeal with participants. Participant 11 believed this was the case with *Fallout 3*³⁷⁷:

Yeah, when you're looking for an item, then level up, then have to choose where you have to put your stats, then find a book so you can edit your stats, there's so many things going on in parallel, you have to keep them all in your head what you're doing. But as soon as you've got less and less to do, it's less interesting. It usually comes to a head when you reach the maximum level. It makes me want to start the game again but then I think "Do I want to start the game again?" and I just get fed up. [Participant 11]

Despite there being quests left unfinished Participant 11 was unable to keep playing without the levelling framework in which to strengthen his avatar and act as a marker of progress. Participant 7, Participant 13 and Participant 23 also felt that the maximisation of avatar attributes represented the end of their game. Unlike Participant 11, however, Participant 7 completed multiple playthroughs of each game, as long as he could develop his characters in different ways. Participant 9 also completed multiple playthroughs and tried to make them distinct from each other in attributes and in the narrative paths and allegiances they made, because it was more interesting than building and playing the same character over and over. Participant 11 believed that his characters would all develop along the same path because he could not alter his image of an ideal character, having strong preferences for certain abilities.

Levelling frameworks can be powerfully attractive for some players. Participant 18 played the MMO *Runescape* to the extent where it impacted his school performance, and he made

³⁷⁷ From this point onwards, text in italics indicates a quote from an interview. Text in bold and italics indicates a question posed by the interviewer. An ellipsis indicates a pause made by the participant. Bracketed ellipsis [...] indicates omission from the quote.

a concerted effort to reduce the amount of time he spent playing. He believes his infatuation with the game was partially caused by the allure of the XP system and what it represented:

With the whole competitively online thing, XP is probably the main thing. Because the rest of it is down to me, my reactions, and... do you know what I mean? There's nothing else I can really do, so being able to make a difference without having to change who I am makes me feel good. "Look how much work I put into this." XP to me is the experience I've gained which is directly proportional to the hours I've put in. It's the same with Call of Duty as well, sometimes I think... "That's all mine, I did that myself." And I have a direct affiliation with that, that sort of achievement of "look at what I've done." I'm the sort of person, I'll finish a task, step back and admire it for days and think "that's my own work." Sound self-centred but that's the sort of person I am. I enjoy the job, and like to see the results. [Participant 18]

Participant 27 also described unlockable features as his "badge of honour". As goals to aim for, and the subsequent rewards which have direct observable benefits to the player, the milestones of gaining experience points and attaining higher levels had a powerful effect on participants, which Participant 18 attested to when describing the amount of time he invested into *Runescape*.

*The 98 to 99 level is well over 1 million XP... I think that partly really did throw me off because once you got to the higher levels you realised how long it took. [...] We used to do silly things though. "Shall we do an all nighter?" "Why?" "So we can play all weekend." "...Yeah!" *laughs* and so we'd buy a six pack of Bull. We were just getting more game hours in so we could progress faster. I think to get to first, the player who'd been playing at the time that I played, I think he'd been playing everyday for six years. You can't do it otherwise. Call of Duty I could get up the last level, 69 to 70 I could probably do it in a few hours. Runescape, for my last levels, I used to spend days, weeks. Just doing the same skills. [Participant 18]*

Despite competition between friends, Participant 18 never achieved the highest levels in *Runescape* (Figure 25) because of the potential impact on his grades. With the knowledge of

his own susceptibility to reward schemes he now tries to avoid games he knows he will be predisposed towards investing large amounts of time in. *Call of Duty* multiplayer gives a similar satisfaction yet only requires persistence and half an hour a day of play to eventually gain the same rewards more skillful players reach quicker.



Figure 25 – Players exploring a town in Runescape³⁷⁸.

Another issue regarding the mechanics of levelling highlighted by participants was that of levelled areas. Levelling is also important in single-player games as it establishes players' strengths and weaknesses relative to the enemies and NPCs around them. Games such as *Final Fantasy VIII* and *Oblivion* adjust the strength of hostile NPC to provide players with a continuously challenging experience. Levelled areas were a contentious issue for participants, with some disagreeing with the practice and others endorsing it. Participant 9 felt that it detracted from her sense of progress:

Emotionally I don't feel my character has levelled up, because all of the monsters level up with you. [...] You expect to be able to tackle harder things, fine, but you also want to be shown that you're getting better. So you are getting that feedback so you can go "yes! I can defeat him now as opposed to earlier when I just got mused." That I found really irritating. [Participant 9]

³⁷⁸ Jagex. Screenshot 15.

<http://www.runescape.com/img/main/downloads_and_media/downloads_and_wallpapers/media/screenshots/screenshots_15.jpg>, [n.d], [accessed 01.12.11].

Participant 2, Participant 7 and Participant 13 were of the same opinion, feeling that it detracted from their sense of power and that it was too obvious that the game world was shifting with the advancement of the player, not in relation to any particular story events. Participant 17 defended the practice, stating that it would be awkward if a player did not receive XP and items for fighting commonly available enemies stating that such setups become a “habitual grind”. Levelling areas and enemies attempts to alleviate the ‘grind’ of experiencing the same repetitive task over and over again, however, it seems players need to have some easy enemies to kill otherwise they feel that they have not progressed.

4.3 Attributes

In games with closed and open avatars it is necessary for the strengths of an avatar to be comparable to that of NPCs, environmental forces or other player-characters. Avatar attributes quantify the extent to which an avatar possesses a particular characteristic and with open-avatars in particular, these attributes can be developed according to the player’s tastes. The traditional *Dungeons and Dragons* attributes are strength (muscle and physical power), dexterity (hand-eye coordination, agility, reflexes, and balance), constitution (health, stamina, and vital force), intelligence (learning and reasoning), wisdom (common sense, perception, self-discipline, and empathy) and charisma (personality, persuasiveness, and leadership)³⁷⁹, and they were worked into the calculations that made up the core mechanics of the table-top game. *World of Warcraft* uses a similar system of strength, agility, stamina, intellect, and spirit, with a whole variety of secondary statistics (hit rating, dodge, critical strike) which rely on a combination of gear, buff spells³⁸⁰ and primary statistics³⁸¹ (Figure 26).

³⁷⁹ Nelson-Brown, J. *New Player Tutorial: Ability Scores*.

<<http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=dnd/playdnd/20060325a>>, 2006, accessed 01.12.11].

³⁸⁰ Spells or potion effects that boost an avatars attributes.

³⁸¹ WoW Wiki. *Attributes*. <<http://www.wowwiki.com/Attributes>>, 2011, [accessed 01.12.11].



Figure 26 – A human warlock’s core stats in World of Warcraft. The Green numbers denote stats enhanced by gear or buffs.³⁸²

How explicit these attributes depends on the game, with some preferring to keep statistics “under the hood” so players can concentrate on other aspects of the experience. For games with these attributes in view, such as RPGs (*Dragon Age: Origins*), real time strategy games (e.g. the units in *Age of Empires*) and some sports games (e.g. *Football Manager*, which also has some hidden attributes), many of the activities participants performed and the strategies they formulated were indirectly increasing their avatar’s attributes.

Participant 3 was one of several participants who monitored the relationship between the base attributes of his *Fallout 3* avatar and their impact on how the game played. Although he liked to read additional information from wikis in order to understand the games systems he found that it was difficult to entirely understand such systems without experiencing them first hand. Hence he would experiment with a game before restarting it so he could plan his character properly.

It isn't until you've actually levelled up a couple of times and fiddled with it and seen it happen for yourself it's very hard to get your head around it. It's just like a mathematical system on these things. An extra point on your SPECIAL, an extra one on your strength, that gives you a plus three boost on the three corresponding stats in the categories. So I worked as an equation like that, if I knew how much I could get my special stats up to I knew how much of a bonus I would get. [Participant 3]

³⁸² Blizzard. *Calliana @ Argent Dawn – Game – World of Warcraft*. <<http://eu.battle.net/wow/en/character/argent-dawn/Calliana/advanced>>, 2011, [accessed 01.12.11].

Even though base attributes of avatars influence the outcome of combat, exploration and communication with NPCs in *Fallout 3*, improving attributes was not a moment-to-moment concern for any participant. Instead, improving equipment and skills were more immediate goals because they could clearly see the results of developing such things and had more opportunities to do so than with SPECIAL attributes.

It's important, and I thought carefully about what perks I chose, I collected the bobbleheads, but when you're following a quest or massacring some raiders the first thing that's on your mind isn't SPECIAL stats! They're just one of the things I think about, but I'd say that perks and skills, and items were the most important things. Probably because you could only influence your SPECIAL stats directly a few times in the game. The other things you can do more about more often, if that makes any sense. [Participant 6]

There's an ultimate goal of improving particular stats but it's an abstract plan really. I hunt after the good loot because it's good stuff, not just because of the numbers, if you see what I mean. [Participant 26]

Primary attributes and derived attributes play a large role in the mastery of MMOs, such as *World of Warcraft*, but attributes and their effects in MMOs are subject to radical rebalancing, unlike most single-player games. When Blizzard wants to change the balance of gameplay and differentiate classes they often do so through removing, adding or altering the relationships between attributes. Consequently, participants who relied on their attributes for raiding high-end dungeons needed to be aware of the changes a new software patch may make to their class.

In Warcraft, there were loads of stats. Didn't matter when you were levelling, you could almost ignore them, but raiding you needed to know them all pretty well. Blizzard would change them in patches, so you had to keep on top of that and with uni I found I couldn't do that so I felt it was slipping away from me a bit. [...] I relied more on my guild mates for advice, and that didn't feel good as I always felt the guild thought that people who didn't make an effect were time wasters, although that's perhaps more my attitude. [Participant 15]

Participant 15 derived satisfaction from understanding the systems of *WoW* more than some other players, but this was also a source of frustration when he could not live up to his own standards later in his *WoW* career. This mastery over the workings of the game system is one aspect of the “elite mentality” that several participants described, where paying attention to attributes separates them from the so called ‘casual’ players.

You can get from level 1 to 80 with the bare minimum of knowledge. And you see it. You see people come along who’ve got completely the wrong armour on which boosts all the wrong numbers, and you look at them and think... “Well, they haven’t talked to anyone about the game much.” They might be enjoying it, but to me it’s an early warning sign not to party up with them. [Participant 25]

In MMOs a player’s choice of equipment not only reflects the effort they put in to a game, but also demonstrates their knowledge of attributes and core mechanics and is therefore a marker of gaming capital. The presence or absence of gaming capital allows someone to judge the skills and predict the level of ability another player before even seeing that player in action.

4.4 Skill selection

The abilities and knowledge an avatar accumulates are known as skills (alternately called traits, perks, and talents by different games). The effectiveness of skills can be proportionate to a parent attribute, and the class of a player-character may influence the extent to which they have access to or how far they can develop certain skills. Skills can often be learned from NPCs or accessed through investing talent or upgrade points earned from levelling up into skill/talent trees. A skill/talent tree consists of skills often unique to a particular class, and can confer anything from a persistent reduction in ability cooldowns, bonuses to status attributes and new abilities. They are called trees because learning one skill will often unlock two other skills, which in turn could unlock more, so the structure of the progression path branches out (Figure 27 and Figure 28). Many games use skill upgrades as a form of avatar customisation, even if no other aspect of that avatar can be altered (Figure 29)³⁸³.

³⁸³ *Batman: Arkham City* has a levelling system which grants upgrade points that can be invested in new combat moves, unlock gadgets and improve armour but the character of Batman retains his agency during cutscenes and his distinctive appearance.

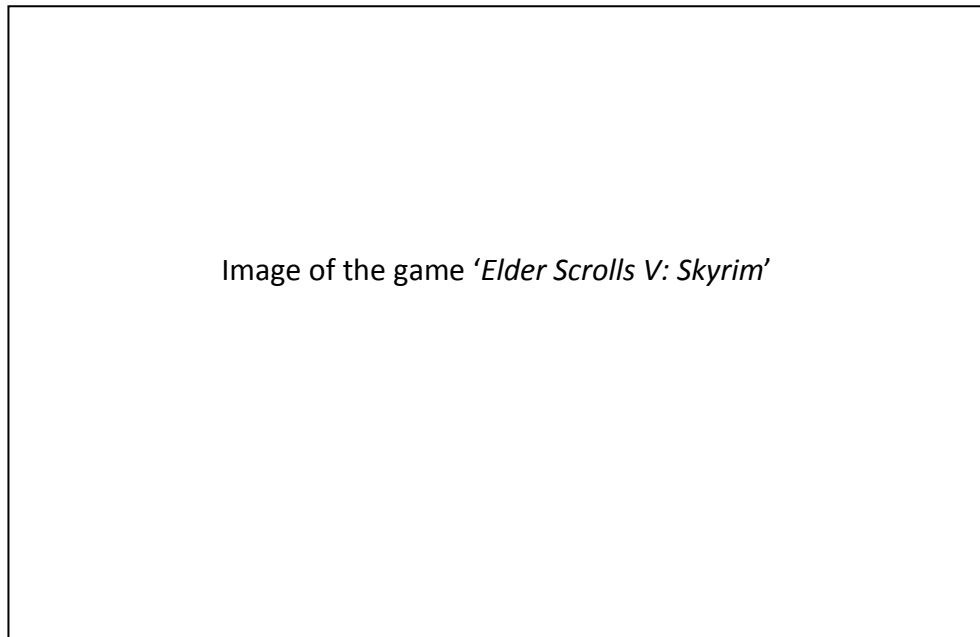


Figure 27 – Skyrim’s character skill screen³⁸⁴.

³⁸⁴ Bethesda. *Skills Menu*.

<http://cms.elderscrolls.com/sites/default/files/tes/screenshots/SkillsMenu_wLegal.jpg>, 2011, [accessed 01.12.11].

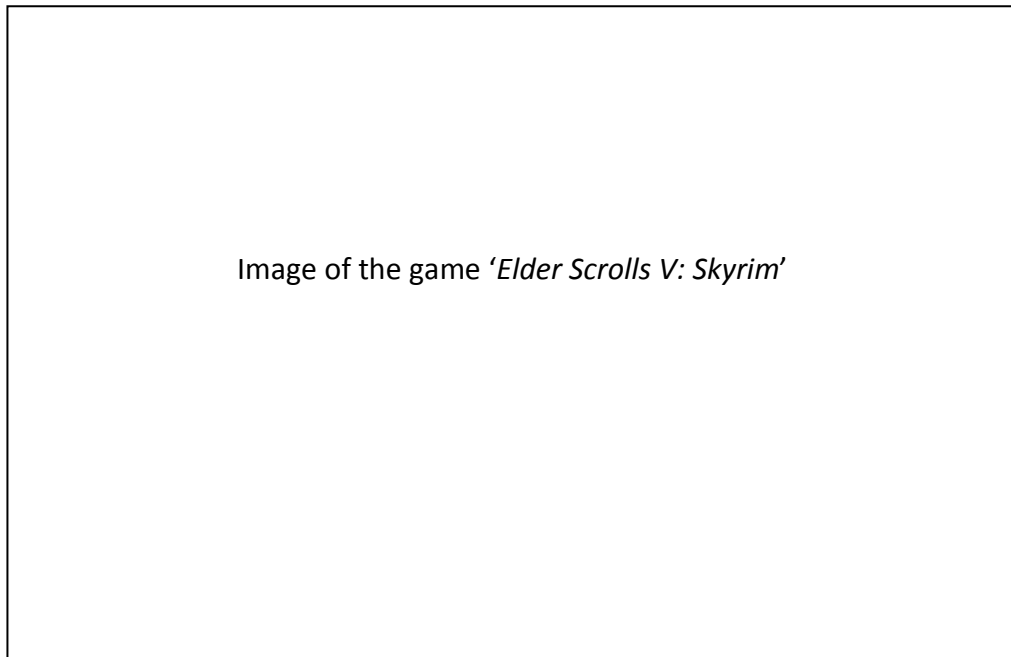


Figure 28 – *Skyrim's* perk tree (Destruction).³⁸⁵

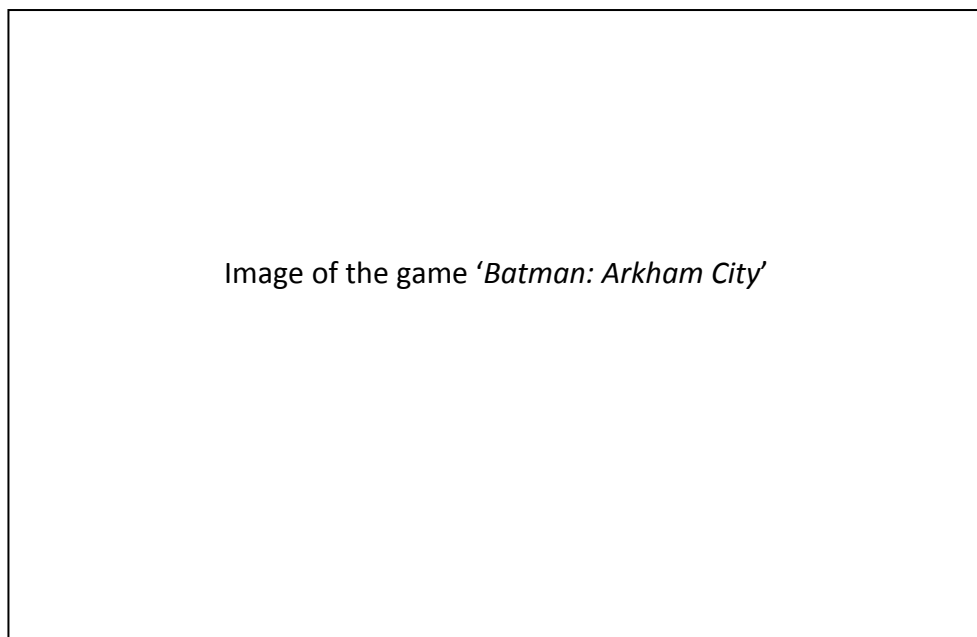


Figure 29 – *Arkham City's* upgrade system, featuring upgrades to equipment and skills.³⁸⁶

³⁸⁵ Shaduxx [YouTube username]. *Skyrim - Perks, Combat, Spells, Inventory, Horses!* <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VsXh7BXIkvk>>, 2011, [01.12.11].

³⁸⁶ prakieva [YouTube username]. *Batman: Arkham City Walkthrough: Part 4 - Level Up [HD Let's Play]*. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vh2UV1xMjls>>, 2011, [accessed 01.12.11].

4.5 Selecting appropriate skills

Participants described different plans of action for developing the abilities of their avatars and explained the reasoning behind their strategies. Participants 11, 13, 17 and 26 described their preferred skill selection strategy whilst leveling up as being to specialise their avatars in certain abilities and to spread the remaining upgrades as evenly through skills as possible.

I've noticed in all RPGs if you focus on making yourself good with one thing as opposed to being balanced. Being balanced gets you killed. If you focus on one thing on Final Fantasy for example, each character will have specific roles, like a job system so you focus on their role. That makes your party all the more powerful. [Participant 17]

Participant 7 argued that specialising an avatar's skills or talents too much brings as much risk as not choosing to quickly maximise one skill. He preferred to prioritise placing points into talents/perks that would impact how several or all abilities performed.

When it comes to assigning points in Mass Effect 2 there are skills which give you an immediate ability or storm, or amplify, there are also class based skills which affect your other abilities like reducing your cooldowns, increasing your damage, I tend to initially put into those quite high, which make everything more powerful rather than a specific aspect of your abilities. I'd go for the broader perspective. You might get more powerful slowly but everything comes up. [Participant 7]

Capitalising on global and persistent effects³⁸⁷ was also a hallmark of Participant 11's plans who also tried to increase the rewards of levelling up (skill points) so his avatar can get stronger quicker. For example, with *Fallout 3* he did this through exploiting his knowledge of the relationship between attributes and skills in order to make his character as 'l33t' (elite) as possible³⁸⁸.

³⁸⁷ 'Global' in the context of RPGs refers to limits or bonuses that impact on many, if not all usable abilities.

³⁸⁸ His definition of elite is to include maxing out skills as quickly as possible so he would have access to locked areas quicker and also have higher combat skills than enemies at the same level as him.

I chose nine intelligence, immediately went to this aircraft carrier and get the intelligence bobblehead so I have maxed out intelligence but with the minimum use of points, using your points up, so that way I'd level up and receive 24 points which was great. Whenever I chose a perk, I'd never just chose one which meant you were better in night or better in day, half of the time that's useless, I'd choose something in VATS for instance you're going to get better accuracy because you'd always do that, it felt to me like it would help through the entire game and I wanted to build the strongest character. There's several novelty ones, I took the Mysterious Stranger for the first playthrough but after that I didn't bother. [Participant 11]

Whilst participant 11 was tempted once by a novelty perk (Figure 30), Participant 3 was determined not to waste skill points to increase his avatar's development speed or take unnecessary perks.

I chose ones that give permanent stat boosts like the radiation resistant perk as opposed to, well, Fallout had some useless ones. Like the Big Guns skill gives you an increase to Big Guns quicker by five, ten, fifteen, but you can pick up skill books³⁸⁹. You can quite easily get strength or whatever the corresponding stat was up to hundred without ever having to choose that perk. So I went through very thoroughly before I played the game and made sure that I didn't choose a perk which was unnecessary and that I couldn't otherwise get elsewhere. [Participant 3]

³⁸⁹ Collectable items that increase skill points.



Figure 30 – The Mysterious Stranger Perk in Fallout 3.³⁹⁰

Perks such as the Mysterious Stranger where a gun-toting NPC randomly appears in battle to aid you might seem wasteful when viewing avatar development in terms of efficiency, but can tempt some players enough to break from their levelling strategy. This temptation or ability to deviate from what is perceived as the most efficient way to develop avatars is what kept some participants interested in their avatars augmentation over the course of lengthy games.

Participant 8, Participant 11, Participant 13 and Participant 22 talked about leaving some flexibility in their plans for their avatars' skills so they could adapt their characters abilities to what they believed would be useful at a given time or what they thought "felt right" (Participant 13). Participant 11 described it as "having a plan but leaving it open, and I'd see where the game takes me", and Participant 8 said that she "would do whatever I felt like at the time." Participant 22 described how it felt in the past when he had laid out detailed plans for skill progression in MMO *World of Warcraft*.

If I think too far ahead with my plans, it gets kind of... depressing, almost. Because I know how long it will take me to get to filling in that bit of the talent tree, all the hours I'll have to put in. It's too much like work. And knowing exactly what you're going to do makes it all seem very inevitable, not very... spontaneous

³⁹⁰ Fallout: New Vegas tips. *Fallout 3 – List of Perks*. <<http://www.falloutnewvegastips.net/2011/07/fallout-3-list-of-perks/>>, 2011, [accessed 01.12.11].

is the word I'm looking for. If I didn't leave a bit of room for taking what I wanted at the moment I levelled up it would be boring! [Participant 22]

Another factor that influenced skill selection was the level of tactical thinking each skill (once unlocked) required to operate. For example, Although Participant 3 enjoyed developing strategies for progressing within complex skill systems he did not like *Oblivion's* magic system due to the many different schools of spells. He reasoned that no amount of planning could make the moment-to-moment spell selection any easier so preferred simpler offensive and defensive abilities. Conversely, participants 7, 17, and 26 enjoyed *Oblivion's* magic skills because of the tactical thinking required and variety of spells available.

4.6 'Cookie cutter builds'

Participant 25 explained the concept of "cookie cutter builds": the idea that, despite all the different permutations a talent system can offer, there are a handful of optimal skill and talent builds in an MMORPG³⁹¹. They are devised by the "theory builders"³⁹² in the community and will be replicated en masse. Participant 25 believed that the emergence of cookie cutter builds reduced the creativity of players and also increased the homogeneity of characters that he faced in PvP situations. It also created expectations of players in raid groups that they would seek out and specialise their character to these builds, a practice that Participant 2 indicated was wide spread in the MMOs he played.

The game [Guild Wars] you play now isn't like the game back then because now everybody knows what they are doing, they know the best numbers, the best way to play in a team. So now it's just numbers, it's very binary, very number oriented, and team oriented. Whereas in its original concept it was so randomised you could come across anything and you couldn't predict it. [Participant 25]

When the game was young and before a revamp of how the abilities in *Guild Wars* worked, there was more room for experimentation and less incentives for replicating the specialisations of other players. Because it was not possible to test all of the possible skill

³⁹¹ The min-maxing mentality (minimising undersirable traits/maximising desired ones) also denotes that there are certain equipment combinations that are the most optimal for specific situations.

³⁹² Players who purportedly know the attribute, skill, equipment and combat systems of a game to the extent where they can actively debate and prescribe optimal builds.

combinations, it was still possible for individual players to find builds that made themselves almost invincible until developers tweaked the game or other players successfully managed to replicate it. Participant 22 noted that this kind of secrecy was no longer possible in *World of Warcraft* as the WoW Armoury³⁹³ online database incorporated into the game's website search function makes avatar builds publically available for scrutiny and they are also viewable in-game, along with the players equipment and attributes.



Figure 31 – The talent trees of a human warlock as viewed through WoW's EU website³⁹⁴

A tactic used by raid group recruiters involves assessing whether potential candidates 'understand' their class or not using these profiles, and also seeing them perform in a Player versus Environment context. Those who use non-conformist builds are unlikely to get into a raid group³⁹⁵. Though harsh, there are some combinations of skills that do not make sense in relation to the primary function of a given avatars class. Participant 24 believed that the players who adopted such builds were often inexperienced loners who did not socialise with others in the game, or had out-of-date knowledge on how their class worked. This attitude is indicative of the norms and pressures that the often competitive nature of MMO society engenders.

³⁹³ Blizzard. *World of Warcraft: Cataclysm*. <<http://eu.battle.net/wow/en/>>, 2011, [accessed 01/12/11].

³⁹⁴ Blizzard. *Talents & Glyphs – Calliana*. <<http://eu.battle.net/wow/en/character/argent-dawn/Calliana/talent/primary>>, 2011, [accessed 01.12.11].

³⁹⁵ Raid groups use application systems and trials to ensure that potential members are suitable for their culture and goals.

4.6.1 Matching virtual and non-virtual abilities

Single-player RPGs and simulation games generally offered participants more chances for experimentation outside of community pressures (with some exceptions that will be detailed in Chapter 8:). Consequently, participants felt more at liberty to choose the skills that appealed to them. For example, Participant 19 selected hobbies for his Sims based on his own tastes and values:

The Sims... I grinded that game. I got a person. I got him to the top level of his skills and they died. And then I got their son to the top of their skills. It was a bit of a weird way of playing. I just wanted the walk distances as small as possible. Have the top level as a bed, and that was the only thing that was on the top level, so he slept as little as possible so he has the most time for reading and learning chess. Stuff I like doing mostly. Thinking logically and reading. It was really satisfying to see them make progress. [Participant 19]

For Participant 19, he saw it as a chance to enact his own values in the game by applying the click-per-minute strategies of real-time-strategy games and creating a dynasty of Sims with the characteristics and skills that he covets from his own personality. The compulsion to level up skills provides a strong motivation for Participant 19 to play *The Sims*, but several participants (Participants 2, 7, 8, 14, 28), did not see the long term attraction in managing the life of a Sim. For example, Participant 7 and Participant 28 found that improving a Sim's capabilities on reading, fitness, painting, cooking, playing chess reminded them of their own short comings and made them feel guilty for playing *The Sims*.

Other examples of matching avatar skills to hobbies or areas of interest that the participants held in real life were mentioned in the context of *Fallout 3*. Participant 8 (PhD student) and Participant 15 (engineer student and CompSoc member) prioritised the science orientated skills³⁹⁶ and perks where possible because they aspired to the role of scientist and identified with the technical knowledge required to build and maintain computers respectively.

³⁹⁶ The Science skill determines the complexity of computer security players can bypass.

Participant 11 described desiring repair related skills³⁹⁷ and perks because of his affinity for engineering and his own research.

Sometimes skills and perks were chosen because participants saw what they perceived to be defining elements of their real life persona other than hobbies or academic interests. Participant 23 chose the 'Four Eyes' character trait in *Fallout: New Vegas* in order to project a facet of his own appearance and visual acuity onto his character.

I sometimes take perks... Like the one in New Vegas, the one to do with glasses. Without glasses you're minus perception... I have to wear glasses for reading and writing, so... I do like to put it so it's me, but not all the time. [Participant 23]

Sports games such as the *FIFA* and *WWE* franchise allow for the creation and customisation of athletes, with the tailoring of abilities and attributes to suit the desired strengths of the player. Participant 27 tried to match his *FIFA* avatar's abilities with his own. Playing local league football he was aware of his abilities and shortcomings:

Obviously I wanted a few abilities up so you can actually play the game. I'm pretty fast so I put most of the stats in the game on speed, but then I can't run for very long so stamina was low. Heading ability high. It was a balance thing, you only had so many points that you could allocate. You could take them off. Take the points off things that weren't important that I wasn't bothered about and put them on things I was quite good at, scaled it up. If I was digitised onto FIFA, my stats, my skills and abilities would probably be 20 out of 100 so I just sort of scale everything up. With speed I'd put it at 50...I'd try and keep the ratio of my skills. If it was realistic, it would be so bad that I couldn't play the game. [Participant 27]

Participant 27 admitted the wish fulfillment involved in his *FIFA* avatar's development as he had dreams of becoming a professional footballer. Although his real abilities did not reach international footballer standard he tried to preserve the ratios between the different skills that he believed he had. As a result he felt that his avatar was more reflective of his own capabilities and took pride in the resulting victories.

³⁹⁷ The Repair skill governs how well players can repair their equipment and also build new weapons.

When strategies did not work or the skills participants wanted to focus on were not adequate for overcoming the games obstacles, disappointment ensued. The repeated example from participants (Participants 6, 15, 17, 26) regarding skills they had trouble using was the magic system in *Oblivion* which was rarely strong enough to be used in isolation.

I started off trying to be a high elf mage, and throwing fire balls is fun. You had to throw about eight billion fire balls and wait for your magic to recharge in order to get them more powerful, and they're weak anyway. I realised that I was having to stab people with my dagger to finish anything off, and that was quite annoying. I thought "Sod this." Big, brawn, hard character, and that was easier.
[Participant 17]

The other participants' complaints were similar, although none went to the extent of re-rolling their avatar. Even though single-player games offer more freedom for experimentation outside of the expectations that a group of players all looking to be "elite" generate, there are still some strategies and character builds that will not work effectively because of the decisions made by developers.

You get the choice over what you want to be and then later you think, "Ah, should have chosen something else." You think, "Oh I just want to get on with it, I'll take that and that and that and that." And later it's like "Ooh, I really ruined it, I can't do that now." There probably are ways around it but I had made such a pigs ear out of it. [Participant 14]

It is possible for players in *Oblivion* to create an avatar where they do not understand the relationships between skills and attributes, but they may abandon that character when they persistently have trouble overcoming obstacles in the game. In Participant 14's case, she was disappointed by her failed character and intimidated enough by the levelling system not to come back to *Oblivion*.

4.7 Items and inventory management

Another of the main ways participants spoke of upgrading their avatar is through the collection and management of objects encountered in the game. Equippable items can have bonuses that raise an avatar's base attributes, and other items (e.g. a key) may be the

subject of mission goals and puzzles (Figure 32). Equipment selection may be vital to fulfilling mission objectives as in tactical first-person shooters (e.g. the *SWAT* series, *Rainbow Six*), and in team based/multiplayer first-person shooters (e.g. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, *Team Fortress 2*) (Figure 33) items earned through combat can be equipped to gain an advantage over other players.

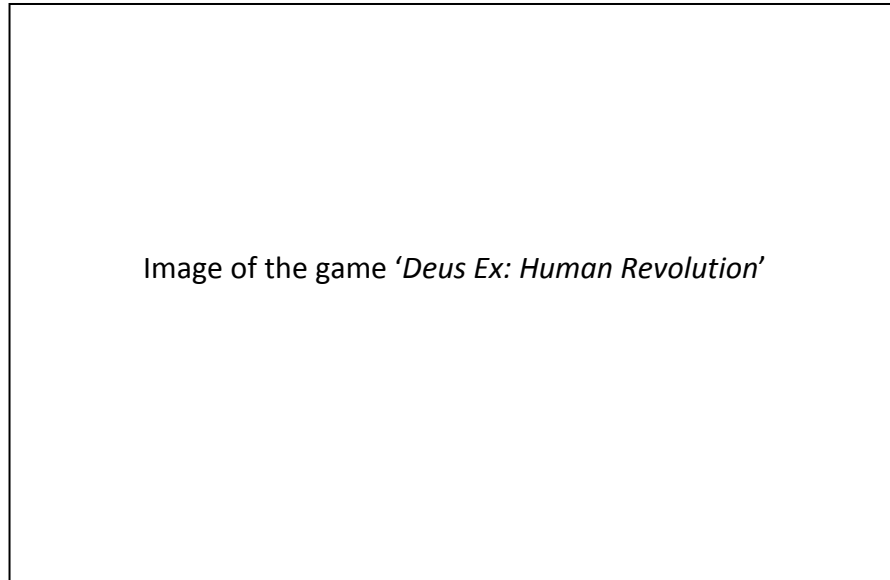


Figure 32 – The inventory menu in Deus Ex: Human Revolution³⁹⁸.

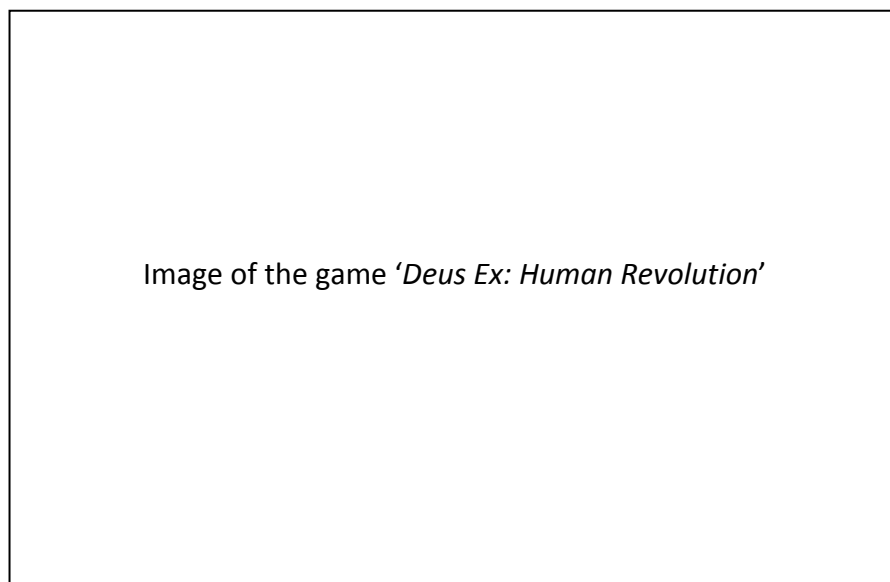


Figure 33 – The Modern Warfare 2 Create a Class menu featuring item and skill selection³⁹⁹

³⁹⁸ Tao [MobyGames username]. *Menu – Inventory*.
<<http://www.mobygames.com/game/windows/deus-ex-human-revolution/screenshots/gameShotId,522959/>>, 2011, [accessed 01.12.11].

Choosing which items to equip or discard, planning which ones are to be pursued next and arranging items for storage (for many games place limits on how much individual avatars may carry with some implementing a grid system which maps out the physical space of an inventory) figured largely in the experiences of participants. It was through making these decisions that several participants described how they could measure the progression of their character, but also how they had power over it.

By changing your equipment, you feel like you're investing in the character, it's like this character has become personal to you. If you do that over time, that's a really nice feeling. Sometimes if you don't get to change anything about them, you just feel like you're the same character, you don't feel like you've progressed.
[Participant 11]

Having the agency to make these decisions over how to improve their characters makes them feel powerful: it gives them the sense that they can do something to improve their lot, and they can expend effort in doing so that is not wasted. It will help them beat the final boss, or hold their own in a player-versus-player environment.

And a lot of the time because the side quests are to do with gaining the best weapons. It makes the hardest enemies a lot easier, which is the point. You have to spend time collecting weapons and getting stronger when your gains with XP really aren't helping that much anymore. [Participant 17]

Items are the means to an end whereby they help players overcome challenges they encounter. Occasionally, participants described how this could be obscured by items becoming desirable in and of themselves, not in relation to any effect they could have on the player's performance, but as symbols of prestige and achievement.

You know that you can beat the final boss without having the strongest weapon but if you have the strongest weapons you have the confidence to think "I will kick your ass in ten seconds!" Even if you don't find the strongest weapon in the

³⁹⁹ TheModernwarfare4you [YouTube username]. *Modern warfare 2 Perks - Weapons - Killstreaks – Maps*. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPIKn8QhHgM>>, 2009, [accessed 01.12.11].

game, you will always think “I have to play this game again to find the strongest weapon, otherwise I’m not finished in this game.” [Participant 12]

The items an avatar possesses are representative of the effort the player has put into a game, and a measure of how much content they have explored. From this perspective it is evident why Participant 12 would not consider a *Final Fantasy* game complete until she has found all of the most powerful equipment, even if there is nothing to do with them by the time she has finished.

In MMOs, where a player’s place in the community can be interpreted from armour worn, being seen to possess high level equipment provided a sense of accomplishment for Participant 18.

I do like sitting on my high horse in games, with big levels, and big emblems, that sort of thing. The best armour. I used to do that a lot in Runescape. Level ninety nine capes wherever I used to go. “Yeah! Look at me!” [Participant 18]

Both participants 2 and 25 believed the love of acquiring loot and flaunting it is a prerequisite for enjoying the game. Participant 18 described the feeling of seeing a felled mob, sparkling because it has an item to loot, as proving irresistible and “very compulsive”, even in the knowledge that the reward is likely to be very little. Players of both single-player RPGs and MMOs cannot predict when the good loot will drop, but they can be certain of some sort of reward for their efforts, even if it is just ‘vendor trash’⁴⁰⁰.

RPGs such as *Oblivion* and *Warcraft* teach players to expect rewards in the form of loot early in the lives of their avatars. Fighting mobs leads to rewards which assist in tackling harder enemies. With this mechanic established in the minds of players they are taught to covet items⁴⁰¹.

As participant 17 observed earlier, earning experience points and skill ups can only progress an avatar to a predetermined maximum level (known as a ‘level cap’). A way to extend their strengths beyond what the games level cap will allow is to acquire high end loot, a practice

⁴⁰⁰ MMO term for loot which is only good for selling to NPC shop keepers for its cash value.

⁴⁰¹ This is also the case in single-player RPGs. Participants 3 and 27 described how they would compulsively loot everything they could find and either sell it or store it in their homes in *Fallout 3*.

frequently employed by *World of Warcraft* players⁴⁰². Groups of up to forty gamers may gather and attempt to tackle the hardest enemy encounters in a game through teamwork, the fruits of which being these high level items.

Eventually I got to the point in the game where my gear was perfect. Couldn't run out of mana at all because the guys at the back were dropping innervate on me. It got to the point where I was going through 30k mana... In WoW, with the numbers again, we did Naxxramus. [Participant 25]

Raid groups eventually conquer the content set for them by Blizzard and, if they are quick about it, can equip their members with the best items available. The game would be effectively over once this equipment has been attained; however, MMOs periodically go through a cycle of renewal where new end-game content is introduced featuring even more powerful items which are only attainable through possessing the former highest tier of equipment. Staying at the cutting edge of this progression sequence takes time and effort, something that participant 2 eventually tired of in both PvE raiding and PvP competitions.

I got bored of it because, there's two sides to it, I enjoy PvP and its the first game where I found that they were bringing in seasons and when they brought in a new season, which is where they bring in gear with slightly better stats. Which was making you do the same things over and over again for something you've already earned. It was the complete throw away nature of the thing which put me off. That put me off the PvP side thing [Participant 2]

Participant 19, Participant 22 and Participant 25 also eventually became dissatisfied with the never-ending quest for the best loot which prompted them to quit raiding altogether.

⁴⁰² At one point, participant 25 described some items as being classed as level 85, where the maximum level he could traditionally attain was 80.

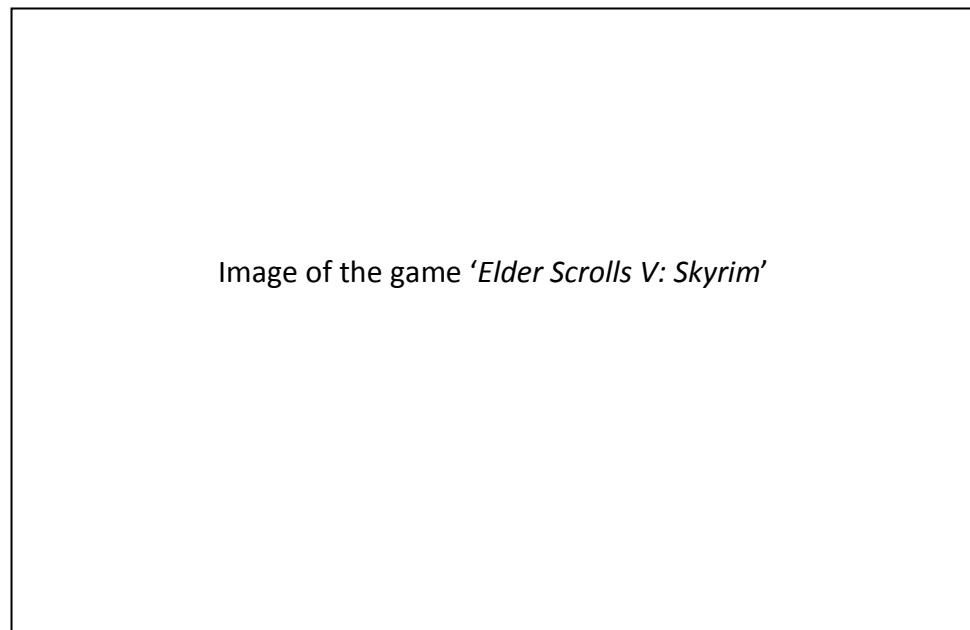


Figure 34 – A redditor's home in *Skyrim*, filled with loot⁴⁰³.

The compulsive nature of rewards in MMOs can also extend to single-player games (Figure 34). Prior to his quitting of *Diablo II* (a heavily loot oriented RPG), Participant 26 describe the realisation of how much time he was spending on the game.

I finished it in fact I played through it with the grasp that Diablo had on me collecting new things, and one day I thought "What the hell am I doing?" And I just put it down. I've been playing this dungeon over and over, and finding something new was great. I actually got one of the really rare things. But eventually I thought "Ahh, screw it." Once you've extracted all the novelty from it and you're desensitised to it now then it's kind of fulfilled its purpose. [Participant 26]

Participants 3, 7, 25, and 26 described a similar realisation for both MMO and single-player players games. Participant 25 called this phase of the avatar life cycle "the long goodbye" (Participant 25), called so because it took a while for him to recognise that he was not enjoying himself in-game but still returned to it through habit. With single-player RPGs, the

⁴⁰³ Titties [reddit username]. *I'm a bit of a hoarder. The frame rate struggles when I come home.*

<[http://www.reddit.com/r/gaming/comments/mkeb8/im a bit of a hoarder the frame r ate struggles/](http://www.reddit.com/r/gaming/comments/mkeb8/im_a_bit_of_a_hoarder_the_frame_rate_struggles/)>, 2011, [accessed 01/12/11].

long goodbye often coincided with participants maxing out avatars attributes to the point where further equipment collecting is possible but unnecessary. With *WoW* Participant 25's attachment to the community made it hard to quit, even when the items no longer were providing the psychological rewards they once did.

4.8 Conclusions

Where possible, participants tailored their strategies for interacting with the reward systems so that they were positioned to receive more of the rewards that they enjoyed through gameplay in the future. The feelings of emptiness and withdrawal described which some participants felt when their avatars got to the point in a game where they have reached the end of the progression path was partly because they missed the sense of advancement, the motivation it provided and the opportunities for creative solutions. Some participants missed those to the extent that they would rather restart a game to take different narrative paths in order to experience left over content, or give up on the game altogether.

The descriptions given by MMO players in particular over the compulsions they felt to reach the next level, to get the best gear and to start new characters when they felt they were not progressing enough with their current one demonstrates how such games succeed in providing attainable and satisfying goals that can keep players tied into their reward cycles for many months. Even if it is through getting players to repeat the same actions over and over, players adopt these goals to the extent that they do not mind the amount of time and energy they have to put into getting their epic-leveled loot and do not necessarily believe that, in retrospect, that they wasted their time.

Mastery over these reward systems is also a source of pride, and in MMOs the outward signs of achievement and knowledge of the game systems (e.g. wearing the right equipment) serve as a status symbol which can help players gain respect from others or potentially alienate them further from developing contacts. Players can interpret poorly chosen equipment as a sign of a lack of knowledge, making some think twice about co-operating with those who show signs of inexperience because they know such signs can translate into troublesome dungeon runs and failure.

Getting to grips with the attributes of an avatar and the relationship they have with other aspects of the game can be hard work, as evidenced by these participants who would

sometimes have to do additional reading in order to understand them. Those not willing to put this effort in, or without the time to do so sometimes get branded as “causal gamers” by players who believe they have mastered the game, which is symptomatic of the hierarchy in the raiding societies of MMOs. Delineated by the knowledge, wealth and contacts players possess, such divisions exist, possibly fuelled by MMOs being made more accessible to people with limited time and motivation to delve into the intricacies of game mechanics.

Overall, the strategic management of avatar related resources gave participants (who as a whole were largely interested in testing and manipulating the capabilities of such systems) a sense of accomplishment and clear, positive outcomes for their efforts. This chapter has shown that a few participants try to replicate their own abilities and strengths and weaknesses in an avatar, but for the most part game systems offer possibilities too far removed from their reality for this to be possible. It is more often that broad likes, dislikes, self perceptions and life-goals (e.g. participants choosing science perks in *Fallout 3* because they identify with the role of scientist) come into play during resource management.

Chapter 5: Appearance customisation and projective identity

Corresponding objective: To gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings that players assign to avatar appearance customisation in digital games.

5.1 Avatars and appearance customisation

This chapter will present and analyse the instances of appearance customisation on open-avatars described by participants. The themes explored include whether or not participants build their avatars to reflect their own characteristics, how participants experiment with the options available in avatar customisation systems, and how players sometimes strive for a 'normal' appearance. The amount of time and effort put into customising avatar appearance is also examined, along with dissatisfaction experienced with various customisation systems that may inhibit the production of projective identities.

5.1.1 Replicating non-virtual cosmetic characteristics in avatars

Eight participants described trying to replicate elements or the entirety of their facial structure or other cosmetic signatures in open-avatar games. Two participants (16 and 27) believed they had the most success with sports games such as the *Tiger Woods Golf* and *FIFA* franchises due to the tools and options being based off the developer's tools which are designed to mimic the features of real players.

Participant 16 believed his open-avatars almost always mimicked his appearance ("except thinner"), but he never consciously aimed to replicate himself in-game. For participant 27, recreating his appearance meant being able to identify with the successes of his on-screen avatar:

It's wish fulfilment, I guess. I spend ages getting them to look like me if I can because when I see myself succeeding... The wins are a bit more real, more personal. I try to do that in every game, but sports games are usually the easiest.

[Participant 27]

Participant 27 also wanted to reach this sense of investment by re-creating himself in *Red Dead Redemption* multiplayer, but he lacked the options to do so and believed his in-game performance suffered as a result. He observed that RPGs tend to have more stylised graphics, making it rare for open-avatar facial features to effectively mimic those in real life.

He still tried in games such as *Fallout 3* but was routinely disappointed with the results. Participant 12's view corresponds with participant 27's, as he always tries to replicate his appearance and is often repulsed by the results, leading him to concede defeat and make "a weird looking guy with spiky hair or something." This evokes the awkwardness that is characteristic of Mori's "Uncanny Valley", as does the time when Participant 12 almost replicated his appearance in *Mass Effect 2* (the facial structure was slightly broader than his own) but could not accept the voice of Commander Shepard coming from his mouth.

It looked like me, but not quite because of the facial structure... Nah... And then the voice coming out of my deformed head was just weird. I went back and made a guy with crazy hair as usual. [Participant 12]

Participant 12's discomfort can be attributed to the limitations inherent in avatar appearance editing systems (*Mass Effect* has many options but only allows the player to edit the face and nothing below the base of the skull) and the participant not being able to accept what he perceived as inconsistencies between his avatar and his sense of identity. The game animated and gave a voice to his deformed doppelganger, producing a sense of unease over his likeness being used as a virtual puppet. Participant 26 also sought to recreate his appearance in *Mass Effect* and unlike Participant 12 he was happy with the result. This was not because he succeeded in recreating his face in its entirety; instead he focused on specific elements from his appearance that he liked.

He had all the aspects that I thought that I had that made me look cool, but they made him look cooler than me, so I thought "He's got the winning combination going on, so he's fine." The hairdo that I thought I had, turns out but I don't have that hairdo at all, but it looked good on him, so it was sorted after all. [Participant 26]

In addition to using sports games to intentionally recreate their appearance, participants also described doing so in online games or with console avatars. Participant 25 always tried to embed one of the main characteristics he felt defined him as a person (his tall height) into the avatars he used in MMORPGs.

I take a character and make it as close to me as possible. So, the height option, right up... And look, not so much as the facial appearance, I'm not so bothered

about appearance as such, as long as it's the right dimension, namely well over 6 foot, I'll be happy. So as long as in game I'm actually towering over people, I feel that's about right. [...] If I'm in an online game I'll spend more time on it and really get into it, but in Oblivion where there really isn't that much option... Then I'll go for the tallest race. Like in my original character for WoW, I was thinking, what's the biggest out of all of them? Tauren. Right. But I'm not an animal. So I picked one, the Blood Elf, that the closest to human and tall. The closest you could get on the horde side. [Participant 25]

This demonstrates that there are limits to how much a player may want to peruse traits they identify with if they are attached to perceived traits that they do not desire or dislike. In this case, Participant 25 could not identify with the animalistic qualities of the Tauren, even though they were the tallest race in the horde faction. He also believed that self-representation through the appearance of an avatar was not his priority and that he would rather “build his profile” by the way in which he acted in-game, as opposed to how he looked.

Participant 17 also preferred to let his actions and equipment or attribute choices represent his intentions, often ignoring cosmetic avatar options for their lack of utility. If an avatar's appearance could not be linked to the affordances available to him, Participant 17 did not believe it contributed towards his enjoyment of a game.

It's only fun, yeah, if it's part, but it's never part of the game. Can you make this look like yourself? It never changes the game. Except, actually in the wrestling games on the PlayStation. [...] you can increase your weight and that changes your class. And that's the only one I've known when the customisation of your character appearance wise has actually affected the dynamic of the game. Because it affects the moves you can do, but apart from that, that's it, I don't need to do much with the appearance. [...] Even if you did see your character, it wouldn't bother me too much. [Participant 17]

Avatars do not necessarily have to draw on the player's facial features or body structure to share visual characteristics with their creators. Participant eight related his preferences for dressing his avatar in *Fable II* with how he liked to dress in real life:

With, for example, Fable II, I probably go for more the Goth look because of course it's pretty similar to how I dress anyway. It's a look-a-like, and it's quite do-able in Fable II. [Participant 7]

This is not his usual method for customising avatars, but because item selection has little impact on combat performance in *Fable II* there were fewer quantifiable consequences and more freedom which allowed him to select an avatar appearance that he valued. Participant five and Participant nine shared a similar approach to replicating the “Goth look” where possible, whilst Participant 27 liked to choose clothes and colours he would wear in sports games when appropriate, though participants rarely chose items for their cosmetic value in RPGs. Some participants described ignoring accessories such as ear-rings or tattoos that would not harbor detrimental effects on a characters performance, because they either found such things distasteful in real life or they were worried about not being able to change these accessories if they became bored with them.

I didn't take any rings or tattoos or whatever there was. They just look so tacky! It's not just Fable, I don't take them in any game. You always regret it later, which is why I've never been tempted in real life either. [Participant 13]

I worry about these things though, I think they look really cool then I don't get them because I might regret it. That's why I don't get something done in real life as well, always wanted a tattoo. Why do I have to worry about that in games? I'm either being silly, or the game is for not letting me change it afterwards. [Participant 24]

MMORPGs have vanity items, but participants experienced with such games preferred to either save bank space for equipment they deemed useful, or just disliked the idea of spending time on choosing clothes. For example, Participant 2 jokingly referred to the act of selecting clothes for cosmetic purposes as “playing Barbie dress-up”, suggesting that a friend he knew who liked to assemble “civilian clothing” was wasting his time when he could be doing more productive things.

In summary, few participants believed that they were trying to recreate themselves in games, with most seeking to explore what was possible with the options given to them. Another contributing factor is that painstakingly recreating yourself in a virtual environment

requires more time and effort than if you were to create something new that you had less familiarity and connections with (unless players had a very specific look they wanted to achieve).

5.1.2 Experimenting with avatar appearance

If people were not going for self-representation through facial characteristics, why did they not all choose the default appearance for an avatar? Participant 26 described his motivation as the following:

I never go for the default. I always try and adjust them in some way or other. I always try to change something, because I suppose ultimately if you don't, you don't have the same personal feel that the game is letting you have. Because it's giving you the option to let you have something you want it to be so if just take the generic one, you have not immersed yourself as much as you can do. That's what I find it is anyway. [Participant 26]

One motivation, then, is to feel some sort of connection with the avatar you are playing; to be able to recognise that certain features are how you wanted them to be and to feel a sense of control. For Participant 26 and others, the level of investment they felt in their avatars would not have been possible if they had ignored facial customisation. For example, Participant 12 highlighted that even though he could not make an avatar that satisfactorily mimicked his own appearance, he would rather create a “crazy guy” than stick to the default options in *Mass Effect*. He achieved this through experimenting with avatar creation systems, some of which allow a great deal of flexibility for a player to exercise their imagination (Figure 35).

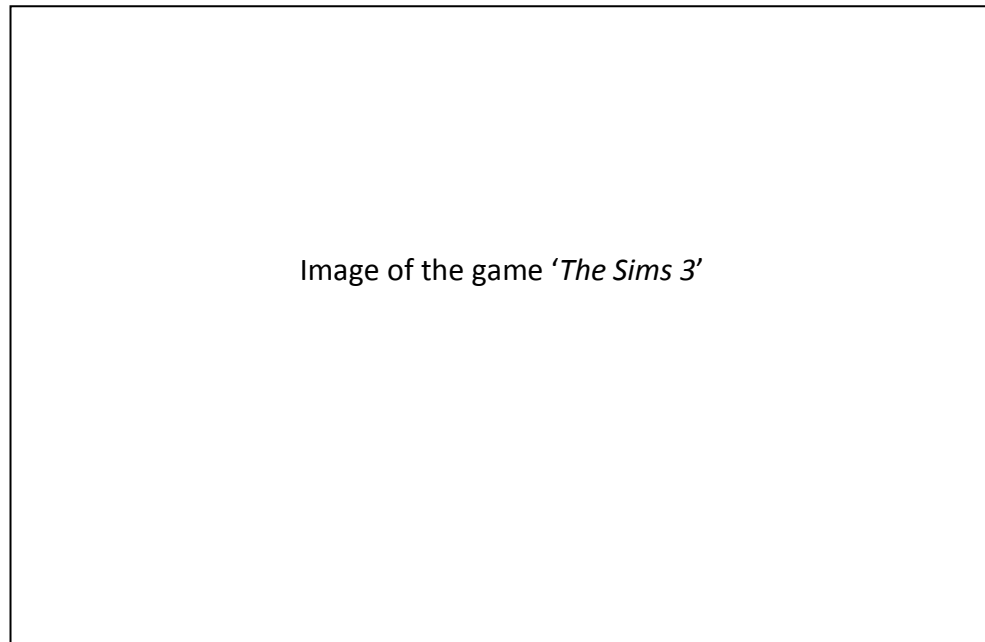


Figure 35 – Experimentation in The Sims 3⁴⁰⁴.

Some games such as the *Sims* franchise and the *WWE Smackdown vs. Raw* series have more flexibility and encourage players to experiment with these options. These games do not have NPCs or any user interface elements which judge the appearance of which further encourage players to experiment without fear of impacting on gameplay. Chapter 5.1.4 demonstrates that some participants do fear their avatars being judged on their appearance by the game, making progression harder as a result.

Two house mates collaborated on a character, in this case the career of a wrestler in one of the iterations of the *WWE: Smackdown* series:

[...] we created a character called Goliath, just because we thought that was a stereotypical wrestler name. And he had a union jack coat and flares and I think we moved all the bars across to maximum to get him as big as we could, so that's one example where we didn't really take the character creation too seriously at all really. We just did it as a proper joke.

Researcher: Did you spend much time doing the customisation or just tried to get it over with as quickly as possible?

⁴⁰⁴ Sprite7868 [Sims Wikia username]. *The Sims 3-100-1-.jpg*.
<<http://sims.wikia.com/wiki/File:The Sims 3-100-1-.jpg>>, 2009, [accessed 22/02/11].

We spent quite a bit of time going through all the outfits and seeing that there was a union jack long coat you could have and pants and things, but there was also the jokey element of let's just make him huge, it's a wrestling game, it'll be funny. So I've done it on that. [Participant 3]

Not many of the games this pair plays allow for the amount of creative freedom this game presents in terms of appearance options. The *WWE* series is amongst the most complex in terms of what you can do with your avatar's appearance, along with the detail you could go into concerning their move set, entrance music, entrance video choreography, etc. The usual manner of collaborating for these two was that they would try to go for the choices that would give them the best possible benefit. For creating a wrestler for this game, however, they had the option to choose options they found amusing, representing a break from their usual play styles.

The *WWE* series was mentioned again, but this time in relation to social play that was more antagonistic and closer to 'trolling' than collaboration, but still done for the purpose of humour. Participant seven first describes the variety of characters he made in one of the *WWE* games which could be taken round to one of his friends' house on a memory card. Four of them would often pit their wrestlers against each other in this fashion:

I usually went for something completely stupid. I had one character in Attitude in which the graphics weren't very good. I called him Bioshock. He had the most awful voice in the game, a really high squawky thing. And he was bright green with yellow hair. Really garish, horrible. With a green goatee and a green Mohican. Really stupid. And in the Smackdown, I made quite a few characters. I made a really, really fat bloke who was in blue lycra with flippers on. He had a Mohican and a face mask. There was also a character who was really, really thin and kinda looked a bit freaky with a ginger afro and he was my aerial bloke who did things from the top rope. I think I was a bit more piss taking, rather than taking it particularly seriously. I think that was more fun in a way. You can play with all the real-ish characters so you might as well make your own character who's proper mad.

Researcher: Were your friends the same in that respect?

Some were, some weren't. Most weren't, they wanted their character to look cool. I wasn't fussed. I was more bothered about "If my character does win, does it look humiliating to you?" [laughs] And when the answer is yes, that's fantastic. That's also why when you'd play shooting games you'd call yourself something ridiculous like "Your Mum." So when you shoot someone else they see "You were killed by Your Mum." [laughs] Childish stupid things but it made you laugh anyway. "Shot in the head by Your Mum." [Participant 7]

Participant seven exploited his friends' desires to make realistic avatars by making his own wrestler as ridiculous as possible, furthering the humiliation of his opponents. This comes down to individual approach to a game, as for him it was more fun to experiment whilst his friends desired avatars that conformed to the stereotypical wrestler appearance. Both participant seven and participant three's examples used experimentation as a source of humour, however participant eight used the flexibility of *Oblivion's* system to explore what was possible with the more fantastic races available (Figure 36):

[In Oblivion] you can play a lizard-type looking character. I'm thinking how can I make this character look like a dragon or a velociraptor from Jurassic Park? That's what I'm aiming for there, I have a goal in mind so I take my time. They can look quite good. If you go for an orc, I'm thinking "Can I get really big tusks?" [Participant 7]

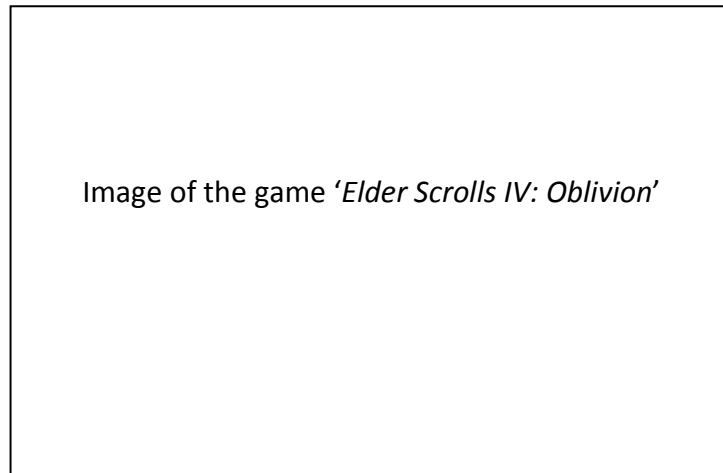


Figure 36 – An Argonian player character⁴⁰⁵.

Participant 7 wanted to accentuate what he perceived as the dominating and aggressive characteristics of the Argonian race, making his avatar an alpha specimen in the game world. This seems like a fair interpretation given Participant 7's propensity for choosing the most aggressive, close combat classes:

You could rush forwards smack them. Bosh! Shotgun to the groin! That's the one I had the most fun with [...]

Going on killing sprees:

*Well on the very evil one, I walked into a village, turned on the most powerful magical thing I had and unleashed it. Turned the safety off so I was killing people. Very disappointed that I couldn't kill the children though. You should get bonus evil points for killing children, *Phoom* "Come back! Die!" The guard comes up with a pistol, he's dead...*

And despising signs of weakness in non-player characters:

*When playing through I always kill him. He's whiny! He seemed soft and weak. Never got on with that character. Always seemed to whinge too much [...]
[Participant 7]*

⁴⁰⁵ Platypusburger [Neoseeker username]. *re: TOESCC: Speed rounds! Le Gasp!* <<http://www.neoseeker.com/forums/directmessage.php?m=27312191>>, 2010, [accessed 22.02.11].

Participant 22 and Participant 24 also tried to emphasise the stereotypical characteristics they associated with fantasy races, striving for a sort of authenticity. For example, Participant 24's wanted his dwarves in *WoW* and *DA: O* to have the biggest beards possible so they could be "proper dwarves".

Participant 19 described a different incentive for not replicating his own characteristics, this time in MMORPG *Runescape* and *Minecraft*. To his mind, choosing mixes of options that confound in-game standards of beauty and could possibly repulse or raise a laugh from players was the only way to approach avatar customisation.

My approach to multiplayer is... Troll people. That's it. Whilst being good so people want to learn or talk to you. Just being a massive dick. [...] In Runescape, my avatar is a black man with a green Mohawk. He stands out. He's instantly recognisable. [...] When into multiplayer I pick something which has the maximum effect or make people laugh. In Minecraft, I am Bert from Ernie and Bert. So people will see me and go "Oh he's interesting, let's go talk to him." I look into it a bit and I'm geared towards making an impact. So I won't be a normal white person with normal robes or normal gear. I'll have flowing purple robes, green hair, jet black skin with red eyes. [...] I want to keep my real persona away from the game. I don't want to get into it too much because I know people who have tripped over the line and they live their lives in the game. I don't want to trip over that line. I keep my persona as someone I'm totally not. [Participant 19]

Whilst arguing that his avatars are something he is not, he also admitted that his desire to stand out and to get a reaction from people was a part of his personality. He just associates the transference of visual characteristics into a game as going too far because in his mind it results in "taking things too seriously". He disliked the thought of people placing an importance on their avatars and forgetting that the game, in his view, was primarily for fun. In contrast, Participant 19 in single-player games chooses the default appearance for avatars because he does not feel a need to represent the rebellious side of his personality in a game where there is no audience and it did not "contribute to the game". He instead preferred to level up the hobbies of his Sim and peruse career paths that he himself was interested in.

Just because people choose to customise their appearance in some games, it does not mean they always choose their creations over the default options. For example, Participant 24 customised avatars in *DA: O*, *WoW* and experimented with Shepard's appearance in *Mass Effect* but ultimately decided to stick with the default male appearance.

At first it was quite off-putting because there's such a lot of things that you can change. Mass Effect was just like, wow... I messed around, but just thought I'd stick with the default one, he looks quite cool anyway. He's based on a dutch model.

Researcher: What about the marketing materials? He's on all of the packaging as well.

Yeah! You just associate Commander Shepard with that face. That's Shepard for me, I can't imagine him being anyone else. I see videos where people have customised him and most of them look silly. His voice with those faces. Eurgh.
[Participant 24]

This reinforces Participant 24's view as his avatar, or Commander Shepard as being a separate entity from him. Participant 24 refers to his avatar as "he", and "Shepard", not "I" like he did for the other games. His view of the default model for male Shepard being the right choice was reinforced by the advertising and packaging associated with the game which all display that face. Like Participant 12 there is some dissonance between facial features and voice, except this time it was because it was a voice Participant 24 associated with a particular appearance coming out of a different head.

In summary, for both of the wrestling examples, the desire for humour and experimentation outweighed the need to be able to identify with the avatar in terms of appearance, and their wrestlers were an example of short-term avatars used as disposable tools. The degree to which participants were willing to experiment was influenced by the time they were likely to spend with an avatar, with conservative choices being made when beginning a potentially lengthy playthrough. In Participant 8's example, experimentation was about customising avatar templates that already looked alien whilst trying to superimpose intimidating and aggressive qualities onto them that he valued in his play style. This demonstrates that even with the most experimental avatars, players may express characteristics they identify with

through appearance customisation, such as Participant 19's desire to communicate his philosophy that a game should only be treated as a game, and not taken too seriously.

5.1.3 Picking cosmetic attributes and gender swapping

If it is too difficult for a player to create an avatar that mimics their appearance, or they are simply not interested in doing so, what other factors might influence their choices? Some participants believed that they gave some avatars characteristics they found attractive. For example, participant eight's attraction to Gothic fashion not only influenced how he dressed his characters when given the chance, but how he used the make-up options for his female version of *Mass Effect's* Shepard:

Didn't change the male Shepard that much but for my female Shepard I gave her neck line long hair, black lipstick. Dark eye shadow and pale skin. Goth chick. You're walking around in a tight leather suit, why wouldn't you? [Participant 8]

He described this customisation as "not something I do in every game", but was pleased when he realised the possibilities the make-up options created. He also seemed to feel that these characteristics were appropriate for the science-fiction setting of *Mass Effect 2*.

A recurring motivation that participants gave for creating an avatar they found attractive was that they could not help but emphasise the traits they found desirable when playing a character of the opposite gender. Most did not see the reason why they would fight against the impulse and create a character they were not attracted to or able to tolerate:

Doesn't make sense to play with someone who is horrendously ugly. DA is a long game to play with a character who you find repulsive. You build what you're comfortable with or attracted to, whether that's representing yourself by projecting yourself into the game... which I find odd because it's a game that bears no reality to real life. [Participant 5]

This quote brings to light the impulsive nature of avatar creation for this participant. He cannot fully explain why he chooses to project his own desires onto a character and it is more of a subconscious act for him rather than something which is planned through. He explained how customising his characters appearance was a secondary concern, if that:

When I play it to win, it's not necessarily my ego saying I want to be taller, stronger, more handsome, more attractive. It's not about that, it's about winning. It's not about other aspects. [Participant 5]

Ultimately, he thought his avatars and their appearance were not an expression of his ideal self or what he wanted to be, rather as tools to get the job done and win the game. Participant 5 was confused by his desire to make an avatar attractive in *Fable II* because there was no one to judge him, and he rarely cared about such things anyway.

Some people do, however, and he believes this to be the result of their sense of humour in going for characteristics that might normally be undesirable. However, he is confused by his desire to make an avatar attractive as the game is not real life, it rarely cares about attractiveness (though *Fable II* does have some measure of avatar attractiveness) and if he wanted he could make something totally subversive to what is considered normal in real life.

Is it possible that creating an avatar of the opposite sex impedes identification for some players? That might be the case when players are forced to play such an avatar, as found by participant ten in the original *Fable* game:

[...] you don't have a choice about sex either which really annoys me because it created a distance. I ended up with a character that I quite fancy in real life as opposed to somebody who I'd be, if you see what I mean. Tall, blonde and a ponytail and stuff. And it made me realise that's what I go for in real life. Facial hair and ponytails. It's ridiculous. So it was that, rather than somebody who was me projected. Which at first I did find that really annoying. [Participant 10]

In participant ten's case, she managed to overcome any feelings of disappointment and finish the game, but she felt that newer RPGs should include the option to play as a female character. Gender is still an issue in the digital game industry with most of the playable characters outside of the RPG genre being male.

Participant eight also mentioned how attractiveness factored into her avatars although she was embarrassed to admit as much:

I prefer my avatars to be female. And they're generally nice looking I say [...] They're always fairly attractive, I must say like Lara Croft, that style of... I just

generally go through and pick the nicest things, definitely good-looking... I have to look at them through the whole game! They are always quite fit looking I think. They are always slim and built. Not really thought about it that much. [laughs] You do at the time though. [Participant 8]

Having “something nice to look at” for the duration of a game was a motivation repeated by other participants as a primary motivation for building avatars they considered good looking. This reason was primarily given by participants who had created avatars of the opposite gender, sometimes accompanied by a similar level of embarrassment. For example, Participant 23 felt that he would be very reluctant to talk about swapping avatar genders outside of gaming circles for fear of it being interpreted wrongly.

It's a bit embarrassing to talk about. I don't know why, I think online it's quite common. It's just talking about it here, in real life it feels a bit strange.

Researcher: Are you worried about something in particular?

People judging me. Not so much in game, but it's not something I'd talk to my non-gaming friends about. We don't even discuss it in game as it's not a big deal, but outside of the game... It probably looks weird. In game it's like an unspoken agreement you don't mention it, I think. Or if you do, you do it jokingly, it's not like you're judging people. Outside, I think people wouldn't understand that it's meaningless. [Participant 23]

Having something attractive to look at was not the only reason participants mentioned for swapping genders in an avatar. Participant 19 once played as a female avatar in *Runescape* because there was a rumour that female avatars would be targeted less than men, although he claimed too many people started to use the tactic for PvP and so it lost its effectiveness. Participant two described another motivation for selecting another gender: how good the equipable items look on the different bodies.

I've played a bit of both genders really. Depends on the game, I played Monster Hunter on the PSP and on the Wii and for that game I kind of looked through the armour sets, and for Monster Hunter 3 all the male armour sets looked a lot better so I played a male. And on the PSP I had the Monster Hunter Freedom 2

united and the female armour looked a lot better so I played female just because of the aesthetics. When there's no difference between the two I just play what's going to look better. [Participant 2]

Participant 25, Participant 18 and Participant 21 stated that they had not even considered making a female avatar. Participant 18 described his overlooking of female avatars as occurring without second thought as in “I have no choice, I'm male, bam [clicks fingers], give him a crazy name.” Participant 21 expressed discomfort at the thought of taking a female avatar when playing *Oblivion*:

Well, it's probably me showing my age there, the thought of playing a female in a role-playing game... I thought “I can't do that!” So I've got to be male, I've got to be, y'know? [Participant 21]

Participant 21 explained that the clear definitions between genders he grew up with made him uncomfortable with playing with different genders in games. Even though he now thought these definitions were outdated he found he could not change his views so easily when it came to creating an avatar, treating it as an extension of his masculinity that could be infringed upon.

5.1.4 Aiming for ‘normality’ and intertextual inspiration

Participants often used the word ‘normal’ to describe the appearance they were aiming for if they were not making avatars that looked like them in real life, or highly experimental avatars. In some of the following cases normal may be interpreted as an appearance that will not annoy or offend players after any novelty has worn off. For others, normality may be an avatar whose face is believably proportioned.

I moved all of the sliders around and in the end the guys face just looked really odd. I realised his face looked odd because he looked normal which doesn't happen often. Normal face, normal proportions so used that face on my character in Mass Effect and carried on into the next game. [Participant 10]

The “oddness” of this avatar was easily overcome because it did not resemble participant 10's appearance or someone else's making it easier to adopt than the situation described by participant 12. Whilst Participant 10 was not purposely trying to create someone he

considered 'normal', for others their avatars appearance is the result of a considered process where balancing creativity, long-term acceptability and fitting in with the aesthetic of a game world is the goal.

The look I was going for on Fallout was someone who looked quite normal. Even though the world was post apocalyptic, there's ghouls and things, it's set in D.C so it's stuff you know. I didn't want him to look strange, crazy or funny. I think I chose a standard face, whichever one was most generic. Again, I don't like them to look too silly. Most of the hair options you get... Erm...

Researcher: Mohicans...?

Yeah, Mohicans! Afros and things. So when you really look at the customisability, it narrows it down to a choice of four or five normal looking haircuts. And the hair colour, went pretty standard with the brown [...] The reason partly for that was he looked normal. if you've got someone with bright green hair, just because you're constantly looking at them on screen after a while it would start to annoy me. Brown was quite a good colour for Fallout because it goes with all the environments. If you had someone with bright blonde hair and bright ginger hair it would have stuck out like a sore thumb compared to the wasteland which is very brown and grey skies. [Participant 3]

Unlike other participants mentioned, Participant 3 was aware that he would see his character at various points during *Fallout 3* (even though the predominant camera angle view is first-person) and planned accordingly. Another important point is how he takes into account the narrative setting of the game and also the art direction of the environment.

His neutral appearance set him apart from the raiders, who are a chaotic faction typified by shaved heads, spiky neon haircuts, scavenged armour, and multiple piercings (Figure 37). The raiders represent the worst of the survivors and will attack anyone on sight unless they have very bad karma (the game measures the players morality in the form of karma – do something good and you get karma, do something bad and karma is taken away). He also took into account the overall aesthetic of the game which includes a muted palette and a green filter, realising that brightly coloured features would make him stand out.

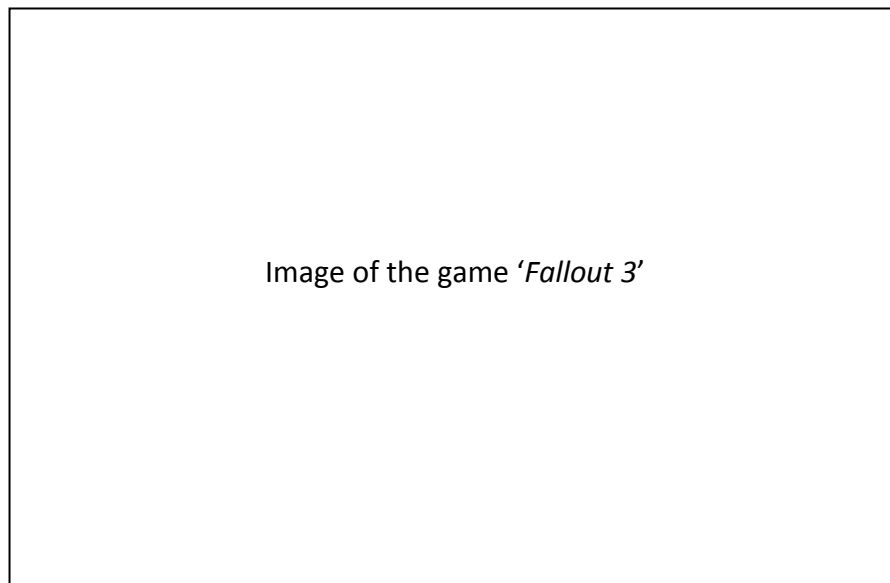


Figure 37 – A gang of raiders in Fallout 3⁴⁰⁶

It is not necessarily easy for players to achieve a look they consider to be 'normal', with some gamers being more satisfied with others than their results. For example, Participant 15 found *Fallout* and *Oblivion* characters uniformly ugly and struggled to find a look that approached 'normal'.

I think be quite hard to make someone just look normal. It can It's so easy to make some strange freakish monster... Especially on Fallout and Oblivion. The appearance thing generates some really strange things... The characters in that are really ugly. They all look like they're on steroids. I think I just try to make them look normal as possible... [Participant 15]

In trying to match the appearance of their avatar to what they perceived as normal, or in keeping with the game world, participants sometimes drew on inspiration from other forms of media.

I remember that I went for a standard looking guy, didn't want him looking too strange. I think I went a bit exotic on the hair style, well he looked a bit Nordic, maybe he had two braids down there, and I think I gave him dark blonde hair and

⁴⁰⁶ Joylock. *Capital Wasteland Raiders.jpg*.

<http://fallout.wikia.com/wiki/File:Capital_Wasteland_Raiders.jpg>, 2011, [accessed 22.02.11].

quite a chiselled jaw line, he was quite a solid looking man because I was going for the warrior class look, so yeah, some sort of cross between Hulk Hogan and Legolas I guess. The manliness of Hulk Hogan and the more elfish looks of Legolas with the hair and stuff [laughs] [...] I'm not trying to make it resemble myself or anything, I just think "Well, he looks like a good character"... [Participant 3]

Combining a fictional character and a wrestler, participant three created what he thought would be an appropriate look for his warrior class avatar. When asked, he (like most participants) was cynical of any desire he might have to express his ideal self through his avatar. For him, it was a creative expression that was constrained by his desire to make something that did not look out of place with the world, but it was not something he aspired to look like in real life. What he created just matched what was in his head when he thought of a warrior.

The only other participant who referred to using a celebrity or TV/film character as a reference was Participant Seven who aimed to recreate Star Trek: Deep Space Nine's Major Kira's cropped hair and prickly personality in his female Shepard for *Mass Effect*. Like Participant Three referring to Orlando Bloom's Legolas because of the fantasy setting of *Oblivion*, Participant Seven drew on his knowledge of science fiction characters to construct his Shepard. Participant Two, when playing *Star Wars: Galaxies* also tried to blend elements of Han Solo's appearance into his avatar.

In summary, normality in a game can be interpreted as an avatar that is in keeping with the aesthetic of the game world. It can also be seen as appearance options that are non-offensive and are suited to long-term avatars or avatars that are believably proportioned.

5.1.5 Appearance customisation and console avatars

Avatars are also integrated into console operating systems and linked with game data and multiplayer accounts. Xbox system avatars are visible whenever user accounts are accessed and preside over the player's achievements, statistics and game library. It is a long-term creation that outlasts most game-based avatars and can equip items based on in-game items (*Halo* and *Star Wars* items are amongst premium items available) or real-world fashions.

Participant six differentiated between the avatars that he created and played in-game and his Xbox Live avatar by claiming his console avatar (Figure 38) is "as close to how I look as

you can get.” He found this achievable compared to in-game avatars due to the t-shirts, body shapes and faces which were more grounded in reality compared to the idealised fantasy options he normally works with. Participant six also observed that his friends’ Xbox avatars also reflect their real-life appearances, reasoning that they all wanted something persistent and instantly recognisable in order to represent themselves over Xbox Live.



Figure 38 – Participant six’s Xbox 360 avatar

Participant six felt this avatar was a novelty and was not worth the investment of spending money on premium clothes and accessories. In contrast, Participant 23 likes to buy games-themed accessories (e.g. armour from *Halo*) and t-shirts with logos using spare Microsoft Points (Xbox Live Marketplace’s currency). He wanted to use up leftover points but avatar DLC is all he could afford.

Waste aversion is not the only motivation for spending money on virtual items; participant four believed her Xbox Live avatar was her main point of interface with friends from her home country who also liked to dress console avatars. Given that the avatar would be her only visual representation to friends through this service, it explains why she feels the need to invest extra time and money into her virtual appearance.

I really like to customise my avatars because sometimes it shows I’m not the same as you, I’m special. Sometimes I need to pay for some items, clothing or accessories like some Assassin’s Creed clothes but I really wanted to spend money on that! [Participant 4]

The Nintendo Wii features the Mii channel where 'Mii' avatars are designed (Figure 39 and Figure 40), sometimes to be imported into games such as *Wii Sports*, *Wii Fit* and *Guitar Hero*. Although no one mentioned using Mii's in-game, three Wii owners had created them. Participant one remarked how she noticed participant two managed to create Mii's that looked like him while she struggled and was ultimately dissatisfied with her results. This could have been down to inexperience relating to using such avatar customisation systems, as her partner is an experienced user of MMOs and of appearance customisation user-interfaces.

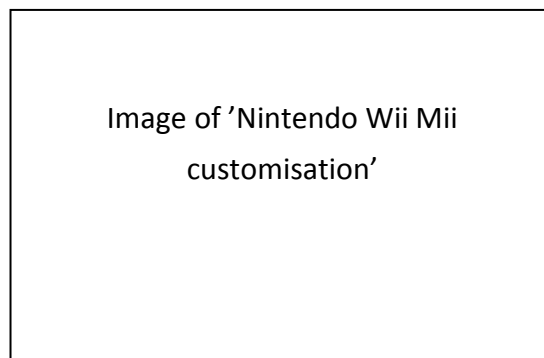


Figure 39 – The weight and height sliders for a Mii⁴⁰⁷

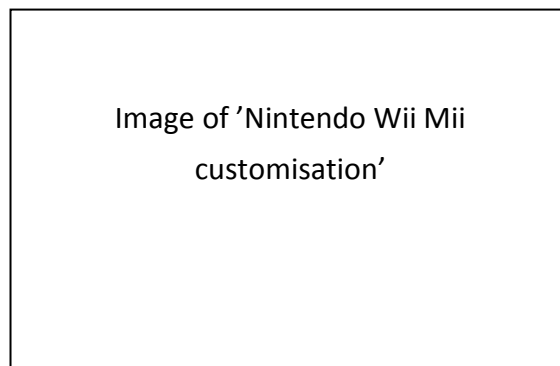


Figure 40 – The eye menu whilst customising a Wii Mii⁴⁰⁸

Participant nine preferred to make Mii's based on cartoon characters, video game characters or celebrities, but emphasised the throw-away nature of her creations. Her Mii's were a result of boredom and she would not seek to experiment with the system again.

⁴⁰⁷ Nintendo. *Mii Channel*.

<http://www.nintendo.com/consumer/systems/wii/en_na/channelsMii.jsp>, 2011, [accessed 22.01.10].

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid*.

I made Pingu, Michael Jackson and Pac-Man. Now I don't think I'd bother. I think I was bored that day... I think it was one of those things you had to do. At the time it was brand new. [Participant 9]

In summary, console avatars can elicit more conscious efforts to replicate of real appearances than in-game avatars, and represent a higher level of player identity that persists whilst avatars from individual games come and go. Participants also associated a sense of playful novelty that reflects the lack of utility with these avatars, prompting some to briefly experiment with re-creating different characters. Avatar accessory DLC items were also the only examples of paid-for DLC mentioned by participants and represented occasional purchases for one participant and essential modifications and markers of individuality for another participant.

5.2 Dissatisfaction with appearance customisation

Of all the aspects of avatar customisation, appearance was the one that most frequently drew the ire of participants. A common complaint was that the detailed interfaces of *Dragon Age: Origins*, *Oblivion* and *Mass Effect* were too complicated. Understanding the assorted options and how they are related to each other (because altering one slider bar might alter another), whilst trying to figure out how they can be manipulated to achieve a certain look the participant has in mind quickly becomes disheartening.

Participants described narrowing down their goals to something more realistic, or randomly changing options in the hope that something acceptable occurs. Consequently, Participant 3, Participant 15, Participant 23, Participant 26 and Participant 27 mentioned a desire for tutorials and better instructions related to avatar appearance customisation so that they might have a chance to achieve the results they aim for. Participant 23 described avatar appearance as a compromise between what the gamer envisions, what the tools developers provide and the limits of the players patience.

Whatever you come up, it's a compromise. Doesn't matter how many ideas you have, if you can't get the system to do what you want it to or don't have the patience... That's a big problem sometimes. You do it right at the start of a game. Sometimes you just want to play! [Participant 23]

It's really irritating when you get a list of forty options with no clue how they link together. You start to change your hair and eye colour and you look and it's got no chin shape so I normally just do five or ten minutes then give up and carry on with the game. [Participant 11]

I know for Oblivion and Mass Effect 2 and Mount and Blade you can just play with the sliders until you create a film character. I sort of played with that until I just got bored. [Participant 10]

Boredom and impatience bought on by the potentially lengthy and obtuse of mastering avatar appearance interfaces appeared repeatedly in the results. Participants are aware that the faces they choose will be with them maybe for hundreds of hours, even if they are not in full view for all of that time, and so feel under pressure to select a face that they can live with for that amount of time. Participants eight and 25 suggested that games need to provide multiple opportunities for players to remodel their avatar's appearance. *Fallout 3* implemented such a feature under the guise of cosmetic surgery, whilst *World of Warcraft* implemented a barber shop feature in major cities that allows players to change avatar hair colour and hair style, and a paid service where the player may reselect their gender, race, skin colour and face. It may be not make narrative sense for an avatar to change appearance mid-game, but if a player has the knowledge that they may be able to alter any features they select, it may tempt them to be more experimental.

In games such as *Oblivion*, *Fallout* and *The Sims*, altering one option will have a knock on effect on another. After a minute of experimenting with options it may prove difficult for a player to retrace their steps to a look that they liked before they changed it for the worse.

It's all connected so you change your cheekbones and weirdly all of a sudden your forehead looks like it belongs on a malnourished Victorian orphan. And then I don't remember what the settings were when it looked okay so I have to reset everything then try again. Then I say "fuck it" and do the minimum to make the default face different. [Participant 10]

A possible solution would be to allow the player to 'bookmark' certain appearance settings whilst they are exploring the options so they could make multiple backups, perhaps mixing and matching settings from several bookmarks into one avatar. A developer might argue

that this would be too much work to implement for the few people who would use it, but it would be interesting to know just how many players do not invest further in customising avatar appearance because they believe they will have trouble navigating or managing the different combinations of options.

It is unusual for criticisms leveled at games in a franchise not to be addressed in sequels; however the ability to create a snapshot of appearance options is rarely provided. If, when providing the tools to make an avatar, the goal is to help users in creating a projective identity then more can be done to make the process an easier and more engaging one. Being able to undo or trace back the alterations made to an avatar's appearance would make the process more accessible and allow users to gain a greater understanding of how different options impact on each other.

The importance of cosmetic open-avatar customisation

Some participants were keen to downplay the importance of appearance customisation due to its lack of utility or visibility:

It would be interesting to have more input visually but it's not necessary. Setting up the character at the beginning of DA I found time consuming. I found it pointless worrying about how far apart the eyes are. Where is the brow on the face? Where does the mouth fit? It would be nice to have more options to play with but it's not necessary. [Participant 5]

I've had first-person shooters ask me to choose my appearance but I'm not sure what the point is. It feels wasted, even in multiplayer. [Participant 29]

I don't go overboard mainly because I always have armour covering my face so any effort is a waste, really. Nine times out of ten I won't see it. Unless its something like Dragon Age, you see your face all the time in that. [Participant 2]

Other participants (1, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 25, 26, 28, 29, 30) held the same opinion that appearance customisation was not as meaningful to their experience when compared to other avatar systems, but at the same time found it hard to imagine RPGs and sports games without the option to change cosmetics on open-avatars:

I can't imagine it adds a vast amount more of complexity to the game but it's a small touch that gives you the ability to add that bit more customisation to your character. Often it just changes the skin on the wireframe slightly, it's not a big deal. It's a cop out when games don't have it. I'd definitely miss it. [Participant 5]

Some of these participants (11, 17, 26) also reported feeling uncomfortable with the idea of not taking the time to change the default appearance on an open avatar:

I like that Mass Effect lets you skip right through all the customisation but it's a bit wrong, as well. You've got to at least change your guy a bit, it's not right otherwise. [...] Well it's not yours then and I can probably do better than the normal settings anyway. [Participant 26]

It's always nice to change your appearance so the game play feels different... Well... It's like emotional input sometimes... Sometimes if you don't get to change anything about them, it feels like it's not you. It's nice to see it's yours physically... [Participant 11]

I don't enjoy it or care particularly but if it's a character I'm supposed to invent and inhabit then just going with the stock options is kind of lame. It only takes a few seconds, a bit of effort to put your stamp on it and then you can get on with the decisions that matter. [Participant 17]

The act of changing a small amount of settings on an open-avatar's appearance seems to allow these participants to claim ownership over their avatar. Participant 11 seems to think it would allow him to be more invested in the avatar's fate but for participants 17 and 26 their motivations appear to stem from not wanting to take accept the configuration given to them by the developer and thinking they can do better with a minor amount of changes.

Overall, the importance of appearance customisation and the time invested into it appears to vary depending on the type of game. People are not necessarily consistent with the amount of effort they put into choosing their appearance between games, or even in the same game. Some participants (3, 5, 6, 7, 13, 28) have suggested that the amount of times they have played through a game may impact on their cosmetic appearances, with participants 3, 5, and 7 moving quickly through customisation the first time they play a game

so they may get to the main content but spend more time on customisation during the second or third playthrough. Participants 6, 13 and 28 described making their second or third avatars in the same game with less consideration than on the first playthrough.

5.3 Conclusions

The importance of appearance options varied highly from person to person and overall it was the least favoured of the different types of avatar customisation. Some participants felt that they put little thought into their avatar's appearance, but their testimonies suggest that they still transferred characteristics they found pleasing or identified with. Even if this transfer was unintentional, it means that participants are still building a projective identity with their avatar, only they are less invested in the process or consciously aware of the reasoning and impulses that drives the decision making process. There are several game-driven reasons for the lack of interest in appearance:

- **Temporal limitations** - The process of customising an avatar's appearance typically occurs at the start of a game, although there are a few exceptions to this rule where players can only enact changes once the game has properly begun. Other forms of customisation can be attended to for the duration of some games, which makes players more aware of their existence and inclined to spread their usage over a longer period of time instead of condensing it into five minutes at the start of a game.
- **Tactically irrelevant** - Appearance customisation rarely impacts on gameplay in a strategic way. These choices are unlikely to put players at an advantage or disadvantage.
- **Hidden appearance** – Some games are predominantly played from a first-person point of view so players rarely see their avatars. This does not stop some players from putting careful consideration into their appearance in these games; however others have admitted that it does influence the effort they are willing to expend.
- **Accessibility** - Games are not yet harnessing their potential for presenting appearance customisation menus in an accessible way. Problems include not being able to create back-ups of particular appearances whilst continuing to work with options, being able to revert back to a previous set of options whilst experimenting,

no facility to create a back-up of a particular appearance, and lack of transparency concerning how various options interact with each other.

These factors vary from game to game, and this is evident in the changeability that participants displayed in their approach. These changes are also a reflection of factors such as the participant's mood, and eagerness to start a game. Eagerness can lead to impatience when faced with temporal limitations meaning that appearance options became a barrier to be overcome rather than something players can deal with in their own time. Thus, the contribution of appearance customisation to establishing a projective identity can be limited by a combination of these factors. Projective identity is not just about transferring a player's desires or characteristics to an avatar, it is about 'projecting' a future for the avatar by planning its development. In terms of appearance, this sort of planning rarely happens due to the temporal limitations frequently encountered with these sorts of options. Players are not often encouraged (or required) to consider the implications of their actions on the appearance of their open-avatar.

This aspect of developing a projective identity was perhaps the hardest for participants, particularly for those who were actively seeking to transplant elements of their own appearance into their avatars. The aforementioned limitations of the user interfaces along with the occasionally high expectations of players means that the developer's contribution to the projective identity often intrudes on what players want to achieve.

In addition to revealing the frustrations and sometimes reluctant tolerance of cosmetic options, the data collected provides indications of the meanings ascribed by participants to avatar appearance. For example, participants described drawing on a variety of sources in addition to their own-appearance for inspiration on what to select for their avatar, notably from TV show, book and movie characters they thought would fit well with the personality, physical abilities and references to tropes they wanted to appropriate for their own purposes. Avatar appearance therefore allows and encourages some players to draw on their knowledge of conventions established by other media whilst building a projective identity.

There were instances where participants considered how they could ensure their avatar fitted in with the aesthetic of the game-world and if their appearance could unintentionally signal a faction allegiance. Participants sometimes ascribed more intelligence to NPCs than

was actually the case when considering how their appearance was perceived in-game. This was not necessarily out of misunderstanding of NPCs capabilities but also because it was fun to consider how their avatar fit into the 'living' game world. In addition to participants thinking about how they could appear intimidating in single-player games, there were also indications of avatar appearance being used to humiliate, confuse or offend fellow gamers.

In summary, there is the potential with cosmetic customisation for the process to be easier and less time-locked than it is now, but even the most skeptical participants admitted being compelled to use these features, if only briefly. Participants have used elements of their own appearance, aspects they find attractive from other people and consider the aesthetic rules they believe (or pretend) to be applicable to game worlds. The data shows that some players think critically about what they want to achieve in-game and how open-avatar appearance can be brought in line with their goals.

Chapter 6: Narrative mechanics and projective identity

Corresponding objective: To gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings that players assign to the role of narrative mechanics in the creation and maintenance of projective identities in digital games.

6.1 Introduction

Players can only project their plans and impulses into the game via the mechanics that have been developed for that purpose. As such, digital game developers continue to evolve mechanics in order to allow the manipulation of non-linear narratives. The following analysis focuses on experiences relating to the mechanics that allow for the expression of choice in terms of shaping narrative and the strategies participants have for shaping their avatars' fate using these mechanics.

This thesis is dealing with the complexities of digital game narrative through the framework of game designer LeBlanc's⁴⁰⁹ categories of embedded and emergent narrative, which has been further developed by Salen and Zimmerman⁴¹⁰, and summarised by Whitehead⁴¹¹. Embedded elements are largely pre-generated such as scripted scenes, whilst emergent narrative elements are created as the player interacts with the game. It is through a balance of these two types of elements that most games convey their narrative.

6.2 Balancing emergent and embedded narrative experiences

The majority of participants (n=28) preferred some sort of balance between embedded narrative and a capacity for emergent narrative, whilst two (Participant 29 and Participant 30) preferred games with little or no embedded narrative elements. Participant 29 cited embedded narratives as the least attractive part of a game, preferring the emergent scenarios created by multiplayer modes where he could be disruptive and chaotic as possible. Participant 30 only had time for browser-based puzzle games and had a receding patience for embedded narratives.

⁴⁰⁹ LeBlanc, M. *Formal Design Tools: Feedback Systems and the Dramatic Structure of Competition: embedded narrative vs. emergent narrative [slides]*.

<<http://algorithmancy.8kindsoffun.com/gdc2000.ppt>>, 1999, [accessed 31.10.11].

⁴¹⁰ Salen & Zimmerman. ref, 27, pp.382-385.

⁴¹¹ Whitehead, J. *Narrative in Game [lecture recording]*.

<http://www.soe.ucsc.edu/classes/cms080k/Winter07/podcast/episode_20070226_15473_2-0800.m4b>, 2007, [accessed 31.10.11].

The other participants, 26 of which played RPGs regularly, were more tolerant towards embedded narrative elements⁴¹². Participants turned to different genres in order to vary their experiences, so they expect different balances of emergent and embedded narratives depending on the type of game they are playing. For example, Participant 15 played *Left 4 Dead* because of the social emergent situations it offers but he also spent much of his time playing RPGs such as *Dragon Age: Origins* of which he anticipated different narrative experiences.

I do like a good story. It's a motivation to carry on playing. [...]When I'm looking for a single-player game. Then the story must convince me to carry on playing. That's why I don't do many side quests as well. [Participant 15]

Participants who had played *Fallout 3* and *Oblivion* typically cited the side quests and the sense of freedom the game provided as among their main reasons for playing. Nevertheless, Participants 13 and 15 preferred to focus on main quests as the world building that side quests can accomplish did not provide the same motivation.

An embedded narrative can provide a sense of progression, context and motivation, justifying why a player's goals should align with those presented by the game. In total, 16 participants expressed the opinion that they would struggle to remain interested in a single-player game that could not give a reason for why they should care about engaging with the systems of the game. For example, Participant 12 found the aggressiveness of FPS titles intimidating, but when backed up with a story as with the case of *Bioshock* (Figure 41) she found it easier to appreciate the genre.

⁴¹² Unsurprising, considering RPGs can rely heavily on embedded narratives to frame and enrich the players experience



Image of the game 'Bioshock'

Figure 41 – “Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow?” - the question Andrew Ryan poses to the player whilst explaining his objectivist views that lead him to create *Bioshock’s* underwater city of Rapture⁴¹³

A strong embedded narrative can also compensate for weaker portions of a game and prove to be more enticing than the gameplay that is on offer. Participant 4 also felt that a good story could prolong interest in a game that lacked in other areas.

It’s got to have something which will keep me interested for a long period of time... If it has some interesting mechanics, that can keep you experimenting but if the story is a bit crap, I’ll probably end up giving it up after a day or something. I guess it’s really the story which keeps you engaged for the duration. [Participant 4]

Participant 11 described the cutscenes of *Uncharted 2* as being the carrot on the stick that kept him playing, despite not being impressed by the combat. The gameplay is highly orchestrated so that set pieces play out accompanied by a constant commentary from the avatar (Nathan Drake) and NPCs with cutscenes in-between playable sections. Although players can do very little to influence the course of Drake’s journey, acting it out made Participant 11 feel like he was part of a movie-like experience.

⁴¹³ digitalknight111 [YouTube username]. *Bioshock Opening Scene*. <<http://youtu.be/QfZ30sfidLY>>, 2010, [accessed 31.10.11].

It really makes you feel like you're in danger, for some reason, but things happen like a tank blows away a wall and you're like "Aaaaaah, move it!" It's silly but at the time it works. [Participant 11]

This shows that embedded narratives and the fixed events they engender can produce sympathy between the main character and the player, even though that character has its own feelings and acts autonomously during many portions of the game.

It's like, he's me but he's not me. At the time I don't feel like "Aaaaah, got to save Nathan", it's more like "Aaaah, got to save myself!" And when the cutscenes come it's like something switches off inside my head. You kind of snap out of it. "He's acting now, wait till it's my turn." The best bits are when the cutscene introduces a threat, and then you're like, "Bollocks, I'm going to have to deal with that!"

Researcher: What's it like when you hear him talk during the playable sections?

Erm, it's usually interesting to listen to. It's not too intrusive. They always seem quite appropriate reactions the things he comes out with, so it's like what you'd say if you were in that position. He's like someone hitchhiking in your head making wisecracks. [Participant 11]

Participant 11 did not think of Drake's body as belonging to an independent character during controllable scenes, but that perspective changes when the embedded narrative takes over entirely with cutscenes. At these points Drake's personality comes to the forefront setting up or responding to scenarios that the player will then confront. Participant 11 feels as if he is the main driving force behind Drake's body, whilst it is Drake's personality that is being pulled along. This symbiotic relationship is defined by the player helping the character to get where they need to be, whilst the character provides the context for the action, entertaining observations and providing helpful hints on what "he" should do.

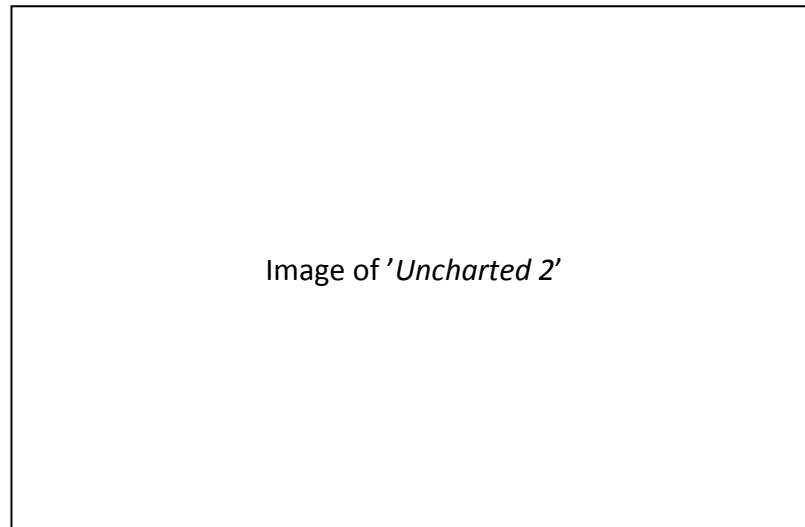


Figure 42 – Nathan Drake as he appears in the Cologne GamesCom trailer for *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*⁴¹⁴

Games such as *Uncharted* (Figure 42) and *God of War* essentially rely on spectacle and characterisation to carry the game, but other games such as *Batman: Arkham City*, and the *Assassin's Creed* franchise blend open-world emergent narratives with an over-arching storyline and a pre-defined avatar (complete with voice acting and their own motivations). Participant 6 explained *Assassin's Creed's* appeal as such:

It was your choice how you get to places, how you did particular bits. You had a lot of choice without it necessarily being about the character. It's not all about the individual that you are; it's also about the options you get for playing the game. [Participant 6]

The embedded narrative component of a game also provides the avatar with their virtual identity, the pre-defined personality traits and background which the player must resolve or tolerate in order to identify with the role of the game's central character. If, like Participant 13, players do not agree with the goals set for them, or they find the available actions for goal fulfillment to be inconsistent with how they believe their avatar should act then establishing a projective identity becomes challenging.

If there's not a good narrative then it gets boring and you don't have any relationship with this character. Or if they force you to do stupid things, giving

⁴¹⁴ VISOGames. *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves - Official E3 Trailer [HD]*. <<http://youtu.be/GUPAyGWKd6c>>, 2009, [accessed 31.10.11].

you silly options. I avoid that game. Batman: Arkham Asylum, that sometimes gave me stupid things to do and you wouldn't really do that. I felt very powerless at some points where you would want to do things differently. [Participant 13]

Six participants (9, 14, 16, 20, 26, and 27) preferred the games they played to be of emergent narrative in the games they predominantly played. Participant 9 believed she valued stories for enabling her to invest in her character, but also preferred it when she was not limited to performing set tasks in order to proceed.

It is important in that it has to engage you. The story needs to make you care about your character. On the other hand some of the best things about Morrowind and Fable is that you didn't have to follow the story continuously... And so in that way, it doesn't matter, it's not so important, that's what I meant. If you are made to do certain things in a certain way, then it does get boring. [Participant 9]

Participant 16 defined the attraction of such games as the feeling of control and ownership he has over direction in the game:

I think you need a narrative which allows you to think almost outside of the game itself, if you like. [...] You need to be able to put your own thing into it and get your own satisfaction out of it. I don't really like games that have a very closed storyline for example. [Participant 16]

Participant 21 also saw embedded narratives as playing an important role in tutoring him on the game mechanics of *Oblivion*. He described the embedded narrative of *Oblivion* as existing to give him “the confidence to go through this massive map”.

In terms of RPGs, *Oblivion* is one of the more flexible in terms of letting players decide for themselves what to do. Other RPGs, such as those developed by Bioware, compromise on the level of freedom given to players but still manage to give players the impression that they have agency within the world, and that the world is not just a series of corridors.

Bioware games can be linear, it's true of a lot of games. Final Fantasy games can be the same, they can have huge wide areas but can have huge tracts of the game that are linear. They don't look linear because they lead you around areas

but in the end you find out that there aren't any side tracks that you could have taken. It works. If it's done well you don't notice it so much, but if it's done badly then I quickly become bored of it. [Participant 2]

In *Mass Effect*, *Dragon Age* and also some *Final Fantasy* games this is achieved through the judicious spacing of hubs which can be explored with some freedom. There is also a map screen which can be used to travel between hubs and quest-specific locations which involve linear navigation. *Mass Effect 2's* galaxy map is full of star systems, but not every star system features a planet that can be explored (Figure 43). Hubs use the suggestion of space, looping corridors and rooms to establish the game world as being larger than it actually is by hinting at areas just out of reach. For example, players can only explore a small section of the ten kilometer circumference of the Citadel central ring (Figure 44).

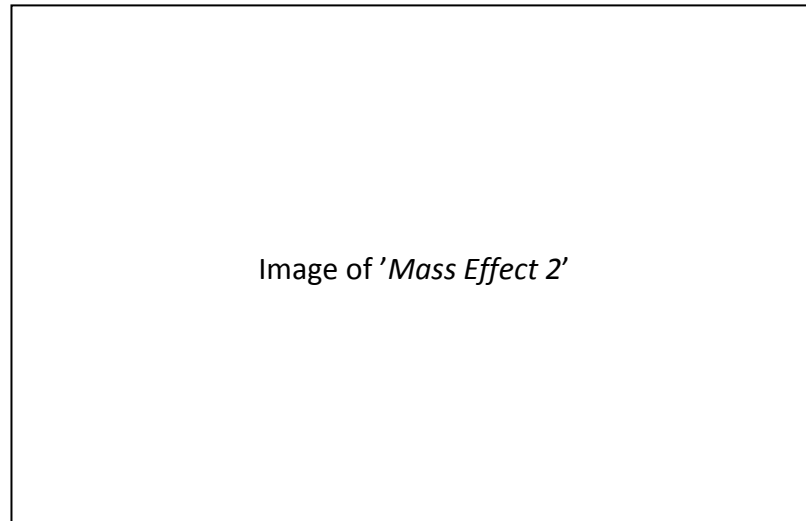


Figure 43 – The galaxy map showing the Sahrabarik system. Out of three planets, asteroid belt and mass relays, only the Omega station is explorable⁴¹⁵.

⁴¹⁵ MassEffectGameplay [YouTube username]. *Mass Effect 2 Galaxy Map - Gameplay HD*. <<http://youtu.be/W2AnJNHpz8g>>, 2010, [accessed 31.10.11].

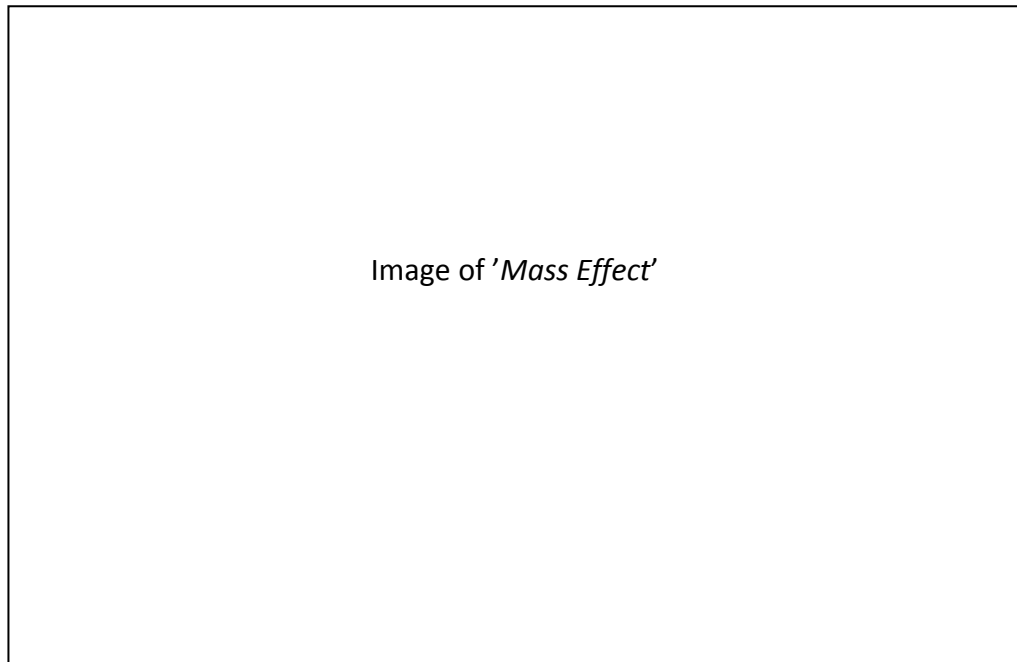


Figure 44 – A view of the presidium, the central ring of the Citadel and quest hub⁴¹⁶

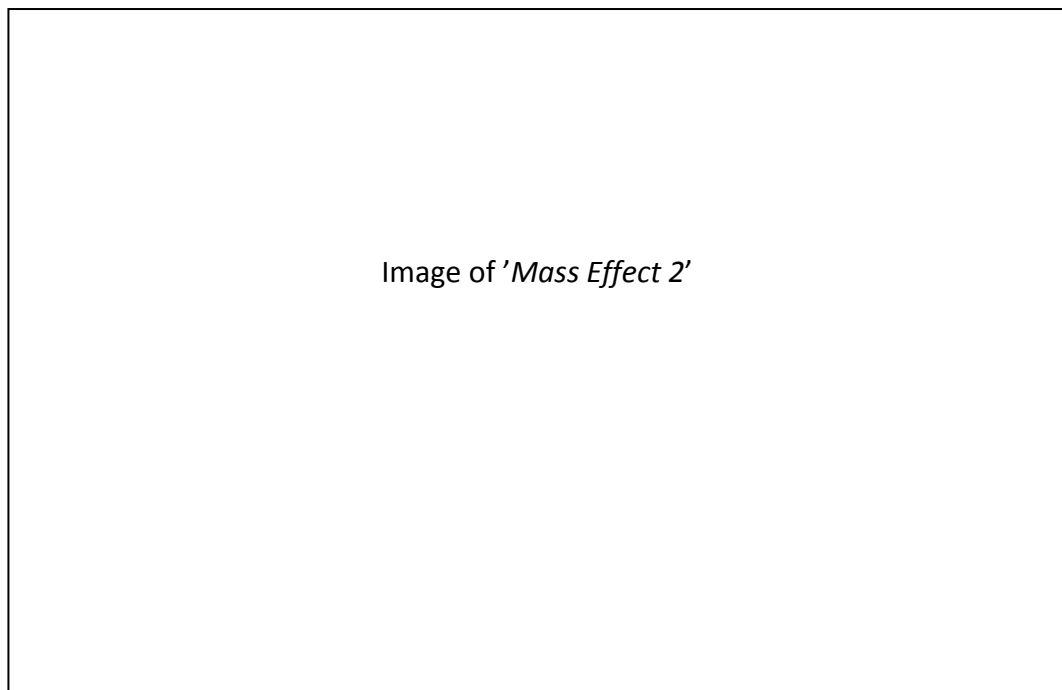


Figure 45 – Progressing through a linear level in Mass Effect 2⁴¹⁷

⁴¹⁶ Silverstrike [Mass Effect Wikia username]. *Citadel – Presidium – View From Ambassador Lounge*. <<http://images.wikia.com/masseffect/images/3/3e/Citadel-Presidium-View From Ambassador Lounge 3.png>>, [n.d.], [accessed 31.10.11].

⁴¹⁷ VanishDoomTrain [YouTube username]. *Mass Effect 2 - Archangel [1/2] [HD]*. <http://youtu.be/1UMEVvk_cn4>, 2010, [accessed 31.10.11].

Certain gateways in hubs or landing on certain planets in *Mass Effect* will initiate the start of a linear level, with deliveries of embedded narrative marking the player's progress and completion of their task (Figure 45). Having the freedom to strategise and improve avatars and NPC team members in-between these fixed points in the narrative is what Participant 17 believed to be one of the most important elements of the RPG experience.

The only choices I want to make are "what am I going to be doing next, where am I going to be going next. Not a story which is so open ended that you have alternate endings or your decisions affecting the world. It's that you've got the time to go and do all of these hidden things that wouldn't otherwise matter but make you stronger. That's my favourite bit, that's where my characters are.
[Participant 17]

He found ethical decisions and the new mechanics in NPC interactions to be almost superfluous to his core of experience of optional activities, attribute development, equipment collecting, and a story to measure his progression against. Defining the avatar through shaping emergent narratives was a core theme amongst participants who enjoyed RPGs. Another theme that emerged from the results was how participants perceived communicating with NPCs and the bearing they could have on the narrative through those interaction mechanics. The remaining sections in this chapter will address these results.

6.3 Linear dialogue systems

Interacting with a non-hostile NPC may trigger a dialogue system which is essentially another set of mechanics that often suspend other systems such as the progression of game time. Ellison classifies dialogue systems as non-branching (linear), branching, or parser driven (natural language)⁴¹⁸. Linear dialogue systems do not allow players to influence a conversation other than to watch or read a conversation through to its conclusion. The player initiates conversations by pressing the action button, the NPC delivers its speech which may be intercut with dialogue from the avatar and other NPCs, then the interaction ends.

⁴¹⁸ Ellison, B. *Defining Dialogue Systems*.
<http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3719/defining_dialogue_systems.php>, 2008, [accessed 31.10.11].

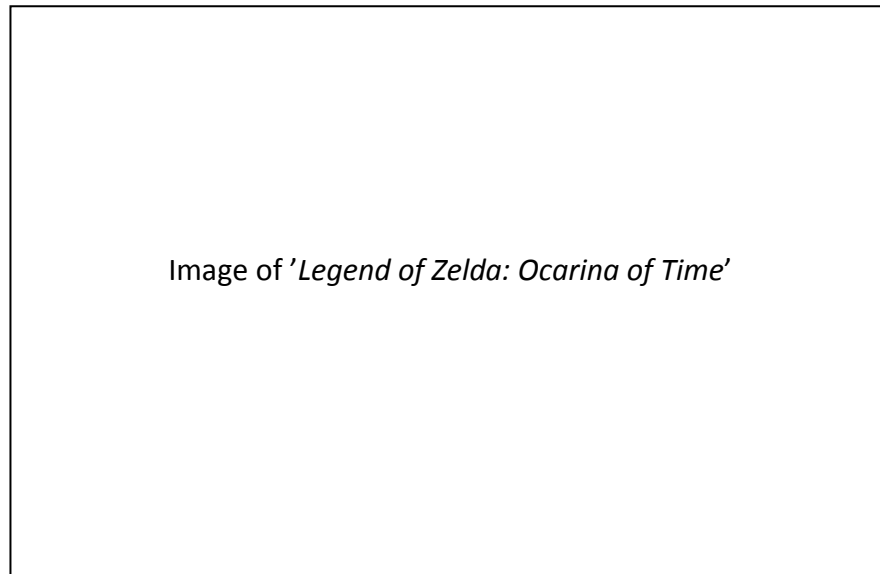


Image of 'Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time'

Figure 46 – The linear dialogue system in Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time⁴¹⁹.

The *Legend of Zelda* series features predominantly linear dialogue interactions (Figure 46) where conversations with NPCs have no input from the mute avatar and players can rarely influence the direction of discourse. Many games still use this system (albeit alongside other interaction mechanics) and it is one of the oldest forms of NPC interaction offered by digital games. Participants' comments and complaints were directed towards cutscenes and newer mechanics.

6.3.1 Experiencing cutscenes

Cutscenes (in-game movies) are used in many genres including action adventures (*The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword*), RPGs (*Dragon Age: Origins*), shooters (*Gears of War*) and real-time strategy games (*Warcraft III*). They are typified by suspension of interactivity, and a combination of cinematography and animations to communicate information.

One participant (14) complained about the overuse of cutscenes in the later installments of the *Final Fantasy* series developed by *Square Enix*. In *Final Fantasy XIII*, interactions between the player character and NPCs play out in the form of animated and voiced cutscenes which require little from the player other than to take in the information.

There's too much story, too much video, not enough game play. The old ones were you could start doing something then you could be side tracked onto

⁴¹⁹ The Zelda Dungeon [YouTube username]. *Legend of Zelda Ocarina of Time Walkthrough 01 (2/5) "Deku Shield"*. <http://youtu.be/rd_PieS7tww>, 2009, [accessed 31.10.11].

something else. This one is very much “This is the start, this is the end, get there as fast as you can”. The video is much longer than it used to be. Where it used to be a minute, now you get a ten minute long one. I go and make a cup of tea and then come back. [Participant 14]

Although *Final Fantasy’s I-IX* had large amounts of text to read, it could be done so at a player’s own pace whilst the lack of options to vary the tempo of voice acting and animation adds additional barriers to the ways in which gamers can progress through the narrative⁴²⁰. Such restraints emphasise that players are not entirely in control of how they experience the game, and also forces them to listen to voice acting that, by participants’ opinions, do not always suit the characters they portray. By filling in the gaps in narrative delivery techniques of earlier games, there is less space for player interpretation than before.

Another complaint directed towards a *Square Enix* game concerned the inconsistent use of voice acting in the different game modes of RPG *Infinite Discovery*.

You go through the game with no voice, then suddenly, during battle or walking, then suddenly they’ve got a voice! It’s really strange because usually during cutscenes you expect some talking. But suddenly when you’re controlling that character running through something they’ve suddenly got a voice! It’s strange. [Participant 12]

Low to medium-budget Japanese RPGs often use linear dialogue systems for NPC interaction with the only voice acting being during cutscenes so Participant 12 found *Infinite Discovery’s* arrangement an unwelcome break from convention particularly as she perceived cutscenes as rewards for playing well. Participant 11 had a similar issue except he would have preferred voice acting to be consistently used throughout survival horror game *Fatal Frame* which alerted him to look out for production issues.

You had voices during cutscenes but then nothing else. I felt it was telling me that “OK, this scene is important enough to be voiced whilst that dialogue isn’t important” It made the experience feel a bit cheap. I was then thinking “what else have they skimmed on?” [Participant 11]

⁴²⁰ Cutscenes can sometimes be skipped entirely, but rarely can they be advanced by units of time or a sentence by sentence basis.

Consistent use of voice acting, but also retaining customised character appearances during cutscenes (which Participant 12 also noticed did not happen in many of the Japanese RPGs she played) also help establish a continuity between the character the player controls, and the character that is acting out their lines during a cutscene. Consistency with regards to how characters are portrayed in narratives is not only determined by voice work:

Even Assassin's Creed 2, you had control to some degree of what Ezio could wear. So, it doesn't influence game play but it's always there in cutscenes and game play. Even though I didn't build Ezio I've still got a say in how he looks and that Ezio is my character. Some older games didn't care and would just revert back to the original characters look during cutscenes which was a bit weird... Like it's forgetting all the work you've done on changing their gear. [Participant 6]

System memory restrictions limit appearance customisation and when the results are displayed. Nevertheless, games such as *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* and *Assassin's Creed* have equipment sets carry over into cutscenes. Achieving this consistency acknowledges the player's agency in defining an avatar, serving to reinforce the relationship between the two even when the avatar has a pre-defined personality. It can give players pride in seeing their avatar progress through the story, linking emergent narratives with the embedded narrative. Overall, five participants mentioned cutscenes in their description of narrative experiences, while branching dialogue and expression mechanics received more attention.

6.4 Branching dialogue

In contrast to linear dialogue systems are branching dialogue trees which present several options to a player in the form of a menu composed of statements or questions written by the game developers (Figure 47). It is through these conversation options that players get to influence how they are perceived by the NPC, demand certain types of rewards for their actions and gather information.

The NPC responds to a player's choice and the menu will appear again, giving the player either more options to explore, or it will return the same ones previously displayed or end the conversation. Sometimes conversation choices may prematurely end an interaction if an NPC becomes upset or is goaded into combat by a player's choice, but usually there is an

option to end the interaction. Some games also provide players with the option to navigate through dialogue trees or certain sections a second time if they feel that they missed information the first time through.

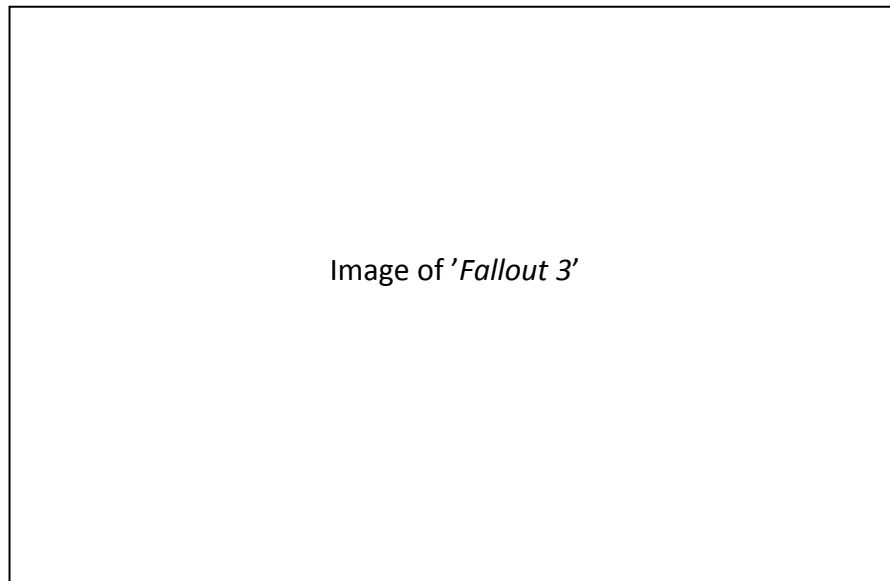


Figure 47 – Dialogue options from Fallout 3⁴²¹.

Going down all of these dialogue branches means reading or listening to a large amount of text, some of which may have been experienced on a previous trip through the tree. Fortunately, many text-heavy games give players the option to skip individual lines of dialogue, a feature that nine participants mentioned using at some point either because of familiarity with the script, a desire to skip poor voice acting or because they had read subtitles before the voice acting had finished. Nevertheless, no one mentioned skipping dialogue because of their lack of patience in dealing with NPCs, which is not surprising as one would assume that people who chose to expose themselves regularly to RPGs would be conditioned towards one of the major standards of the genre.

Each game may differ in how they present these options, such as *Mass Effect* which uses a radial dialogue menu (Figure 48) and instead of displaying the exact line of dialogue your character will deliver to an NPC or describe action they will perform verbatim, it is paraphrased so the essence, mood or tone of the option is disclosed. With these systems being linked to the overall ethical and moral alignment of player characters, three participants were dismayed to find that at some points in the game they had either

⁴²¹ WikiGameGuides.com [YouTube username]. *Fallout 3: The Replicated Man - Pinkerton's Bow and Decision Making*. <http://youtu.be/5CpkRHVTHXQ>, 2010, [accessed 31.10.11].

misinterpreted the mood of conversation options and their subsequent consequences, fumbled the controls, or accidentally highlighted the wrong option. For example, Participant 26's misinterpretation of the consequences of a climatic plot-critical choice made in the games finale resulted in him making a choice that would have knock-on effects for his playthrough of *Mass Effect 2*.

You know how you can save the council? I pressed what I thought would do that and then they all got killed... It sounded like they weren't going to die. And I thought, "Well, that's more of a priority, we'll get to them in a minute because they are not in direct trouble from the sounds of it". Then they get phaser beamed in half. And after that just everyone hates you! They made references to you as the human who let the council die. [...]

Researcher: Was it down to the menu layout that you didn't get the choices right?

They have the right and left thing, putting good choices one place, bad another... I couldn't have mistaken it I don't think... Obviously, one side you have "I'll kick your head in" and the other "Have this present". You can get a feel for which one is going to be good and which one is going to be evil because they are labelled colour wise. If they left everything white, then I would naturally have thought well that side must be that, and that side must be that. And they also lead you through menus at the bottom. For example going left almost always seem to be the ones which give you more information, the bonus ones. [Participant 26]

Consistency of presentation is an important factor in the design of these systems, and the choice participant 26 describes was presented in a manner uniform with how neutral options were presented throughout the game. The death of the council, unless the player character intervenes, is implied but never explicitly stated as an outcome for choosing "Concentrate on Sovereign" which is in the location on the hub where neutral options are usually placed. Neutral options rarely result in poor outcomes in *Mass Effect* explaining why participant 26 made his incorrect assumption.

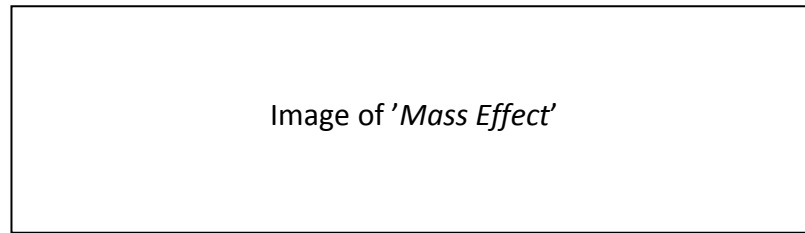


Figure 48 – The dialogue wheel of *Mass Effect*⁴²².

If the script had emphasised that immediate intervention was necessary and that the council's situation could not wait any ambiguity would have been removed. Nonetheless, the game appears to have remained internally consistent in its presentation of options.

Other participants kept multiple saves, or saved often to avoid these situations where they had to deal with unintended consequences. Participant 11 exploited the use of saved games in order to explore all dialogue options and the consequences of each choice before deciding which choice he would like to incorporate into his characters story.

What I really like doing is checking out all the consequences for a selection of choices you have. Go down one route, reload, go down another. I don't often have time to do that anymore, and if a game uses check points, or if the conversations are really long then it's easier to just go to a wiki and look at the consequences there. Some might say it's cheating but if you want to know enough to make a decision then that's fair, I think. It's your character, you should gather all the information you can before making a decision about what you want their future to be. [Participant 11]

Whilst Participant 11 evidently relished having absolute control over his character, four other participants (Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, Participant 7) described using saved games to a lesser extent to avoid unattractive outcomes and preferred not to explore alternative decisions unless something went wrong with their first choice. This wish to avoid unnecessarily prolonging interactions with NPCs comes down to players trying to establish a rhythm and pace in how they proceed through a game that is satisfying. If the methods used to progress a player through the game become too repetitive, or the mechanics become too

⁴²² Lyonthal [YouTube username]. *Paolo Mass Effect HD 85 - Sovereign End Battle - Council Saved by Renegade Shepard – Citadel*. <<http://youtu.be/DPrrpFnOoX4>>, 2009, [last accessed 31/10/11].

noticeable then players will try to change how they proceed, or will eventually become tired of the game. Participant 9 (*Morrowind*) and Participant 24 (*Mass Effect 2*) highlighted the downside of enduring the same mechanics for every major NPC encounter in a particular game.

It gets very boring... Interrogation type interaction... And everyone seems to say the same things and it becomes very mechanical. I got to that point and then I wanted to get it finished as quickly as possible and just do the main one because I was sick of grilling everyone I met for information! [Participant 9]

This frustration evidently shortened her interest in the game because it prompted her to accelerate through to the game's conclusion. Interestingly, this did not dampen the participants enthusiasm for *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* which uses essentially the same system. This can be attributed towards the pervasive use of voice acting in *Oblivion* where *Morrowind* relied on text alone to deliver narrative.

Just talking to people, getting information out of them. If you're looking at doing a couple of playthroughs, though, it's not that good. But it can make a difference, it can change the outcome of missions so you have to do it. I think with the side characters, the lesser ones, I get more impatient because they're not as interesting or as fleshed out, so I want to skip those interactions and get to the shooting more when it comes to replaying side missions. I don't mind talking to my crew again, they're all right. [Participant 24]

The density of text branching dialogue interactions in some games and over-reliance on them could, therefore, harm the replayability of such titles, which is possibly why the most replayed game mentioned by participants (*Fable II*) features very little in terms of dialogue, but instead uses an expression based interaction system as explained in chapter 6.5 which allows for emergent NPC crowd effects.

6.5 Expressions and interrupts

There are other methods of interacting with NPCs and expressing a character's personality other than dialogue systems. The *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* allows a very basic level of experimentation with NPCs to see how they react to different attitudes from the player.

Wearing a mask whilst initiating dialogue would elicit different reactions from NPCs. For example, the Spooky Mask could be used to scare some NPCs, whilst others were indifferent or offended that the player-character tried to scare them. Upon taking the mask off, the NPCs return to their usual scripts and the previous interaction is forgotten.

Overall, there is little development in terms of relationship between PCs and most non-hostile NPCs in *Ocarina of Time* but players are given the agency to explore their role within the world and are not punished for this experimentation. Still, the predominant method of communicating with NPCs is through the linear dialogue system, so this section will concentrate on games which have integrated alternative systems into the player experience. The games mechanics discussed here are the emote/expression wheel for *Fable II* (Figure 49) and interrupts in *Mass Effect 2*. The expression wheel of *Fable II* was summoned with a press of a controller button giving players access to gestures or expressions (Table 2) that could be targeted towards specific NPCs or performed in front of crowds who generally gathered around displays of exhibitionism.

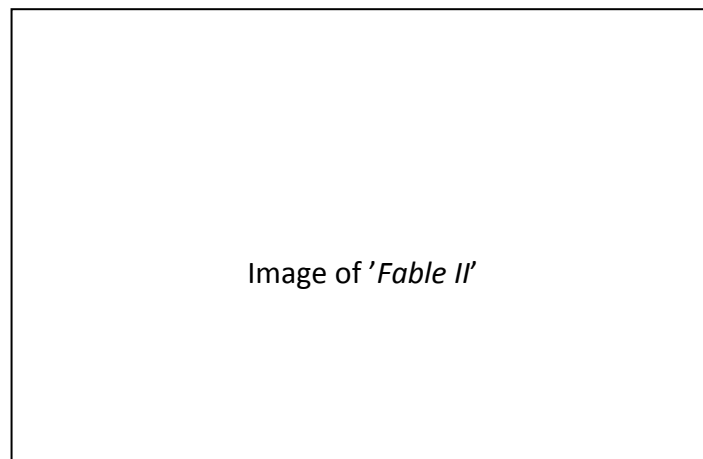


Figure 49 – The Fable II emote wheel targetted at an NPC⁴²³.

⁴²³ Caron, F. *The journey is the reward: a review of Fable II*. <<http://arstechnica.com/gaming/reviews/2008/10/fable-2-review.ars/4>>, 2008, [accessed 31.10.11].

Expression type	Expressions
Flirty	Blow Kiss, Come Back to My Place, Heroic Pose, Pickup Line, Seduce, Whistle, Worship
Fun	Belch, Dance, Fart, "Hat, Headband, Moustache", Laugh, Sock Puppet and Victory Arm Pump
Rude	Beg, Chicken, Kiss My Ass, Middle Finger, Play Dead, Point and Laugh and Vulgar Thrust
Scary	Extort, Bloodlust Roar, Feign Attack, Growl, Scary Laugh, Slap, and Threaten;
Social commands	Apologise, Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down, Follow, Gift, Lute, Trophy, and Dismiss
Dog	Praise, Treat, Fetch, Punish and Heal
Dog tricks	Backflip, Begging, Bunny Hop, Growl, Hide Snout, Play Dead, Roll Over, Tail Chase, Targeted Urination, Wave

Table 2 – Fable II Expressions

Fable II is populated with NPCs who each have loosely defined personalities including expressions or gifts that they are attracted to or repulsed by, and some participants evidently enjoyed using the emote system to draw crowds and experiment with their reactions.

I sometimes spent ages manipulating the crowd with nice or flirty expressions, then breaking out something inappropriate or scary just to take them by surprise. It was a good distraction, because they all react and the voice acting is quite funny so it was worth it to hear some of the stuff they'd come out with. It was also a good way to drive down prices if you were trying to get a discount in a shop, get the shopkeepers to like you and you get money off. [Participant 11]

I love gestures and stuff in Fable because they are just fun. There's quite a few of them, you can combine them you can watch the reaction on the other person, and then you can watch them change how they think about it. That's a non-crucial aspect to it, mostly, but rather probably there are odd times where you have to get someone on your side in which case you have to do the right expressions and it does become that bit more mechanical, but the non-crucial stuff is fun. [Participant 9]

By crucial and non-crucial, Participant 9 means that she believes it to be an aspect of the game that she is not forced to use and finds it more attractive as a result, because players in *Fable II* can get by without using the expression system for much of the game but they will miss out on various beneficial effects such as cheaper items and more renown (the equivalent of fame). Not every participant who played *Fable* saw the utility in engaging with NPCs and, accordingly, rarely used expressions because they were not convinced of the rewards of doing so. They argued the financial incentive was small and is negated once players have a steady income from owning properties, and that having the NPCs find them more attractive or scary was only of consequence if the participant cared about their reactions and the systems (i.e. romance and fame) that were tied into those reactions.

I find the expressions fascinating and particularly fun, I have to admit, but I seldom used it because I didn't intimidate people to get money and gifts, even as an evil person I didn't particularly do that. I found it fun having to show off to get gifts but that's all I used it for, and that was rare. [Participant 5]

From the rest of his interview, Participant 5 seemed particularly sensitive towards the plight of NPCs, and did not necessarily enjoy being rude or hurtful towards them even when he was playing through as a predominantly evil character. It also appears that the lack of integration into other systems of the game meant that he was not so convinced by its utility, nor were Participant 10 and Participant 25.

I didn't use the feature that much. Obviously a couple of mini missions required it. But it wasn't really part of the storyline, so I left it out. It did come out in the woodwork, but it was an interesting thing to do because as your reputation builds up you get certain different emotes and things like that. Obviously you could be a right evil monster and have a crowd fleeing but it's not something I did much. [Participant 25]

The way you could shit yourself in public I thought was entertaining. You could shit yourself in public, you could vomit in public. That was okay, I suppose. But I'm not going to love the game just because of the fact you can fart and everyone loves you. I was thinking about doing an evil playthrough and getting loads of people to follow me and sacrifice them at the dark brotherhood bit but I just got

bored. That wasn't enough to make up for the lack of a decent armour system.

[Participant 10]

Lack of practical reasons to use the expression system were not the only issues that prevented participants from engaging with NPCs. Participant 23 was also reluctant to use the expression system:

If you smile at some people, they might take offense to it if they don't like you. Added a bit more dimension to it. A bit more real I suppose. If you approach people out on the street, depending on how you approach them will affect how you speak to them. I didn't like that because it's too real, perhaps... If I'm playing a game, I don't want to worry about how I look to other people. I wouldn't say that I overly worry about how I appear to others in real life to a huge extent, not too much, and it's not something I want to think about when playing computer games, really. [Participant 23]

Games typically help players escape the barriers of social norms and etiquette so this might be perceived as a step too far by some players. This can be interpreted as the expression system making Participant 23 uncomfortable due to it reminding him of real life situations where he feels very aware of how he presents himself to others, or simply that it is too close the mechanics of a social simulator like *The Sims*, which he tries to avoid normally. In the first two *Fable* games, this aspect of the mechanics were overlooked if a player was not interested in them; however, *Fable III* (Figure 50) changed the formula, simplifying the expressions available and making their use critical to the progression of the player character through the plot and for developing their abilities.

I felt the opposite about Fable III's gestures than Fable II. They had so many in Fable II and you could do them whenever you wanted but what was the point? Then in Fable III they made it so you had a reason to use them, but you had to do things in a certain order, and you couldn't trigger gestures whenever you wanted. I was doing the same thing over and over again, just with different villagers. Argh, that's like the worst part of an MMO! Grinding for points. When I first meet someone in a game, if I have to talk to them at all, I don't want to have to shake their hand. I want to do something proper random! Your character is a royal, so it

shouldn't be out of place for them to be a bit barmy. And the options you get to choose from are on a cycle so even though you have a fair few, you don't have access to all of them at once. [Participant 25]

Participant 25's complaints are concerning the application of social conventions to how a player can use avatar expressions on NPCs. Instead of having a whole menu of expressions to choose from, players must initiate contact with NPCs with a greeting (scary or nice), and then they will have a choice of three expressions (good or evil). In real life there are certain social graces involved when meeting someone for the first time but games need not follow these conventions. Participant 25 believed it was a strength of *Fable II* that he did not have to obey any such structures when dealing with NPCs.

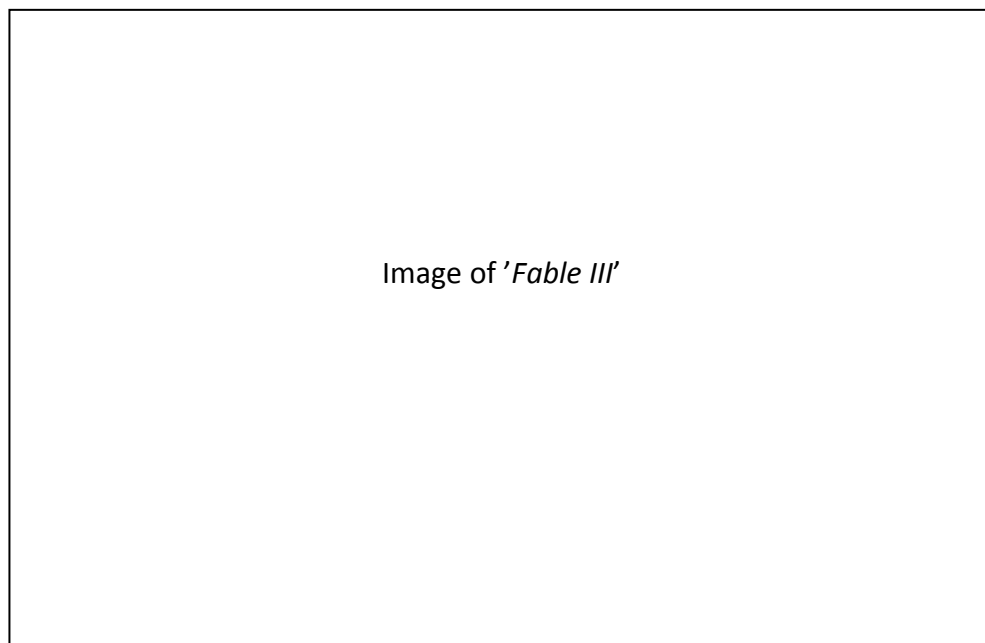


Figure 50 – The NPC interaction system for Fable III⁴²⁴

For players interested by emergent systems and experimenting with the reactions of NPCs, this will hobble the exploration and articulation of their character as well as making the system more overtly mechanical. Another participant also criticised *Fable III* for the addition of a set of animations that your character (the prince or princess of the land) automatically performs during combat which hint at an underlying highly confident or callous (depending on interpretation) personality. In a game franchise that previously tried to provide a blank

⁴²⁴ RPGash. *Fable 3: Extreme Good Combat Wings and Emote*. <<http://youtu.be/liYsJQg6Dkg>>, 2010, [accessed 31.10.11].

puppet-like avatar for the player to imprint their own personality on, this is seemingly at odds with the actions of a self-defined avatar and did not make sense to Participant 11.

I noticed those new animations. It's fun and it looks good, but isn't the game automatically presuming that's how you want your character to act? When you think about it, it's quite cocky, doing all these fancy flourishes as you kill things, and I think that's more the character of Lionhead's show-off prince rather than my prince, if you see what I mean. [Participant 11]

Emoting systems have also been implemented in genres other than RPGs, an example being the *Little Big Planet* series which allow players to make their player character (called Sackboy) adopt a scared, happy, sad or angry expression which each have three degrees of intensity. Only two participants had played *Little Big Planet*, but found that the expression system and the ability to move Sackboy's hands independently added to the entertainment value of the game. Participant 15 said that it helped them express themselves when playing online without voice communication and was amusing when playing with his girlfriend.

If you kind of flick the analogue stick to the side then your Sackboy waves his arm around and if someone's next to you they get smacked and fall over. Did that when I was playing with my girlfriend, hahaha, she didn't like that, but it was fine once she figured out how to do it. [Participant 15]

This system also proved to be compulsive for participant 14, even when playing alone as it provided a playful way to express feelings in the game without it impacting on the main mechanics or on the effectiveness of the character.

I really like the idea of it, that whenever you pressed a button he got happy or sad. It was cute but I didn't see the point of it, but then I only played single-player. Saying that, I'd put the happy one on maximum when I finished a level or the scared one on if something bad was happening... That's sad, I guess, haha! But it was cute, and I liked the way you could control his arms as well, even though it didn't do anything. I'd make my Sackboy do a victory dance... [Participant 14]

Another system that allows players to convert spontaneous impulses or express more aspects of their characters personality is the interrupt system which, as of 2012, is a relatively recent development in the world of RPGs. They are a variation on the quick time events used in adventure games such as *Heavy Rain*, *Shenmue* and *Dragon's Lair* which require either a sequence of commands or a well-timed key press in response to on-screen instructions in order to make a player character perform a particular action. This makes the commands context sensitive, because the end result will vary depending on the situation the character is in, how well the commands have been inputted (if the game is monitoring such things), and what possibilities the developers have programmed into the scenario.

Bioware's *Mass Effect 2* adds interrupts onto their existing dialogue and cutscene system allowing the player to, when prompted, initiate either a paragon or renegade intervention in the scene that is unfolding before them. The system was well received by participants who often felt tempted by the renegade actions, even when playing a straight-laced paragon character and delighted in the physicality and humour of the interventions that going full renegade afforded to them.

They were fun, even though I was good, I would do some slightly colourful things. Like the merc mechanic, I stabbed him in the back. "You're working too hard."
[Participant 24]

Interrupts are awesome. In Mass Effect a lot of conversations let you give someone a punch. But you don't always know from a conversation option that you're going to hit them. With Mass Effect 2 you knew that if you push the right shoulder button you're going to hit them. You're either going to shoot someone or throw them out of a window. It was pretty much right shoulder button even when I was playing a good character. [...] I took renegade interrupts just because they were cooler. [Participant 10]

The appeal of being a wise cracking antihero was evidently popular as it presented opportunities for mischief to players who did not want to be completely conformist and peaceful in their moral and ethical alignment. This proved attractive even to participants who usually stuck rigidly to doing the 'right thing' in games.

Oh, like in Mass Effect 2 you had the pop up options, the interrupts, they were interesting. Sometimes I'd take those where you might hit somebody in the head with a wrench. I got some renegade points for that. Hahaha! [Participant 13]

That the interrupt mechanic tempted Participant 13 into performing renegade actions, when he clearly stated earlier in the interview that he got no enjoyment from being evil shows that even if people find taking the morally grey or outright pernicious route to be difficult, lesser acts of villainy and mischief can still be attractive when presented correctly. It is likely that the novelty of the new mechanic first tempted him into exploring this side of his character's personality, because the actual outcome of triggering an interrupt is never made clear until it is in motion (other than it being paragon or renegade in nature); thus, curious players will initiate the mechanic in order to discover how they work and what the consequences are. For Participant 18, the interrupts often represented exactly how he wanted to deal with situations:

*I loved it. I thought when someone was talking but not spilling the beans, "No! Renegade!" *bangs on table three times* You slam into the wall or something, "Yeaaaaah! Tell me!" Really sort of, like... You feel like you've got power... This artificially generated character gave me the massive power trip of my day! Like, I feel... Mighty, and all flared up... You know. Tingling. Some of its, well... Personally, very powerful. Some of it was just like, "Wow. I'm really sort of emotionally balanced with Shepard right now. I feel what he feels." And probably how Bioware wanted me to feel. It's really interesting how they do that. [Participant 18]*

The sympathy between Participant 18 and the character of Shepard appears to have been aided by the addition of interrupts to the game. They have allowed him to translate his violent impulses triggered by obstructive NPCs into assertive action, when other games might have forced him to persist with the interrogative questioning style evident in *Morrowind* and *DA: O*. Accordingly, an interrupt timed with a player's own urges can have a positive influence on their identification with the player character.

6.6 Developing and managing working and personal relationships with NPCs

Many of the more difficult choices that players faced came from interacting with non-hostile NPCs; recruiting them to form a group capable of overcoming the games enemies is a key mechanic of many RPGs. Bioware games are notable for their inclusion of the ability to develop a relationship with NPC team members during periods of respite between quests or missions. This is usually achieved through choosing from multiple dialogue options at various points in *Mass Effect 2* and *Dragon Age: Origins*, how you treat your team members through dialogue choices and how they feel about the decisions you make as a leader might influence their performance or convince them to leave your endeavour entirely. Mismanaging a team member can potentially impact on the narrative options available to a player, and change the outcome of the game.

This chapter will give examples of how participants dealt with such situations, their opinions on the mechanics and how they impacted on their experience of the game. Some of the examples that participants mentioned the most were with regards to events where choices made by the player resulted in the death or departure of a team member. The loss of a team member was sometimes felt deeply, largely in connection to the time and effort exerted in customising them and being able to use their abilities in battle, but occasionally relating to the regret of losing opportunities to interact with a character. For example, Participant 7 who was rarely sentimental about the characters he controlled or influenced was moved by *Mass Effect's* scripted event which can lead to the player having to shoot one of his/her team mates.

Researcher: Did you talk Wrex down?

Oh yeah, Wrex! That was one of my favourite bits, talking him down. First time I played through I had to shoot him which was devastating. Next time I was like, how do I get through this and second time I managed to do it. I was very surprised.

Researcher: How did you feel when you found out there was a consequence?

Very surprised. It was strange to go though the game with little consequences then get the opportunity to lose two of them. It was kind of unique of the game.

You're going around the galaxy, kill things, save the universe. But then there's the whole moral dilemma of killing a team mate. "Actually I don't want to kill him, I've invested all those skill points, he's useful!" [Participant 7]

Mass Effect presents another decision within an hour of the confrontation with Wrex where players must choose between saving one of their two human comrades who are both under attack in different locations. Whilst he was feeling dismayed over the death of one team mate at his hands, Participant 7 then was then forced to sacrifice another. This event was less fraught for most participants who had played *Mass Effect* as they seemed to share a common animosity and favourite nominee for annihilation, preferring to detonate biotic⁴²⁵ Kaidan Alenko in favour of saving soldier Ashley Williams⁴²⁶. It appears that Kaiden's demeanour produced the reaction in participants that lead to him being their favourite sacrifice, and no one mentioned basing the decision on the abilities he possessed.

When playing through I always kill him. He's whiny! He seemed soft and weak. Never got on with that character. Always seemed to whinge too much. [Participant 7]

First time through I made a mistake! I was wanting to save Ashley because Kaiden was just annoying me all the way through, whiny little bitch... "Whuuuu whuuu whuuu", so I thought, "You can sacrifice yourself and I'll keep this bird with me", and I end up pressing the wrong thing, I thought this would be the right way to do it, and in the end she blew up and I was like "Nooooo" and I had whiny with me for the rest of the game. And he appears in the second one. I intended to go back and redo it from the start but I didn't get a chance to. Kaiden, just what was his problem? Good god! Just get on with it. He always annoyed me. There were always certain characters in games that would. He was the first choice, and the option came to make him the better man! [Participant 26]

Researcher: How did you feel about potentially sacrificing Ashley?

⁴²⁵ A human who can create and manipulate mass effect fields on the battlefield.

⁴²⁶ Human soldier with advanced combat training. A bit racist.

*Sort of a prehistoric cave man protecting kind of thing. *laughs* I never really talked to Kaiden enough to get to know him. He seemed a bit cold. I don't think that had any impact on me. I just thought "Go on, might as well... That's just the way it is." [Participant 24]*

The character of Kaidan appears to have been generally perceived as being too conservative and sensitive by most participants who took the time to talk to him between missions and those who used him as a team member. Otherwise people thought he was too bland. Another factor is that most participants played through as a male Shepard, and Ashley was one of their possible romantic interests. Participants also described being averse to limiting their options when dealing with their team mates, which may have given the participants who sacrificed Kaidan further reason to do so if they valued the romantic potential of Ashley over what Kaidan's biotic abilities could offer.

Some NPCs clearly invoke the ire of players, but at the same time other NPCs come across more sympathetically to various participants who could become quite fond of them. For Participant 1 and Participant 2, the innocence of Alastair the Greywarden in *DA: O* was endearing, as was his interactions with NPCs who were the polar opposite of him.

*Alastair was a hilarious character in the game. Some of the one liners he came out with were so amusing we just took him everywhere just because the banter between him and some of the other characters was hilarious. Especially between him and Morrigan! They always just bitched at each other the whole time. *laughs* He started off very pure and chaste and obviously Morrigan is a slut, so the interaction between those two was hilarious, we'd just be walking through a town and they'd be bickering in the background which was quite amusing.*

Researcher: How did you resolve his story?

We ended up that he wasn't executed and that he did take the throne in the end, but he was still a bit of a softy. Because obviously he was all battle hardened and he was wielding big axes and things but deep down he was a bit of a softy which we thought was quite sweet. [Participant 1]

Likewise, Participant 24 felt a connection with Alistair and was also weary of the decisions that could reduce his loyalty to the player character.

Alistair was a part of the Chantry, who are the main religion, and he was like “No, he killed the Grey Wardens, I’ll leave if you take him.” I executed him, had Alistair cut his head off. I assume Alistair would have left. I don’t know what would happen if you just put him in a tower. I think he’d be pissed off. His loyalty would go down but he wouldn’t leave. I quite liked Alistair because I’d been with him throughout the game. You do your mission, your starting mission and he’s the junior grey warden so he leads the group of recruits into the woods and he was just in my party for the rest of the game. He was my tank. I’d say that I built quite a relationship with him, became quite good friends with him I think. So I’m not going to jeopardise that by recruiting a guy who just killed all of his friends.
[Participant 24]

That Participant 24 felt that he had become friends with Alistair is indicative of how well written the character was and how that character could be expressed through the all of the different dialogue systems in the game, including moments where his loyalty to the player character was put in jeopardy. This makes NPCs more than just bots with fighting abilities, and this emotional resonance enhances the experience for players who enjoy paying attention to dynamics of NPC relationships in games. Likewise, even NPCs with very limited interactions can be used to emotionally manipulate or have some impact on the feelings of players. One example being *Fable II* where after NPCs were inadvertently dragged into an ongoing feud between the player and a group of assassins who periodically tried to slay the player character, Participant 11 felt guilty that he could not save them.

*The thing I regret the most is when I was playing Fable II, I would be periodically attacked by assassins and I had an optional quest to go off and investigate who they were and probably to stop them from trying to kill me. I put it off because they were quite easy to deal with, but at one point a fight started whilst I was rearranging furniture and the family were killed before I could do anything about it... I was quite sad about that. I think it was because tenants don’t respawn
laughs No, I felt a bit guilty because they died because I was there so it was my*

fault they died, and I could have done the optional quest and then there wouldn't have even been any assassins.

Researcher: Did that prompt you to do anything about the assassins?

I did that quest straight away after that because I was a bit angry. It made for a good story really, good reason as any to go and clear a tower full of assassins. Vengeance!

Researcher: How do you feel when you can't save them?

It's like herding suicidal sheep at times! I don't like it when they die unnecessarily. It's annoying when they're wandering through woods at night and they get attacked by balverines, I can't always save them. I suppose you do get attached to them... You hear all the same voice actors, so you recognise them, even though there's really hundreds of people running around. There's only so many types of villager out there. You get to know them that way, rather than through actually interacting with every single one of them. If you're playing it good, you're also supposed to be their champion and protect them from harm. I probably take that too seriously. [Participant 11]

This is an example of emergent narrative elegantly supplying the motive for completing a quest that otherwise was a low priority. Participant 11's conviction in response to the death of the NPCs also shows that some players are susceptible to the guilt and anger that events in games have the potential to provoke, and this can be connected to the attachment Participant 11 formed with the NPCs, or at least the understanding of their characters that he had formed based largely on the voice acting.

They're always talking in the background, babbling away! But I'd miss them if they weren't there. A lot of the feedback you get from the game about how you're doing, what your character is like is based on what they say so I think they're important. And I like that feedback. It makes me feel like I'm changing the world instead of hearing all the same things whenever I visit somewhere. Maybe that's why I went off on one a little. [Participant 11]

Even when not using the interaction options discussed earlier during *Fable II*, NPCs continue to comment loudly on what the player is doing, what they are feeling about the game world and also to talk amongst themselves. This constant babble provides reinforcement for the player if they are susceptible to such positive or negative feedback and a family to be killed whilst he was redecorating was an example of that reward system being damaged which also hurt the participant. Forming an emotional connection, then, was not unusual for some participants who spent more time managing the NPCs of their team than with connecting with NPCs that populate towns.

You're trying to develop friendships by giving gifts to improve people's views of you, to improve their kit. My character is in a relationship with Lelyana, so I tend to leave her behind fights. Stupidly. So she's out of harm's way. Whereas Alistair who will be king is annoying, but I take him on fights to build up his characteristics and help him survive later on. At the end of the day they become one of the family and you're trying to do what's best. [Participant 5]

An optional aspect to relationship development in several major RPGs involves developing relationships with NPCs to the point where they become romantically involved with the player character. Some participants earmarked particular NPCs as being worth pursuing and would make it one of their characters goals to achieve a successful relationship (or at least manage to sleep with them once). For Participant 5 this meant he would try to protect the NPCs he had chosen to have a relationship with by leaving them out of fights, whilst others he knew would require to be developed in order for them to be useful in ways other than providing emotional support. Seeking to maintain a romantic relationship with one NPC can lead to problems when trying to maintain good working relationships with another when they clash. For example, in *ME2* Participant 24 had to take sides during an argument between his love interest and another member of his crew which then meant that crew member was not performing at their best.

There was obviously that argument between Jack and Miranda. Because I was pursuing Miranda, I just took her side rather than take the middle ground of Jack's side. If I had been paragon I would have taken the middle ground. "Ahhh, it's greyed out, nooo."

Researcher: Do you try to please everybody if possible?

I'd like to but it's quite hard. Especially with characters like Morrigan and Wyn. Wyn is a mage healer you find in the mage tower who is inherently good, whilst Morrigan is wild witch. Quite strong. If you have them in the same party it's quite hard to please them both, it's always a compromise. It's a bit frustrating, but it makes it more interesting. Makes it feel like they've got their own personalities and you're their leader. [Participant 24]

Participant 24 was particularly conflicted here because although he wanted to pursue Miranda, he really wanted his team to function optimally, however, here he had to decide between the two. He does not resent being made to make the choice because if he had played the game in a certain way (in this case making sure that he had high paragon or renegade points) he would have been able to stop the argument and not have to choose sides. Ultimately it was his playing strategy that was deficient and he redirected his annoyance at himself rather than the game for making him choose because it is that choice which makes him feel like he is in charge of a group of warriors and how they perform, as opposed to being swept along with a heavily pre-defined narrative. This group dynamic also means that there are some characters that are going to remain undeveloped both in terms of attributes and inter-personal relationships when there are a limited amount of narrative events to use them in.

Researcher: How did you decide which characters you would use?

There were some characters that we specifically didn't like and didn't want to take out on raids with us and specifically left at home and there are other characters that we wanted to cultivate our friendships with which was quite good and we often had quite heated discussions:

"Well, I want to take the dog this time!"

"No we can't take the dog this time!"

"Why??"

Depending on what places you were going to, different characters that you could take with you had different skills to fight monsters and things like that, but there were definitely some characters we were nice to and said all the right things to, and there were others we were actually quite nasty with. [Participant 1]

Some participants maintained that they had little interest in engaging in the romances and relationship management with NPCs, like participant 7 who chose to “focus on the action and violence more than anything else”⁴²⁷. This was not true for how he played *Mass Effect*, however, as he tried repeatedly to woo an alien crew member but was frustrated to find that she rejected his advances.

I really tried to get my character to sleep with the Matriarchs daughter...

Researcher: Liara?

Could I? Cold fish. Every time I thought I'd get a bit of action, I'd go chat with her, chat with her, next chapter I'd do the same to keep my hand in. Again, wasn't a high priority. [Participant 7]

This can be due to not selecting the right dialogue choices whilst talking with Liara in between missions, but the desire to see new game content made him persist. His lack of success was a source of frustration however the relationship only progresses to the physical stage in the penultimate moments of the game, so it is possible that he gave up before that point. Participant 18 also made a relationship with an NPC a core goal for his player character and felt a greater sense of achievement from succeeding in that endeavor compared to finishing the main campaign of the game.

*Again I felt this massive personal affiliation with Shepherd. I was him, and so from the first cutscene my mission was to have sex with Miranda. *laughs* I was actually more pleased with getting that achievement than destroying the Collectors, because it's just like “I've earned Shepherd points!” So it was that sort of personal affiliation with the character, “I want him to do this, I want him to be this person...” I think there were some points that the game played with my mind*

⁴²⁷ Although he did say that he “missed his wives” after he was forced to sacrifice them, so he evidentially explored the system to at least a small degree.

as well. I think it was where I was calming down Jake and Miranda. It was like “if I don't manage to calm them down...” You get very involved. Even though all my friends are talking around me, I've got headphones on, I don't care what's going on. It was massively immersive. The fact that your character could affiliate with people, could have man talks and things like that... [Participant 18]

Participant 18 describes moments of great concentration and worry during tense situations with his team members and a kind of identification with his player character where he shared in the victories and growth of the avatar. He clearly had a vision and goals for his version of Shepard and enjoyed fulfilling them with regards to being a successful team leader and managing relationships, so it seems these gameplay mechanics can contribute a great amount to some players' experience. This was one of his first role-playing game with these mechanics which may explain his enthusiastic reception to their inclusion but it also may be the combination of combat and these social elements that are particularly appealing and trigger his competitive spirit.

Being a long-time *Runescape* and FPS player, and, admittedly, very competitive, he spends a lot of energy and takes great pride at excelling in terms of performance, so it is this same approach that he brings to interfacing with all of the systems that are present in *Mass Effect*. Participant 18 enjoyed the ability to effect change both on a galactic scale and on a more personal scale with his team mates, but new ways of implementing these features (particularly romance) in RPGs are still being developed. Games are a progressive medium and new ideas are being released all the time, but the changes that individual titles introduce can occasionally cause confusion when they upset established genre conventions.

*Mass effect One I tried to do some of my crew members. Mass Effect Two I didn't bother. Mass effect One, I was actually quite shocked they had done that. I thought they've got a bit too far here. *laughs* Usually the screen just fades to black. I thought “this was a bit odd” so I immediately made a female character and became a lesbian. [Participant 10]*

His thought regarding Bioware going too far with their depiction of sex was also down to the awkwardness of the animation in addition to them pushing the boundaries with what was portrayed in games. Participant 11 described the cutscenes as “like watching Barbie dolls get

it on". He also found Shepard's facial expressions as he pursued women to be distractingly lecherous. Male Shepard's animations resulted in Participant 11 referring to his avatar in the third person whilst recounting this embarrassing section, instead of talking about the avatar in the first person, laying the blame on "Shepard" and making the distance between the actions of the avatar and the intentions of the player all too clear.

Some of the animation and facial expressions look great but Shepard's sex faces generally aren't. I don't mean his actual sex faces, you don't see those fortunately, just the ones when he's trying to pull. His tongue is barely in his mouth it's just, uuugh! [Participant 11]

Participant 2 had similar feelings about the equivalent cutscenes in *DA: O*, referring to them as "the rather comical sex scenes. [...] It was certainly amusing and we were just sat there laughing." Sex and intimacy in games is traditionally portrayed with a fade to black which has been interpreted by some participants (participant one, participant two, participant ten) as down to not wanting to get a higher classification for their game, or to spend money on animating interactions that may have to be cut in order to achieve a more inclusive classification. *Mass Effect's* representation of sexuality attracted sensationalist coverage from news agencies and criticism from gamers over the lack of opportunities for homosexual relationships.

No participants picked up on the absence, or if they did they did not mention it, whilst fans questioned Bioware's commitment to equality. In an interview with 1up.com, Bioware's Casey Hudson implied that they did not have time to implement gay relationships as well as the woman-on-alien woman content, also suggesting that they might have compromised the "PG-13 action movie" theme of the game⁴²⁸. Bioware's other franchise (*Dragon Age*) and Obsidian Entertainment's *Fallout: New Vegas* both were more inclusive with their representations of sexuality which Participant 10 appreciated, even if it was down to the humour and the sense of taboo breaking that *Fallout: New Vegas* encouraged.

Fallout: New Vegas is a bit funnier. Any game where you can gay it up as a woman, that's happened in Mass Effect One, Mass Effect Two. Any game we can gay it up as a man. That's like the ultimate taboo. You can do that in Fable can't

⁴²⁸ John, T. *BioWare Explains Why There's No Homosexuality in Mass Effect 2*. <<http://www.1up.com/do/blogEntry?bld=9026170>>, 2010, [accessed 01.11.12].

you? You can bum and be bummed. And you can get STDs. In Fallout: New Vegas you can have sex with a ghoul, a man, and a robot.

Researcher: Fisto?

*Fisto. *laughs* I found that absolutely hilarious. That's the one where after using him you can go "I can't feel my legs." In Fallout Two there's a place called New Reno. And if you run out of money you can work as a fluffer. [Participant 10]*

Much of participant 10's sexual exploration in this context can be linked to the humour derived from the absurd setting and performing sex acts are not commonly portrayed in media. The acts themselves are also executed off screen (except for the sounds of a pneumatic drill in Fisto's case) which also increases their palatability (Figure 51).

I'm glad they didn't show that. It's funny but robot man sex is not something I actually need to see. [Participant 10]

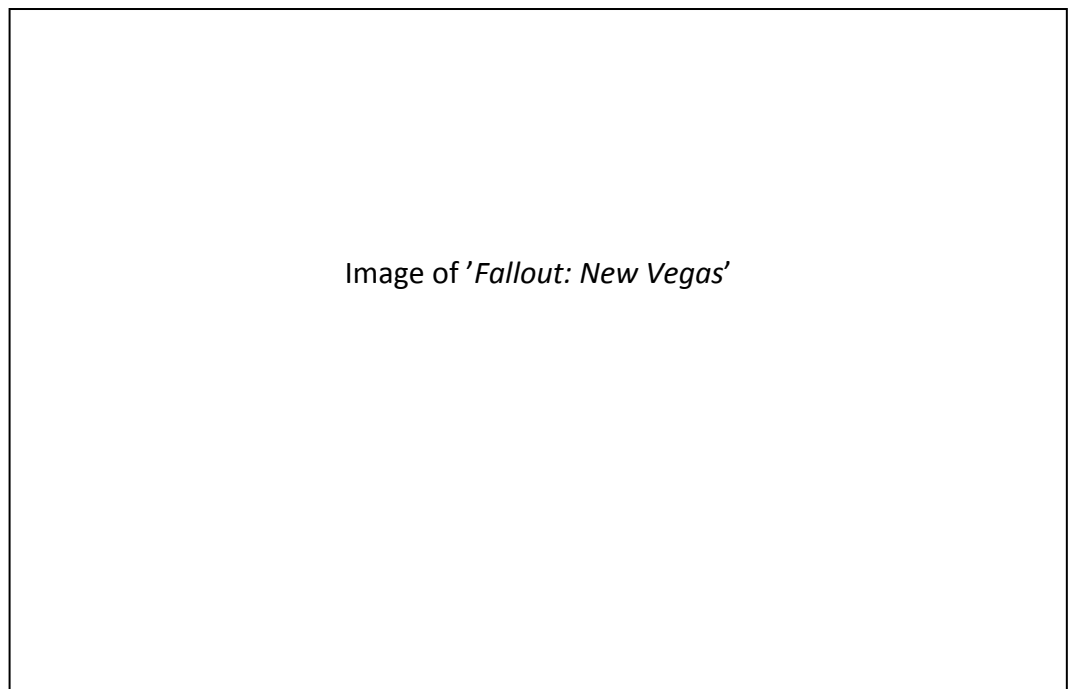


Figure 51 – Fisto the robot: "Numbness will subside in several minutes."⁴²⁹

⁴²⁹ Jspoelstra. *Fisto nv.jpg*. <http://fallout.wikia.com/wiki/File:Fisto_nv.jpg>, 2011, [accessed 11.05.12].

In an example of participants sharing their ethical decision making and game sessions with each other, Participant 1 and Participant 2 played through several games, including *DA: O* together. Participant 1 and Participant 2 found the relationship management and romance aspect of the game kept them entertained because of the unpredictability of NPCs and how they would receive their advances.

And in that game as well, you can interact with the other characters in your group, and you can end up sleeping with some of them and not getting on very well with others depending on what you choose to say to them, and that threw us sometimes. You say one thing to one character and you think they're going to fall in love with you and then she would go storm off in a strop. It was quite clever in that way, and it was quite nice that you didn't know what was going to happen and that it threw a spanner in the works so that you would think "Oh damn, what do we do?". [Participant 1]

Bioware's games vary in the consequences of initiating relationships with NPCs as this largely depends on the personality of the NPC and how you treat them afterwards. These participants were more motivated by trying out all of the relationship options and trying to get certain encounters to happen rather than doing it out of any sense of attraction to the characters. The two gamers got their enjoyment out of the system by trying to see how many different NPCs they could get their character to have sex with, and what reactions some would give if they were unceremoniously dumped or tormented.

Researcher: Were there any characters that you disliked or decided to act against?

Morrigan, because our character had an affair with her but then we ended up in a very deep relationship with the girl with shorter hair. He ended up having a relationship with her and then we were horrible to Morrigan until she bugged off. But we were cultivating our character's relationship with Alistair who's the bloke who ends up becoming king. We read somewhere that you can actually get your character to have homosexual relationships, so we were trying to get that to happen but it didn't. [Participant 1]

Participant 1 appeared to be more interested in this aspect of the game than her boyfriend, and with not wanting to take control during battles, the overall relationship management and NPC interaction side of *DA: O* is the part she had the most involvement with. Unlike with the attribute development of characters where participant 2 took the lead, both Participant 1 and Participant 2 tried to reach some sort of consensus on what they wanted to achieve and how they were going to do so. Treating the game as a “choose your own adventure book” (Participant 1), the couple had an image of how the character should evolve and act, and tried to stay consistent to that vision.

*We were trying to make him a bit of a hard nosed bastard at times. Rather than being a nice happy go lucky character we were trying to make him a bit blunt which we succeeded in doing until we started having the love affair and he started getting a bit gushy. [Participant 2] was like “He’s not very hard anymore, is he? We’ll make him do this.”*laughs* We didn’t really follow our own morals quite as much because at the end of the day it’s a fantasy character and you can portray onto it whatever you want to do and it’s not going to hurt anybody in the real world. [...] We made Morrigan be a total slut, which is quite amusing, otherwise all the characters would be the same! [Participant 1]*

They gave the impression that the negotiation process over how the character should act and who he should pursue next was quite relaxed and they worked to accommodate each other’s ideas. Participant 2, nonetheless, was unsure what that the relationship management mechanics, particularly the ability to pursue characters romantically, added to the experience, although was pleased that he had been able to share the game with his girlfriend who had previously lamented his loss to *World of Warcraft* and MMOs⁴³⁰. Playing certain games co-operatively turned out to be a way of including Participant 1 in his hobby, but beyond helping to keep his girlfriend interested he was not sure how useful the sexual relationship options were.

That’s an interesting game because of all the relationship stuff. I’m not sure it really added much to the game, you could sleep with...I was playing a male

⁴³⁰ At one point, Participant 1 described herself as a “Warcraft widow”, stating that the amount of time Participant 2 and his friends spent on MMOs caused a great deal of friction between them and their partners.

character and I slept with the two female party members. Could have slept with a male party member which was an interesting choice to have in there. [...] It was slightly odd to have those choices in a game, I don't think it really added much.
[Participant 2]

Whilst these options proved humorous for some, their inclusion and handling of sexuality opens up the potential for perceived promotion of some viewpoints to the exclusion of others. As reflected in 1UP's interview with Bioware, finding fault with how such a system is implemented does not necessarily imply that developers or publishers seek to promote hetero-normative or particular views on the importance of marriage. It is not possible on the budget and timescale of most commercial games to cater to everyone's views on this complicated subject. Only two participants took exception to the way sexuality and relationships were portrayed in games, in this case with the *Fable* series.

Participant 9's complaints were centered on there being few opportunities for gay relationships in *Fable*. When asked how this made her feel in game, she replied "You see that annoys me as well that there wasn't more opportunity or equal opportunity in the game but that reflects my politics so maybe I should bear in mind it's a game..." She completed the game so evidently it did not annoy her enough to stop her from enjoying the overall experience but it is indicative of how for some people their opinions and beliefs can be invoked when something contradicts them in a game. Participant 5 also noted some conflict with his views, or perhaps an inconsistency on the Lionhead's part when he found that all the people he slept with in *Fable II* expected him to marry them afterwards.

Morally the game is slightly odd, but you can have sex out of marriage, but even if you have sex with prostitutes in that game, they expect you to marry them thereafter. I find that slightly odd. In some ways it's good, in some ways it's bad. In that game you can have the whole gamut of personal relationships, whether it's heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual. It makes no difference in that game how you live your life but it's that expectation on how you must live your life at the end of it. [Participant 5]

This can be explained by a potential programming oversight in forgetting to stop prostitutes from forging attachments to their clients but for Participant 5 it still conveyed a message as

to what were the social norms in the game world and he found them jarring. Neither of these participants stopped playing the games on discovery of these issues, but they made their playthroughs a little more conflicted.

6.6.1 Conclusions

The embedded narratives of digital games can be very influential on the projective identity of players, providing the backgrounds, dialogue and motivations that constitute player-character virtual identities and also the context for the actions of the player. In situations where the virtual identity features prominently in a game, the relationship between player and virtual character is symbiotic as they share the same body, the player relying on the narrative and virtual identity to setup scenarios for his or her entertainment and the virtual identity relies on the player to fulfil objectives.

Only two participants felt that embedded narratives were superfluous and obstructive towards what they wanted to get out of games. The majority of participants preferred a mix of the two types of narrative in their gaming experiences, cherishing the freedom of putting something of their own strategic thinking into accomplishing objectives. Generally, if they were confined to performing particular actions then participants required a stronger relationship between the virtual identity and their own desires, and to be entertained by the charisma of that identity, their plight, and also the strength of the narrative meaning conveyed by environments and set pieces.

Another factor considered was how participants used NPC interaction mechanics, through which much of a games story is manipulated. These mechanics of interaction and expression continue to evolve in digital games, with some being better received (e.g. *Fable II*, *Mass Effect 2*) than others (e.g. *Fable III*). Some criticisms stemmed from the evident age and limitations of some systems (e.g. *Morrowind*) and further developments are being worked on to blur the boundaries between what occurs 'in-game' and what occurs during interactions with NPCs. *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, for example, does not pause all other action whilst a player talks to an NPC; instead the NPC will continue to go about their daily business and time will move as normal.

The positive comments directed towards interrupts indicates that Bioware has successfully varied the traditional "interrogation-like" formula and invited player involvement to

normally passive cinematic sequences that can produce emotional resonance between the player and the games antagonist/player character. In contrast, the expression wheel that was initially presented in *Fable*, expanded upon for *Fable II*, was judged to be an entirely optional part of the experience with little motivation for using it, but also appealed to participants who enjoyed observing the emergent effects of interacting with NPCs. Unfortunately, the paired down implementation of expressions in *Fable III* almost eliminated the possibility for these emergent effects whilst making the system critical in progressing through the game, turning opinions from ambivalent or entertained, to hostile and annoyed.

If there is a lesson to be had, though doubtlessly the developers have already learned this to their cost, it is that successful interaction mechanics are not just peripheral to the experience. The user must be convinced of its utility or they may ignore a feature that could have taken a significant amount of development time to implement. Players can simply choose not to incorporate it into their projective identity. At the same time, if the systematic, mechanical and repetitive nature of these interactions becomes noticeable then that effectively puts a cap on how much patience and attention a player will invest in a game. Whilst the matter is not simple, this multibillion dollar industry and endlessly adaptable art form should hold enough room for more than one method of interfacing with artificial intelligence and the expression wheel is a distinct evolutionary chain that has not yet been developed to its full potential. In summary, even for participants who were primarily interested in measuring progression in terms of levelling up and equipment, embedded narratives will shape the characters they create and control whilst players create their own emergent narratives with the tools they are given.

Chapter 7: Morality and ethics in projective identities

Corresponding objective: To gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings that players assign to the morality and ethics of digital games.

7.1 Introduction

In order to examine if and how players engage in moral management whilst building their projective identities, an understanding of the mechanics by which players could assert their values in a game world must first be achieved. This chapter will also expand on the themes of moral and ethical issues briefly mentioned in Chapter 6: by providing a detailed critique of the views and strategies that participants held with regards to ethical and moral questions that games pose.

The literature review concentrated predominantly on the impact of violence in digital games, but this is not the only avenue through which players engage with ethics in a virtual environment. In role-playing games, players are often tasked with resolving situations or problems by choosing between pre-defined resolutions. These choices usually present their consequences immediately to the player, and sometimes, can have lasting effects on how the game unfolds⁴³¹. Such choices are usually far removed from the normal circumstances of players which represents part of the appeal; they present players with situations they would never have to chance to experience for themselves⁴³².

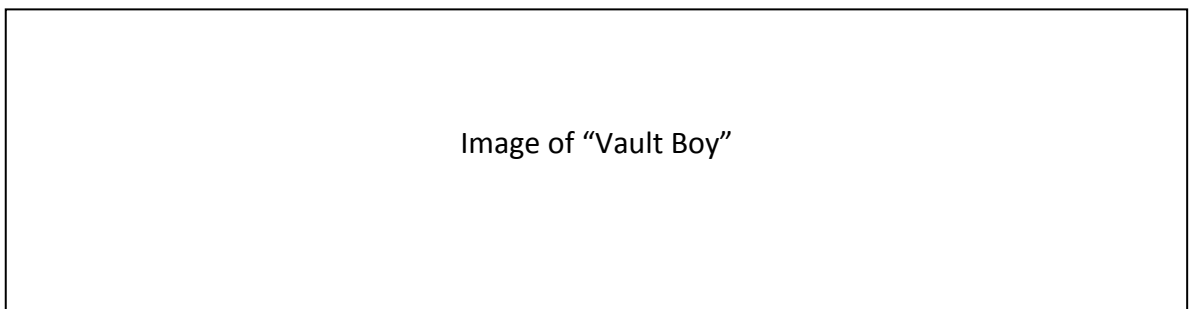


Figure 52 – Cartoon representations of karma levels in Fallout 3 and Fallout: New Vegas.⁴³³

⁴³¹ Parker, L. *Black or White: Making Moral Choices in Video Games*.

<<http://uk.gamespot.com/features/black-or-white-making-moral-choices-in-video-games-6240211/?page=1>>, 2009, [accessed 15.12.11].

⁴³² *Ibid.*

⁴³³ Bethesda Softworks. *KarmaF3.png*. <<http://fallout.wikia.com/wiki/File:KarmaF3.png>>, 2009, [accessed 15.12.11].

Developers often resort to implementing dichotomous morality systems featuring clear delineations between the choices, such as good and evil acts (*Fable*), good karma or bad karma (*Fallout 3*), light side or dark side (*Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*), and paragon or renegade behaviour choices (*Mass Effect*). Decisions made in such systems are usually quantified and graphically represented to the players, their character accumulating morality points and moving between two extremes on a sliding scale as they make their choices (Figure 52). Some games keep such statistics under the hood and allow the players moral standing to be reflecting only by how the game world reacts to their decisions (*Dragon Age: Origins*, *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*), but the majority let players see their morality ratings as a form of feedback to let them know they have progressed and also to let them make tactical decisions based on their current position in the morality system.

Because morality systems are often linked to gameplay options such as being able to use certain dialogue options or gestures to intimidate or charm NPCs (*Fable 3*, *Mass Effect*), there is potentially a tactical element to how players interact with NPCs. Therefore, this chapter will examine whether or not participants considered moral choices in purely strategic terms, or whether they were engaging with the moral issue presented to them, or mixing both perspectives. Did participants make moral decisions on according to how they planned for their character to develop at the start of the game, or are they appraising each decision individually? Are there some games that manage to engage participants with moral dilemmas more than others? Did participants believe that they had learnt anything from their interactions with such systems? This chapter seeks to answer these questions.

7.2 Choosing moral alignments

During character creation in *Dungeons and Dragons*, players must define the moral alignment of their character based on a list of categories which, depending on how the dungeon master and the players have agreed to proceed with the game, will act as a loose or binding guide for approaching the moral decisions presented to them. Although computer-RPGs generally do not force players to choose their moral alignment from the beginning of the game, participants still considered how their character would behave before creating it.

This can be a strategic choice as much as being a creative decision about how the player wants the character to act. Making a moral choice in some games can take players down different branches resulting in some mutual exclusivity where it is impossible to experience

all consequences, quest resolutions and opportunities in one playthrough. This means that when participants wanted to experience all of the content games such as *Mass Effect* and *Fable II* had to offer, they had to keep track of the decisions they had made previously and make an effort to make different ones next time round.

Others, such as participant 11 started out with a loose impression of how they wanted their character to be, to find out that the game world was more complicated and morally ambiguous than they originally thought.

Researcher: Do you have some idea before you start a playthrough of how to approach moral decisions in the game?

*I do, but it depends on the game if I follow through with it... Like with *Fallout 3*, I started out thinking I was going to be all good and everything [laughs]. Really, I just wanted to survive and get the best gear. I was pretty mercenary. I think that might be because of the world though. It's a nuclear wasteland, there's only so many resources around. The best guns aren't necessarily given to you for being nice. You start to think with the mindset of "how does this benefit me?" I think I realised that quite early on. The bigger decisions I made were good, I cleaned up the water, didn't side with the slavers. I did intimidate a lot of people, though. Double crossed a few. I wanted to make sure I survived, basically. I thought I was behaving quite authentically. [Participant 11]*

Through paying attention to the themes expressed in the *Fallout 3* game world, he adopted his original approach to alignment in order to take better advantage of the opportunities available to him. Other participants also described only realising the moral stance they wanted their character to adapt to situations after familiarising themselves with a game. The roles participants adopted in games, therefore, were influenced by the meanings and values embedded in the individual game worlds. Games may also evoke moralities from other fictional universes; for example, Participant 26 felt the role of Commander Shepard in *Mass Effect* and the possibilities attached reminded him of the television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, whose upright and responsible crew members served as inspiration for his first playthrough.

I've got a rough idea of what I want my character to be, how I want them to behave. In Mass Effect, I had a playthrough where I'd try to do "the right thing" and most of the time I did. Basically, I realised I could be like a Star Fleet officer, don't phaser anything unless you're given no choice. That's what I had in mind. And I stuck to it most of the way through apart from a few accidents. Same as when I played through renegade, I made sure I was mostly renegade.

Researcher: Why?

Simply to make sure I was getting enough points to unlock the best conversation options. You have to be consistent, or you can't take the best conversation options either way. I realised that when I saw you needed paragon points to charm. The blue options. There's no point in being neutral, 'cause then you can't charm or scare people! [Participant 26]

Whilst his approach was partly inspired by the associations he made between his character and the *Star Trek* universe, like many other participants, he realised that taking particular moral choices influenced the options open to him later in the game. The system employed in *Mass Effect* encourages consistency in moral choices through rewarding players with paragon or renegade points. Only by reaching certain figures in accumulating those points can players access to certain conversation options.

Because *Mass Effect* tracks paragon and renegade points on separate scales (so it is possible to accumulate one paragon point without deducting from the renegade point count), it is possible that with enough content, a player could accumulate enough of both sorts of points to have all options available to them. There does not appear to be enough content in the game to allow this, so participants who played the *Mass Effect* franchise rarely balanced their actions, preferring to pick one alignment and stick to it.

If Bioware intended for players to consider each decision carefully, then attaching score points and blocking off options based on charm and intimidate rankings does not promote it. Not rewarding players who make neutral choices also puts them at a disadvantage and instantly reduces the complexity of any given moral dilemma. This possibly explains why their next franchise, *Dragon Age: Origins* does not track decisions in a quantifiable way. Instead, choices only affect the narrative outcomes and options, which Participant 15

observed as feeling more ambiguous, and prompted him to take more time over considering the impact of his decisions. In contrast, *Mass Effect* rarely troubled him with ambiguity, but it did allow him to feel pleasure in committing to a role and knowing how to fulfil it.

Some decisions were a bit automatic, because I knew I was being a paragon or renegade. Exclusively, I mean. It was automatically choosing the blue options or the upper right ones on the wheel thingy.

Researcher: How enjoyable was that for you, knowing which options you were going to take all the way through?

*It wasn't a problem, if that's what you mean. It was satisfying knowing instantly which ones to take. I knew I was going to get paragon points, which I needed. I also felt quite confident by being able to say "I'm doing that one." Knowing instantly what my Shepard would do. Being decisive about things for a change.
[Participant 15]*

Being able to adopt a set of moral standards and stay true to them served as a source of satisfaction for other participants (Participant 2, Participant 4, Participant 5, Participant 7, Participant 9, Participant 13, Participant 15, Participant 22 and Participant 26) as well, both in the context of being able to decisively act when moral choices were posed to them, but also in being able to see the quantified gains in games such as the *Mass Effect* and *Fable* series. It can be argued that such rewards cheapen the dilemmas players face, but it is clear some gamers get additional satisfaction from receiving and accumulating paragon points and the like.

7.3 Difficulty in adopting certain alignments

We have already seen that some players adopted alignments they were not necessarily predisposed to in order to see all the content a game had to offer. There were other participants who freely experimented with the different perspectives games encouraged them to adopt, whilst others had trouble reconciling such alignments with their own moral standards. Participant 9 was one of several participants who remarked on the concentration required to go against her moral code and how it was a source of discomfort when she had considered those options.

But I don't see those games are somewhere where I can be something other than I'm not, not without a lot of effort. It does take effort of being evil! I wouldn't enjoy it so much if I had to sacrifice somebody, even if I'm choosing to do it deliberately, I feel uncomfortable about it. It makes me feel wrong... And I don't like feeling wrong, therefore I'm not really going to do it because therefore I'll feel bad. Because you get so immersed doing it, it really does feel like you.
[Participant 9]

I really try to do the good thing. I think I'm a stupidly moral person. I don't put my morals on other person but if I've lied to someone, I feel really bad afterwards... I remember when I was younger I took 50p from my Mum's purse and I couldn't sleep that night until I told her and she was like "Right... Ok... Naughty..." For me, I have no idea why, but I seem to be... Exceptionally moral, for no reason! I can see people do bad things, and things like if you saw someone's wallet and money on the floor I'd have to give it back or give it to charity. Which is probably why I can't do anything bad in a game. I wasn't brought up in a strict house or anything... [Participant 14]

I ended up doing the same decisions as my first playthrough. I don't know, it's just not very pleasurable to be doing bad things, like murder. [...] I don't really understand why people would do the evil option. I don't see why... Sometimes, slightly evil options are OK, but just randomly murdering people isn't really that fun for me either, so... I wouldn't really do that. I feel uncomfortable when I hit people accidentally in GTA, that's how much I don't like killing people unnecessarily. It's just a game, so I don't regret anything, but it's basically an ethical problem you face as a player there, and being in this virtual world you kind of have these ethical problems as well, even if no one will actually die in the real world. You do your actions and then, I don't know... Perhaps they have to be up to some moral standard. [Participant 13]

These three participants all had issues with some of the choices they were faced with, and for who discomfort follows accidental acts of cruelty or violence in games, but they are all open to suggestion and are not necessarily consistent in their application of their morality.

Participant 9 found it easier to overcome her misgivings about killing NPCs when their programming limitations were made obvious, spoiling any illusion of their sentience and breaking her immersion.

Just little things are irritating me like people standing in doorways are not moving. I end up hunting and killing them because I don't have the patience to sit and wait for them to move when they are stuck.

Researcher: Don't you get the law on you?

Not if you taunt them first, then you go "I was just defending myself, Officer". You can do what you like, and long as no one sees you can do whatever you like. It's brilliant. [Participant 9]

Participant 14, who believed that she would normally have trouble committing immoral acts in games also admitted that this was not true all of the time, and would vary depending on her mood.

I think there are times where I was in a certain mood I'd go, "let's see what happens!" and do the bad thing... I think that's probably on days I'm more detached from it. [Participant 14]

For Participant 14, games served as an effective outlet for accumulated frustrations, such as when playing *The Sims* where she replicated the people at school who annoyed her, gathered them in a house and burned it down. Participant 13 was also convinced to let go of his convictions through the renegade interrupts in *Mass Effect 2* which shows that the right mechanics can encourage players to experiment with different moral choices.

*Like in Mass Effect 2 you had the pop up options, the interrupts, they were interesting. Sometimes I'd take those where you might hit somebody in the head with a wrench. I got some renegade points for that. *laughs* [Participant 13]*

This begs the question what is so appealing about some mechanics that convinced some participants to forget their qualms over electrocuting someone to death with a future-wrench. The next sub-chapter explores why most participants experimented with such mechanics and repeatedly made decisions that ran counter to their initial instincts.

7.4 Moral disengagement and experimentation

Some participants were able to distance themselves, or ‘disengage’ from their normal moral code with few negative emotional consequences. They reported specific games or triggers for prompting them to do so, particularly games with the capacity for emergent situations (often the product of applying affordances in creative ways with the aim of confounding NPCs) such as *Grand Theft Auto*, *Hitman*, *Deus Ex*, and *Fallout 3*. Killing in inventive ways was merely part of the fun for Participant 6 and although the following quote depicts an attack against hostile NPCs, he and other participants also performed similar experiments on non-hostiles.

The funniest thing is if you pickpocket them but put a mine in their trousers. And then you just sneak away and BOOM! That was good, I enjoyed that.

Researcher: Who did you do that to?

*Raiders, no one important. I did it because I had the perfect opportunity to do it. I had just entered into some sort of sewer system and there were two raiders sneaking past and I got the *beep beep beep beep beep*, disarmed it, waited for the raiders to go past again, snuck it into one of their pockets and the raider was like “Who’s there?...No one? OK.” Then they stood next to each other and BOOM. Two down. Although another one ran in from a room that wasn’t there so I had to sock them in the back of the head with the shotgun. That was good.*

Researcher: How do you mean, ‘good’?

It was fun! It’s just dicking around, really. I suppose I feel a bit of a badass when things like that work. When I have an idea and pull it off. [Participant 6]

The tension that accompanies the stealth and resulting visual feedback and sense of achievement from the successful kills are amongst the incentives participants felt that encouraged this behaviour. The actual inspiration can come from the desire to see how NPCs react and/or to test the flexibility of the affordances offered to the player for interacting with their environment.

Sometimes things don't work out but I still have fun trying. Other times I'm just feeling bloody minded, or slightly annoyed with someone, then I'll blow them up too. Just because I can.

Researcher: Do you take the consequences of killing someone who wasn't hostile?

Nah, I reload. These things usually turn into a bit of a blood bath. So I reload. No harm done, but if I see them again I'm like, "Shut up, I killed you!"

Researcher: And what's it like dealing with people after you've done that to them?

*Easier because I know I could turn them inside out and have done. *laughs* Makes it a bit easier to put up with them. [Participant 6]*

Even after reloading a previous saved game state, participants still felt the positive effects of their assertive action against NPCs, subsequently heightening their sense of control over the game world allowing them to tolerate characters they previously found irritating.

I think I pretty much always revert to another save after a rampage. I even make a backup of my current save before I go on a rampage. I wouldn't want to deal with all the damage to my reputation, I'd never be able to go anywhere without being arrested or hunted to death! [Participant 27]

Whilst some games have consequences for moral choices, a player might choose to reject them by not saving their game file, avoiding the long-term guilt or inconvenience their experimentation may incur. Such experiments may be viewed as side stories and as non-canonical; they are erased from the game world when players' reload but still exist in the player's memory which they can refer to if they need to draw upon the experience. This testing can therefore be seen as an important part of safely learning the limits of what simulated societies tolerate, mastering the use of weapons and understanding the simulated physics of the game. Such behaviour is also triggered out of encroaching boredom, as players try to wring more entertainment out of a game they are becoming tired of. In this

mindset, even predominantly non-violent games such as *The Sims* players eventually diverged in order to exploit its wealth of options as a social simulation.

I do that more when I'm getting bored of a playthrough. I'll just start messing things up for my neighbours. Efficiency goes out the window a bit towards the end. [Participant 19]

But I did randomly play a couple of times... Let them die, just to test the system I guess. I had a couple of house fires with no doors to get out of. [laughs] Mainly I used to play it pretty seriously. [Participant 3]

The quotes so far have shown some participants would practice moral divergence over a short period of time but there are those who have spent a great deal of effort in formulating divergent role-plays and perusing them. Participant 10 was experienced with experimenting with different moral alignments, and in one playthrough of *Fallout 3* his main aim was to be as evil as possible and to kill and cannibalise NPCs until the game stopped working.

Researcher: Did you decide right at start the game to be as evil as you can?

Yes. I killed everyone in Megaton. Then I blew it up. Then I went to Tenpenny Tower, killed everyone. Killed the ghouls. And ate them. The Republic of Dave, killed them all. Slavers, killed them all. Slaves, killed them as well. The people that pretend to be vampires, killed and ate them. The girl with the bottle caps, killed and ate her. Everyone in Rivet City. Anyone I could find basically. The only people you need for the storyline are your father, the doctor in Rivet city and the Brotherhood of Steel. I didn't kill and eat them. I robbed all their stuff but I didn't kill and eat them.

Researcher: How does it feel being that evil?

*The first couple of the evil acts I feel sick inside. Then I become desensitised. I've played *Grand Theft Autos* so it comes naturally. [...] I did feel bad when I blew up Megaton. I killed everyone first as I want to get all their stuff before it blew up. Even when playing as a medium sort of character, it's usually so convenient to kill*

everyone in the market of Rivet city and steal everything which gets you thousands of caps. [Participant 10]

For Participant 10, practising divergent play is easier than for other participants who could not experiment as he did. As evidenced by the answer to the last question in the quote he still feels some initial regret upon committing a divergent act but can quickly overcome that guilt in order to continue with a divergent play style.

Participant 10 reasoned that the NPCs exist to be treated as potential sources of money and experience and refers to this justification to assuage his guilt. Newer acts of cruelty that he is not accustomed to such as destroying a town by detonating a nuclear warhead at the heart of it (note that it is the detonation of the bomb he feels guilty about, not the actual killing of the NPCs) will elicit a guilty response but the well worn act of killing the town's population does not.

Moral divergence does not only arise from exploring the capabilities of a games mechanics, however. Games such as *Mass Effect*, *Fallout 3* and *Fable* often offer tasks which are predisposed towards chaotic character alignments, such as stealing, extortion, ruining someone's reputation or murder. Participant 24 talked about how he would do quests in games even if they asked him to go against his moral code.

Honestly, I just do the quests that I come across. Like in Fallout, I'll try to do all the quests I get.

Researcher: Why's that?

Well it's not necessarily that I want to do every single quest in the game, I just really want to clear my quest log. For some reason I get really annoyed by not being able to clear all the quests in my journal! It's the OCD bit of me that has to do everything on the list. So I tend to be a bit amoral if I've picked up something which asks me to steal or be a bit of a dick and do it anyway, just to clear it.

Researcher: Don't you usually get a choice over whether or not to help someone before the quest is added to your log?

I guess so... I don't think I've ever turned a quest down... This is hard to explain actually because I could just say "No, not doing that" but I always take the quest anyway... I think I take them so I can think it over but I always do them because they're in my quest log and been sitting there for ages. I'm probably slightly scared that if I turn a quest down I'll never get the opportunity again, which I know isn't true. [laughs] Obviously I don't like the thought of losing out on content. [Participant 24]

In this case, the player's moral compass is replaced with the directions provided by quest objectives and the map markings. The alternative to forcing oneself to do a quest even if it goes against their moral code would be just to abandon the quest with view to picking it up again if so desired (as is possible in MMORPGs such as *WoW* but not a common option in single-player games) or perhaps hide quest details on another page in their journal so that they are not constantly reminded about them, triggering their desire to complete quests they do not necessarily agree with.

For some players, divergence may have an altogether more therapeutic use. Participant 14 hinted that she used *The Sims* as a way to ease frustrations accumulated from attending school as a teenager.

*Or give them stupid names. So all the people you hated in school, I'm going to name them that, give them horrible faces, then I'll burn their house down! *laughs* That sounds really vindictive, don't read too much into it as I was just venting, although it did make me feel better... But then I had a house full of my friends and then I'd give them nice faces. [...] And there was the whole burning people alive thing... I thought at the time "If that's what you're choosing to do with people, perhaps you shouldn't be allowed." [Participant 14]*

Through recreating her school social life in *The Sims* she vented anger in an ultimately consequence free manner. That she was informed of the ability to trap Sims in rooms calls attention to the social desire to share stories and accomplishments from game sessions which then feed other players ideas and inspires them to test the game for themselves.

7.5 Social influence on moral codes

Some participants only considered certain moral acts or felt permitted to try them after listening to their friends relate tales of their own adventures.

Once someone mentions it, one of your friends, you think “Oooh, I should try that.” [Participant 14]

It also demonstrates the susceptibility some players can be to the influence of their friends who practise moral disengagement with ease. Similarly, participant 23 felt the presence of friends whilst playing made him feel more able to practice moral disengagement partly because they work to entertain each other with more and more divergent activities.

When I’m alone I’m usually a bit more careful, less likely to do things for a laugh. It’s when I’ve got friends round and we’re taking turns, I go a bit out of character. Nothing massively evil, not in games where I have to deal with the consequences. A bit more cruel, perhaps. Mischievous...

Researcher: Why’s that, do you think?

Erm, I think it’s because it’s you and your mates versus the game. It’s just fun to egg each other on and you end doing ridiculous things. I’m more likely to take things seriously by myself, I guess. I’d also be really pissed if we did something that made the game harder for me when I’m alone. So, within limits. [Participant 23]

Also responding to the activities of his friends, participant 15 was frustrated by his inability to do certain moral actions due to the uncomfortable feelings he experienced whilst considering those actions. He eventually managed to reach higher levels of moral disengagement by using his friend’s actions to justify carrying out his own desires.

It’s weird, but it’s only after listening to my housemates do I think, “Why don’t I do that?” Usually it’s because I thought at the time “Ooh, that’s a bit dodgy”. It’s always annoyed me slightly that I can’t get over that. Treat it as a bit of fun. I’m getting better at it. It’s like, “He doesn’t have a problem with it, why should I?” [Participant 15]

Participant 26 also believed his friends influenced his moral alignment in games; he played through *Mass Effect* a second time as renegade having being told that it was “quite enjoyable” by Participant 10. Whilst this helped him commit to a renegade playthrough, he still found a way to justify his actions using his own moral code.

But [renegade] doesn't technically qualify as evil. You're saving the universe in a different way. And the way the game is structured, the acts you do aren't evil, you will just pistol whip some baddie and they are more the baddie than you are. You're higher on the scale than them, so you're better than them, you're just dispensing justice. That's my story and I'm sticking to it. There's one bit where you shove the baddie out the window, but he was a baddie. He's probably killed a few people anyway. Probably... [laughs] [Participant 26]

7.6 Consequences shaping future actions

The tone of the consequences that follow moral choices in games also appears to influence if people are willing to experiment. For example, Participant 7 felt the comical repercussions of tormenting villagers in *Fable II* encouraged him to commit further acts, although he would have done so regardless.

*Fable doesn't take itself seriously. The way the villagers react can be quite funny at times, even when you're crushing them. "Help! Help! I'm being oppressed!" *laughs* [Participant 7]*

The cosmetic evolution of avatars in the *Fable* series along with the NPC interaction options also prompted one participant to reassess how he was playing *Fable II*. Participant 25 believed his avatars were direct reflections of his personality, and although he has a propensity for mischief, he did not feel any game allowed him to express this effectively until *Fable*. Seeing these options for expression available to him and the mismatch between his own personality and how his avatar was developing, he changed his approach to the game.

**laughs* Yeah, I went out of character in Fable II because you could and I thought it would be good... You can't be a virtuous innocent having all the angel wings and what not. I was like, "That's not real, I'm not some pure hearted do-gooder with a halo so I'm going to be on the other end of the scale and see what I*

*can do.” So I had demon horns instead. It convinced me to play out of character. I started out good, I planned to be good, but it convinced me to go to the other side because of all the options you had when people interact with you.
[Participant 25]*

Whilst Participant 7 found sticking to any moral alignment in order to see all of the content the Fable franchise had to offer was relatively easy, some participants found moral disengagement difficult. Although he did manage to try all of the resolutions to the scenarios in *Fable II*, Participant 5 could not detach himself enough to avoid feeling guilty.

I found the spire to be quite a harrowing, even playing for the first time. I have to admit, the first time I played it. I fed the prisoners and I spared the other guard and I attacked the captain. I found it quite a harrowing experience. [...] The last time I played the game was the most difficult where I starved the prisoners and I killed the guard. I found that very, very morally difficult from a personal point to do, even though that was the outline...the purpose of me playing the game the third time, but I still found it very difficult. [Participant 5]

Managing to playthrough a game in a manner that he did not find enjoyable, yet felt compelled to do in order to experience the entirety of the game speaks of his self control in the face of discomfort, but also his mindset for the consumption of entertainment. Games, in his view, are not necessarily just for provoking positive feeling and pure pleasure, but can be used to explore difficult moral situations and to face up to the consequences of how he deals with them.

This persistence can also be interpreted as a trait acquired from his days as a table-top role-player where players often choose an alignment and stick to it throughout the course of a game. The table-top role-players interviewed for this study indicated that some members of their community preferred to role-play characters very similar to themselves, whilst others preferred to challenge themselves by maintaining a projective identity very different from their own morality even if it was not necessarily enjoyable as other options.

In contrast to Participant 5's approach, Participant 11 distanced himself from the emotional ramifications of the cruelty that was necessary to see all of the outcomes in *Fable II* by considering his earlier 'good' playthroughs as the canonical choices, and dehumanising the

NPCs he initially sought to save. This echoes Participant 3's similar approach to achievement-collecting playthroughs where he sped through scenarios and environments, making fewer strategic decisions and not buying into the authenticity of the world because he had already taken the optimum choices with a previous avatar. Participant 11 also ascribed less meaning to his actions because he had developed a familiarity with the systems and that highlighted the 'gameness' of the world he was playing in, devaluing the NPCs in his view and making violence against them easier. Nevertheless, he describes a process of desensitisation to the game's surprises that eventually means any fun that violence initially offered is diminished.

*My friends talk about this all the time, how we always playthrough as evil the second time round. I always say that I do it to see all of the game that I can. Killing villagers in Fable, first ones you might feel guilty, or a little thrill, then you get used to it. Then they're just cattle, just casually offing a few when you're bored, like... *laughs* Maybe that's how real tyrants view people...*

Researcher: How do you justify that to yourself?

I dunno, I always start out caring for them but when I replay I'm more casual about it.

Researcher: What is it that makes you feel more casual about harming NPCs?

*I suppose the first time you playthrough you really pay attention, everything's new. You haven't learned all the lines from the townspeople. When you hear the same line for the fiftieth time that's it. "Shut up!" Bam! *laughs* It's like anything you play for a long time. There's bits of it which are still entertaining and keep you going, but then are bits which start to annoy you after a while. Then I mince the annoying buggers up. *laughs* That's pretty bad, it sounds bad when you say it like that.*

Researcher: Does that lose its meaning eventually?

As I said, even that gets boring because it all gets too familiar. Then you're casually doing things and it doesn't register. That's why I prefer to think of my

first time through as the one that matters, they're the ones I remember the best.

[Participant 11]

Another strategy participants used to justify their experimentations was that such choices were fine if they were not caught or if there were no immediate negative consequences to their actions. For example, Participant 21 initially experienced some dissonance when he tried to broaden his moral code into accepting assassination contracts from the Dark Brotherhood in *Oblivion*, but soon found that as long as there were no witnesses to his crimes, he could kill without consequence.

One of the roles you take on, you can become an assassin in Oblivion and part of me thinks "I don't like doing this" but I'm also attracted to it... Basically, if you commit a crime, you've got a bounty on yer. Well, I thought "I'll do it in such a way that I'll never have a bounty on me..." I'm comfortable doing that...

[Participant 21]

As previously mentioned, participant 9 also justified some deviations from her normal moral code if they could be done so they did not incur negative consequences, even if it was against the rules of the fictional society. Participants who expressed this opinion seemed to get enjoyment from the thought of committing a crime without being caught for it, particularly if it was something like stealing from NPCs whilst they were in the same room. This can be explained by the tension felt whilst carrying out a theft, and the feeling of relief and superiority they felt, even if it meant exposing a flaw in how a game registers such things.

This shows that even though the morality of participants appears to have developed to a level where such actions are precluded in the real world, their morality in game is much more pliable and open to the possibilities a game can offer if the consequences can be brushed aside by reloading a save. The impermanence of undesirable consequences, the sense of challenge and accomplishment that accompanies successfully executing a plan, social pressures, and desensitisation through familiarity with violence or NPCs responses and limits of the game, all seem to play a role in assisting these participants moral disengagement with the actions they perform in-game.

7.7 Rewards influencing moral choices

A recurrent theme was the role of game play rewards in participants' ethical reasoning, and the ability for these rewards to dictate the solution players choose. The importance of acquiring new resources was stressed in chapter Chapter 4:, so it is not necessarily surprising that for some participants, the best resolution to an ethical problem was where they profited the most in usable assets.

Looting the bodies of dead assailants or NPCs killed by other NPCs did not register as an ethical issue with any participant. Stealing items from non-hostile NPCs is another method for acquiring assets in many RPGs, but participants rarely considered this to be an ethical problem. Generally, participants experimented with stealing items in order to find out what the game mechanics permitted, and in what situations they could not get away with it. These participants only regretted instances of theft in *Oblivion* when they were caught even if it was just because of the time they had wasted progressing to that point.

I wanted to join the Thieves Guild to do the quests, and you need to sell a certain amount of stolen goods to even get in it. One fence was in Burma, so I thought I'd just raid a shack across the road, make it quick. I got in, started taking everything but I knocked a plate over and the owner wakes up and spots me. I leg it, but turns out he was also a thief, and you're not supposed to steal from members of the Thieves Guild! First house I chose and I got thrown out. [Participant 15]

I'm not one of those people who murder everyone they see in a game, but I do take anything that isn't nailed down if I can sell it.

Researcher: How does it feel when you're caught?

Annoying but I reload. I don't like paying fines for murdering people. I tend to think "sod it" when I'm caught and take it out on the person who found me. Then the guards come and it's all downhill from there.

Researcher: Why do you do that?

Because it's like you've just had your time wasted because they found you... I guess I blame them for catching me, and I'm a bit annoyed at myself for being

caught so I take it out on them. Which depending on how many guards come can waste even more time, but there you go. [Participant 27]

Aside from the moment-to-moment opportunities for profit through theft that the towns of RPGs offer, there are also the rewards linked to choosing certain outcomes in ethical dilemmas. Participant 3, Participant 6, Participant 8, Participant 11 and Participant 28 created characters in *Oblivion* and *Fallout 3* that perhaps started out with a particular alignment but developed so that the players appraised each opportunity based on the rewards, and how much effort they would need to put in. For example, whilst playing *Fallout 3*, Participant 11 had a choice between exterminating a population of ghouls (irradiated, peeling humans) who were petitioning for entry into a gated community (Tenpenny Tower), finding a diplomatic solution or letting the ghouls into the community whereupon they slaughter the residents.

*First time through a game, I do my best to do the good side of things but Tenpenny Tower had me thinking. I really wanted to resolve it, but if you looked up what you got for it, it was in your favour to let them in. Then they kill every resident in the tower. You feel bad about it, then you loot their dead bodies. *laughs* You'd get your bad karma for it, get their guns and you had nothing to do with it all. Bad isn't it? *laughs* I let all the ghouls in, let them do their thing. It's pretty bad. And I did think for a while before doing it. [Participant 11]*

Whilst Participant 11 indirectly murdered for better equipment, Participant 6 would take matters into his own hands if he felt an NPC had an item he could benefit from.

Went up to one raider who didn't attack me and he said "I sent my friend off to this Nuka cola factory and he's missing", so I went "OK, I'll go find him." I'd been there before and there was no one there, but this time there was dead body with a note. I took the note back to him and then I got a little thing for it and then I killed him and took his mask.

Researcher: Why?

It was one of those hockey mask things, and it seemed a bit special, and it gave me 25 AP! So for not doing a lot, I got quite a very good piece of kit. [Participant 6]

This action was also motivated by the quest given by the raider being “un-named”, and therefore not one of much importance to the storyline, or so Participant 6 thought. Based on experience of these quests, he knew the NPCs that bestowed them were often of minor importance, and so felt safe in killing it and looting the mask. He confesses that he would have considered the problem further or done some additional research if they had seemed like important NPCs, but did not feel it was necessary in this case. Participant 6 and Participant 23’s views of NPCs was similar, as they treated NPCs associated with minor quest differently from those associated with major quests in terms of intimidating and stealing items. It would appear that the relative narrative importance of a quest-related NPC will influence how some players formulate their strategies for acquiring resources.

Participant 3 was also strongly motivated by rewards and sometimes betrayed NPCs in order to obtain the best solution for himself, but also had a desire to see as much content of a game as possible. For him, part of the reward was seeing and hearing bits of the game he would not experience by taking the easy route.

You found that on the game as well all of the good karma choices involved a step extra. A bad karma choice, the easy thing might be just to go in and shoot everyone. It might complete the mission but that was worse. Whereas the good karma choices you may have to go and explore a bit extra of an area, talk to an extra person, do an extra speech check but you would get a bit extra for it, you’d get good karma. That’s probably part of the reason why I went for the good karma choices, because they pushed you to do everything, you had to complete everything. [Participant 3]

Participant 7 agreed that pursuing the good path took more work, often leading to a delay in receiving rewards, whilst being evil in *Fable II* gave him many more people to kill and experience points as a result. At the end of the game, players have the choice to resurrect their dead family, resurrect all of the NPCs who have died in order to construct a tower, or receive a cash reward instead. Thus, Participant 5, who had committed himself to seeing all

possible endings for the game, also found the evil options often provided plentiful access to material rewards, and upon completing the main storyline he took the gold. Once he had completed the storyline, however, he no longer felt that he had to maintain that moral alignment and felt obliged to spend his ill gotten gains on helping the economy and residents who had suffered under his reign of terror.

So the third time I played the game, I took the choice of the money at the end of the spire which means you're reviled by everybody, but now I'm loved again because of all the side quests. I've got so much gold I don't know what to do with it, I keep spending it. Trying to build the economy up, but I can't do anything with it. I can't mend the damage done by not investing in areas earlier. [Participant 5]

He did not have to persist playing, but chose to seek redemption and challenged himself to turn the land's fortunes around. He managed to look past the rewards the game offered and invested enough in the game world to care about its fortunes. Completing the evil scenario did not evoke the same response from other players, but the game was evidently doing something right to inspire such feelings in Participant 5.

Despite the writing of situations designed to test their moral codes, and provoke ethical reasoning, participants believed that game mechanics were incentivising certain solutions too strongly in order to pose a real dilemma to them. In the *Mass Effect* franchise, the neutral options come with no rewards at all, meaning players are pushed towards taking extreme actions.

I wouldn't really understand why someone would play neutral as well because that would be kind of mediocre in a way. Fallout 3, the best rewards seem to be for intimidating and murdering everything, which I don't agree with. Sometimes you can get the best things by being good. Mass Effect, you can only access certain options through your accumulated paragon or renegade points. So you have to make these spectacular or extreme decisions. [Participant 13]

The same goes for *Fable II*, where if players want to access certain treasure caves, they must possess expressions which are only available if they have attained certain moral alignments.

In order to open one of the Demon door you have to be able to do expressions and one of them is laugh which you can't get unless you're really good you don't get that is an expression which is just ridiculous, so the game is pushing you.[Participant 9]

It is clear that games reward players for certain behaviours, pushing them to take extreme actions in order to reap the benefit of their rewards. There appears to be three predominant attitudes which players hold with regards to their ethical reasoning and the subsequent rewards.

- 1) Ethical problems encourage certain behaviours and confer rewards. A player may chose to engage with the ethical dilemma but still be influenced to some degree by the rewards on offer.
- 2) A player may fully engage with the ethical dilemma whilst considering the consequences of their actions on the game world, but without care for the rewards they will receive.
- 3) A player may manipulate a situation to their advantage with little engagement with the actual ethical problem, instead they focus entirely on the rewards.

Almost every participant exhibited some degree of factoring the rewards into their decision so no one was entirely selfless. Participants engaged with some problems more than others, placing more emphasis on their ethical reasoning rather than procuring the best proper equipment for their characters. So this begs the question, what made for interesting ethical decisions and why?

7.8 Providing meaningful ethical dilemmas

Encouraging players to reflect on ethical scenarios and to see the problems as more than a reallocation of assets is difficult, as participants always considered how. Nonetheless, interviewees highlighted several scenarios from game that they thought were effective examples of meaningful ethical dilemmas along with issues that detracted from such scenarios.

7.8.1 Simulating consequences on an individual and societal level

One of the main reasons why theft was treated so lightly by participants is that the consequences of theft in games are rarely illustrated beyond the player character being caught and forced to do jail time or pay a fine.

Why should I feel guilty? Fuck it. It has absolutely no effect on them. I can try and be good, stop myself from taking everything, stick to it like that, but there's no real reason. Thievery in real life is bad because it deprives people of their stuff and whatever. They don't suffer like that. It has absolutely no effect on them besides triggering some behaviour if they catch you. [Participant 10]

All it's really about is moving resources from one column in a spreadsheet to another. It's fun for a bit, but looting every house in a small village doesn't have any impact on the community or on families. I'd expect people to be upset at least, struggling for food, that sort of stuff. Oblivion and Fallout, people just carry on like nothing's happened! Where's the lesson in that? So no, I don't feel particularly guilty about that kind of thing. [Participant 20]

Researcher: Why is stealing okay when killing them isn't?

Because stealing their stuff doesn't affect them does it? Killing them obviously does. They might be useful later so it's better to leave them alone. I think once you start down the road of not bothering if you murder someone, you don't believe in it so much anymore. They're just a piece of the software. That's true as well if they're bugged or annoying, but when you think like that, it's not as rewarding. [Participant 27]

Without some sort of feedback as to the effects of theft on NPCs and communities, then much of the potentially guilt inducing consequences are absent from the minds of players. Without simulating the impact of theft on the local economy and the mental health of NPCs, then it is too easy to view shopkeepers and home owners as guards of loot. Likewise, the act of trying to improve living conditions or financial status of NPCs is rarely accommodated in a satisfying way in games.

In Dust Town [Dragon Age: Origins] you can interact with some dwarves who give you some information but you can't give them anything. You can't improve their lot... They're beggars and you can't do anything for them! Personally, if someone gives me information... In Fable, if someone gave me information, a beggar, you can give them gifts and money to help them improve. You can't do that in Dragon Age. [...] But then again, the beggars in Fable II, you can give them money and gifts but they still remain beggars no matter how much you give them.

[Participant 5]

Ultimately, participants found it frustrating that even when they wanted to help individual NPCs, they could not lift them out of their defined roles as beggars or slum dwellers. If it were possible that a game could simulate the rise and fall of NPCs due to theft, or the provision of welfare then that world might be a more believable place, making the ethical decisions made therein that much more interesting for players.

7.8.2 Case Studies: Ambiguous consequences in Dragon Age, Mass Effect and The Witcher

Whilst obvious consequences to certain actions such as theft are desirable, participants also appreciated ethical dilemmas to which the solutions were not clear cut, with ambiguous consequences; ones they could not predict. An example mentioned by five participants was from *Mass Effect 2* where players had to decide on the fate of the Geth, a species of sentient machines who have repeatedly caused problems for the player over the course of the first two games in the franchise.

The player finds out the hostile Geth are actually a splinter group from the rest of their species (who happen to be apathetic towards organics), and that this group plans to infect all Geth with a virus to turn them hostile. The player foils the plans of the rebels, but is faced with a dilemma: the virus can be modified and turned upon its creators so that they are no longer hostile. The player has the choice of rewriting (or brainwashing as some participants referred to it as) the Geth so that they may reintegrate with the rest of their race, or destroy them.

Further complications come from the potential impact on the galactic conflict waging between organic species and the Reapers, ancient machines who periodically exterminate all

life from the galaxy. The Geth joining the Reapers in their quest to exterminate all organic life is a risk, yet they may also prove to be valuable allies if they side with organics. None of the participants chose to destroy the rebel Geth, but most considered the idealistic and realistic sides to the argument. Are the Geth really alive? If they are, is it correct to alter the way they perceive their reality? Should they just be treated dispassionately and as war assets?

What I figured with that was that the Geth are a massive load of sentient machines, and people survive more with the Geth on their side. [Participant 10]

You have to remember that the Geth view themselves differently from humans. They all link up to form some collective consciousness, so an individual is more like a brain cell rather than an individual like a human is. I think that influenced my view. It's better to alter how those brain cells work than destroy them. [Participant 13]

That's one of the few choices that made me think. It's not simple that one. Ideally, you'd think about if this is the best thing for the rebel Geth as part of a sentient species. Realistically, I'm thinking about the next game and what would happen if they became my allies or sided with the Reapers. I brainwashed them in the end. Better to do that and have them on your side. [Participant 22]

Yeah, it's quite a heavy choice to make. Because Legion says that he hasn't got enough data to recommend either way. It was morally ambiguous. OK, exterminate them, but it's not their fault because they've been brainwashed. Basically it was because there was a one and not a zero in some program. Brainwashing them... They're Geth... I've just spent an entire game killing Geth. I imagine it would have been a harder choice if I had played Mass Effect as then I would have had more Geth back-story. [Participant 24]

It was just a programming error which made them crazy and they weren't... I thought if it's just that, and they're robots then what's the harm? At the minute we're about to be slaughtered by Reapers and if we can get the Geth on our side, then let's do it! [Participant 26]

No participant could say for certain if they had made the correct judgment, but as a result they found the decision more interesting than others in the game which they felt were overly obvious as to what would be considered right or wrong. *DA: O* and *The Witcher* also received similar comments due to the unpredictability of the outcomes of ethical dilemmas, and also their lack of a points system (e.g. karma from *Fallout 3* or paragon/renegeade from *Mass Effect*). A minority of participants did not feel so comfortable, however, when they were not dealing with moral absolutes because they could not be sure of the consequences, or they did not believe any of the consequences were desirable.

The aforementioned Tenpenny Towers quest was left unsolved by participant 23 because he did not want to decide on the fate of either the ghouls or the residents of the tower. Participant 25 also quit *The Witcher* due to the bleak nature of the game world, compounded by the morally ambiguous decisions he was constantly faced with. It is therefore possible that such complex situations used frequently in a game might deter potential players who do not enjoy feelings associated with uncertain consequences.

7.8.3 Case Study: Fallout 3 – The Replicated man quest

As previously demonstrated, participants decisions were often influenced by the quantification of moral decisions and characters into points systems, but there was also another type of presentation that worked upon their decision making; the writing and subsequent acting of NPC dialogue in relating quest information. For example, Participant 6 and Participant 27 often chose resolutions that benefited themselves, but in *Fallout 3's* The Replicated Man quest, they described being influenced by the manner in which one of the key NPCs was portrayed.

In the Replicated Man, the player assists Dr Zimmer in searching for an android that developed self awareness and fled from his compound. The android has since changed his appearance and started a new life. Through investigation you find out who the android is, whereupon you can report him to Dr Zimmer who will confront him or keep the identity a secret. Both NPCs offer different rewards depending on how you manage the situation, and some participants figured out how to get both.

I got both rewards from that one. The gun and the perk from handing in the android to Zimmer. Before he could wipe the androids memory I blew his head

off. No one actually cares that Zimmer dies apart from his bodyguard, who I also ventilated. I think the game wanted you to dislike him as well so it wasn't a hard choice. [Participant 6]

That was easy, the old man wasn't remotely sympathetic. He could have argued that he created the android, the android was rightfully his. He perhaps did, I'm not sure, it was a while ago. He was such an arse, though, anything he was technically right about just didn't matter. All he could do was "Wah wah wah", so I wasted him.

Researcher: How about perhaps if he had more humility?

Then it would have been difficult I suppose. There'd be more issues to think about instead of "Save the nice android or give him back to his evil master." [Participant 27]

There were potentially several issues there. The sentience of the machine. Was it genuine? Did Dr Zimmer still have a claim to the android now he had developed self awareness? It could have been quite complex but it didn't feel that way. Unless you were doing things for yourself, it was quite clear to me who I should help. The android was obviously a victim of slavery of some sorts. That one was a wasted opportunity, I think from the developers. [Participant 13]

Underlying the quest, the issues were complex and had the chance to inspire players to think about the consequences of their actions critically. Unfortunately the pantomime villain nature of the quest giver did not convince Participant 6 and Participant 27 to look past their own needs in terms of the rewards they would gain from the quest and consider themes being presented to them. In addition, Participant 13 recognised the potential issues behind the quest but felt the character was too unsavory to deal with. The lack of subtlety and ambiguity in characterising Zimmer and the android that detracted from the participants experiences of the quest appears to be a risk of having archetypal NPCs.

7.9 Conclusions

This chapter has examined how role-playing games can encourage ethical and moral reasoning in players, and has uncovered a variety of strategies used by participants to increase moral disengagement. It can be concluded that some participants found the ambiguous and, therefore, difficult moral choices were entertaining and that they would enjoy a mixture of ambiguous and transparent moral situations in games. Several case studies were used to highlight scenario design reported by participants as being particularly effective at encouraging them to use critical ethical reasoning, with “lack of consequences” serving as one of the main reasons why players do not limit their divergent activities in games more often. Of course, this implies much more work for developers and must be balanced with the requirements of making the game fun to play, but indications so far suggest that players enjoy being challenged with regards to morality and ethical decision making.

One of the main findings is that players are not necessarily consistent in choosing a moral alignment for their projective identity; even those who apparently take pride in being consistent admit to times when they diverged. This is particularly interesting when described by participants who ordinarily felt guilt over violence and theft and otherwise thought of themselves as exceedingly moral in the real world, but managed to justify those acts to themselves depending on their mood or whether something in a game had provoked them. The moods usually stemmed from accumulated frustrations from school or work, and in-game annoyances were NPCs who the player did not like or were otherwise bugged. We argue that these players are fluent in some moral disengagement strategies yet choose not to employ them until certain triggers present themselves.

We have also learned important about the extent to which participants will go to role-play a character with only one participant out of thirty intentionally taking morally divergent paths yet not employing moral disengagement to nullify his guilt. Exploring games through another point of view yet staying open to the feelings of guilt was part of his gaming experience. The majority of players did not go so far, preferring to avoid moral divergence completely if they had not developed adequate disengagement strategies.

In considering projective identity, these findings demonstrate how participants adjusted their own expectations of the game (what they wished to contribute from their non-virtual

identities) to the ethics instilled in the game by developers (which form part of the avatars virtual identity). Most players accept the choices they are given by the game with only a few participants wishing for alternative resolutions.

This can be interpreted as participants not being interested in highlighting any deficiencies with the choices on offer, preferring to avoid criticism of the game as a text because that would obstruct their creation of an avatar whose choices they could identify with. In addition, the degree to which players contribute their own moral code to the creation of their projective identity appears dependent on the ease with which they practice moral disengagement, with participants who are able to separate negative emotional consequences from their in-game actions being more likely to adopt more varied projective identities than the participants who could not dismiss feelings of guilt or remorse.

Chapter 8: Information practices and projective identity

Corresponding objective: To gain an in-depth understanding of the role of everyday information practices in the creation and maintenance of projective identities in digital games.

8.1 Introduction

This chapter will demonstrate that the construction of a projective identity is not confined to the game itself, but is fuelled by the information practices of gamers in online settings. Participants described bringing together information from many paratexts (primarily online) and incorporating that into their avatar. Judging the cumulative effect of exposure to pre-release information and the seeking out of specific answers to avatar-related questions is difficult, but through the testimonies of these participants insights can be gained into effects of information practices on projective identities.

8.2 Gathering information for avatar creation and continuing development

Some participants described having a routine of checking a particular set of sources, for example the *Dragon Age: Origins* forums, the Unofficial ElderScrolls Wiki, social news aggregators such as Reddit, and various news sites such as Joystiq, IGN and Kotaku. Some of these sources are game specific but this is not a requirement for them to report on the latest information concerning how the statistical aspects of avatars will be arranged. Participants described monitoring the information sources (maintaining current awareness) they had already identified, exploring (non-directed browsing) of identified sources, and searching for new sources. Participant 18, Participant 6, Participant 9 and Participant 25 described the influence these practices had on plans for their avatars before they had got hold of the games in question.

I prefer to play rather than spoil everything, although some of my mates will do that. I liked the Mass Effect wiki, I read quite a bit of that, it was really helpful. One of my house mates told me to look up the plot of the first game so I did that, that got me so stoked for 2's release... All the different paragon, renegade choices, I thought about which ones I would have taken myself. I was thinking ahead because I didn't have a save file to fall back on. It was like revising for an exam so I could get all the references to the first game. [Participant 18]

It isn't out for the PS3 yet but Mass Effect 2, I've watched all the official videos, all the classes and what-not. Each time I see a video I'm like, "That's the coolest thing ever". First I was going to be a psychic-throw-people-round-the-room, or whatever they are, erm...

Researcher: Biotic.

But then I saw videos with the guy who rushes up to people and smacks them. Then there's the soldier, lots of guns. I'm not sure what I'll choose... Whichever you can experiment the most with I think. I'll watch some Let's Play videos before I decide. [Participant 6]

There is a really good wiki that I sat and read all of the descriptions about all the races and I've been doing it for Oblivion this morning whilst I had my breakfast and trying to weigh up what choices were better or which ones suited me. I was trying to think how my character would develop, what sort of skills I wanted them to have and how I would play. But that's what I do for a role-playing character, anyway, put a lot of effort in the beginning... [Participant 9]

I've watched all the coverage. I know in Guild Wars 2 immediately I'll want to build a character that looks like me, straight off, because I've seen the initial start up. And it looks fantastic, I'm not lying. It's powerful. So for that one I will go "Right, what's the tallest avatar, you, make him going grey, little bit quirky, mad as hell, lots of swords, go" and I will focus on that one, I'll make it focus on that. And make it look like me. Because I know I'll start it and won't stop. From what I've seen so far, it's going to be immense. [Participant 25]

I definitely do it for my table-top characters. When starting Warhammer Online took a bit of time to read about the classes, their abilities, how they played. It's a bit different, though, it's not like I'm thinking about a character... When I think of a character, it's about motivations and who they are, what they want to achieve. For table-tops I create a character, but online RPGs, I think you just play as yourself. It can be fun to think about who your character might be but mostly I'm just reading about the stats. [Participant 5]

Participant 6 will use recordings of other people's playthroughs of ME2 to figure out which character class he will select, whilst Participant 25 knows that he will try to apply what he considers his signature characteristics to his avatars. He knows for certain that the avatar customisation interface will be powerful enough to accommodate his desires which enhanced his anticipation of the game. For Participant 5 and Participant 9, exploring information sources related to a game was their typical way of preparing a character for table-top games, and they were simply transferring this approach to one of her first digital game avatars. The main differences for those two participants were that they were thinking less about the motivations of a character, but how to negotiate the numerical frameworks that surround avatars in C-RPGs.

Participant 22 was also a table-top role-player, and believed that the characters he created took on a life beyond the confines of games. Elements of characters found their way into both table-top games and C-RPGs, and also in experimental writing for blogs. This suggests that Participant 22 has several well-defined characters or archetypes which are transmedial, and retain some consistency even when they are adapted to the specifics of each game world. Expressing them through blogs is just another way through which his characters evolve.

I like writing backstories for my [table-top] characters. Not for all, some characters are too thrown together for me to bother, but some games I do. Some of the characters I've role-played in WoW have been based off ones I've created in table-top games. I have a few favourites that I keep on going back to. Blogs are a good place to practice your writing. Even if no one reads it, I like to continue characters online. [...] The games I created them in do sort of define their character to an extent. That carries through online as well, although I think a lot of RPG backstories are generic stuff that can be transplanted from one world to another, whether that be table-top or computer. In that sense it doesn't matter where they're from. Just that table-top is better at recognising your thoughts on your character. [Participant 22]

Participants also described browsing paratexts to improve their general knowledge concerning game lore, and other matters not specifically relating to their avatars (such as reading how another class might operate, or alternative resolutions to moral decisions they

have already made). For example, Participant 15 used the *Dragon Age Wiki* to broaden his understanding of the politics in the game world and how he might influence them.

Sometimes it's nice to just look. It doesn't have to be for anything in particular, it's nice to browse and learn more about the game world. I find myself browsing story stuff more than anything. The history of Dragon Age is massive, it's too much to take in whilst trying to play. I'll look through summaries of the various ages and races to get to know the world a bit better. [...] I understand the place of my character more, is the main thing. What Dwarven culture is, why they have this caste system, that kind of thing. The more stuff I know, the easier it is to guess how your choices will influence the world. [Participant 15]

Whilst 24 C-RPG players made character creation and development preparations through reading and imaging future directions, only seven ever made any notes, and only three of them described making extensive calculations designed to last for the duration of the characters life cycle. For example, Participant 3 made extensive notes and populated spreadsheets with the numerical framework of the *Fallout 3* avatar, but only after he had experienced the game for himself first. So called “test runs” coupled with the use of the official guide meant that he understood the relationships between attributes, perks and skill points, and could properly plan those aspects of his avatar.

Ever since I played computer games, if I got stuck I liked to check a walkthrough, there's this site GameFAQs.com which had been around for ages, since Windows 98 games, so that's my classic resource online. I do use guides but when I get a game, I don't like to use it straightaway, so I put Fallout straight into the machine, I played it for quite a few hours until I got out of the Vault and maybe back to Megaton, wandered around a bit and got a feel for the game [...] In total I probably ended up restarting it three or four times before I stuck with my character. It isn't until you've actually levelled up a couple of times and fiddled with it and seen it happen for yourself that you can get your head around it. Then I started looking up lists of items, lists of perks, finding out which perks become available at which level. [Participant 3]

Due to the levels of preparation Participant 3 went through, he finds the idea that his calculations may be invalidated by a mistake of his or the developers particularly unpleasant. This tension is worse for the games he puts the most effort into, whilst in other games mistakes can be a minor inconvenience. In such moments in games where he has planned extensively he feels the success of his playthrough is at stake.

Quite a lot of anxiousness as well when you come across a skill book in the game which is glitched and you can't get hold of it. You think "there goes my calculation out the window, because of those two points". [...] It's like the more planning I put into it, the worse I feel if I think it's not going to come off. Other games like the Final Fantasy's, I haven't been quite as bothered. But it's like, I've got a plan, I want to carry it out. I'm not sure how I'd feel if I couldn't fix it somehow. [Participant 3]

For Participant 3 this sort of extensive planning not only extended to the numerical aspects of avatar development, as he tried to familiarise himself with the relationships between the various quests or missions of *Fallout 3* and *Oblivion*, and how one outcome may preclude another and influence the rewards he obtains at the end of it. In order to do this, he used the official guide to read ahead of the plot as he progressed through the game, making use of the decision trees the writers provided.

There were two or so missions which overlapped, so if you were playing through and not paying attention you could miss content. But because I was reading through, planning ahead, I was ahead of the game, I knew exactly where to go, how to maximise everything and not miss anything. [Participant 3]

Participant 23 also gathered information from online sources and used spreadsheets to monitor the growth of his avatars. He did note that he would not do this for every game, depending on the amount of resources that need tracking and whether the user-interface can fulfil his desire for monitoring his progress.

*For EVE I got into the habit of using spreadsheets to calculate everything I needed for ship building. Didn't stop there. Applied it to building characters, planning out the perks, what skills I'd try to maximise first. Snapshots of where I'd want to be at a certain level. Going into *Fallout: New Vegas* I knew there'd be a lot of stuff to*

collect like in Fallout 3. I wanted to make sure I used my skill points properly, not waste them. [...] Actually it's easier to get the information you need online. I go to the wiki, usually. [Participant 23]

Through comprehensively gathering information and planning ahead, Participant 3 and Participant 23 tried to gain a certain level of control over the development of their characters, and in knowing where to find certain items, how to resolve situations in order to get the best rewards and where to exactly to go next, they gained confidence and a sense of security over their success in games. They viewed their avatars as projects with optimal end states that they want to achieve. A lot of the fun of the *Fallout* experience for them was working towards the completion of these projects. The payoff for reaching maximum level, getting all the collectables and the best equipment is minimal, however.

For Participant 3 and Participant 23, and also many other participants who described abandoning their avatars after reaching maximum level despite there being much more content to explore, the feeling that their avatar is progressing and developing appears to be a vital part of their experience. The detailed planning, enacting those plans, assigning talent points, the browsing of game-lore in a wiki, all of these contribute to the players' sense of learning about a game world and tightening their mastery over it. Once they actually reach the point where they no longer feel that they can progress, the avatar has reached the final stage of its life cycle. Abandonment soon follows, and the feelings the player experiences are not necessarily victorious.

It's a bit of an anticlimax because you just stop levelling and that's it. Done. You can kill everything. I've even still got some quests to do but I can't be bothered now I've reached max level. Even though I was quite obsessed about seeing everything, and I've seen most of it, I can't be bothered with a few right now. [Participant 3]

Sandbox games in particular, like Oblivion and Fallout, once I've done stopped levelling, that's it. Some games aren't so much about the levelling, like Mass Effect. The ending I was like, yes! Shepaaard! Next game! But Oblivion and Fallout, I carry on for a while after maxing out and then one day after playing it

every day for months and months, I'll just not bother. It's strange that, but I just got bored. [Participant 18]

But one day I just put the controller down and didn't come back to Oblivion. Not regularly anyway, because there's still some stuff to do and if I'm feeling nostalgic I'll give it a blast but it's not the same. I think it's because I've reached max level in most things. [Participant 26]

It's a shame, in a way, because you spend so much time thinking where to go next, what to concentrate on, but there's no real payoff in the end.

Researcher: How does it feel when you reach the end of the game?

Feels kind of hollow because there's no fanfare, it's not like a movie or anything. It was kind of like Elite, I just stopped playing that one day. It's just that you're feeling bored, not sure what to do next. Oblivion was one hell of a game, and I've tried recapturing it since, but I can't get that feeling back when it was my first character. [Participant 21]

These feelings of stagnation seem to mostly derive from reaching the pinnacle of avatar progression and are similar to the “Long goodbye”, described by Participant 25 and other MMO players who found it hard to quit their games but without the frequent rewards of progression they found the experience to be unfulfilling. It seems that games with a definite ending, such as *Mass Effect* may feel more satisfying in terms of having a character arc, whilst sandbox games which predominantly rely on the self-motivation of players were less rewarding for these participants by the time they decided to stop playing.

8.3 Information overload

If a player monitors and explores paratexts there is always the possibility of having key narrative elements spoiled for them. Participants described the measures they would go to in order to avoid such spoilers, but also occasions when they could not be avoided and the effects spoilers had on their understanding of their avatars and NPCs.

I'm part of CompSoc, my house mates are all big gamers, I've got forums that I check regularly, I'm always browsing something so I'm getting it from all angles.

It's inevitable. A friend forgets I haven't got as far as them, or they think it's okay to mention something when really they shouldn't. It's not malice, just "whoops, shouldn't have said that". And your brain works against you, puts bits and pieces together by itself. "So if that screenshot shows that and my mate says this, then something goes wrong with the plan". [...] I don't think I've had anything too major spoiled... Or if I have, I've gotten over it pretty quickly but if you find out a certain character is going to die then you treat them a bit differently. [...] Classic example, Aeris in Final Fantasy VII. I didn't really bond with Aeris because it was years after release, I knew she was going to die. I didn't fight with her much and made sure she didn't get any valuable gear or material.⁴³⁴ [P15]

Participants remarked that moving in social circles in which gaming features heavily as a shared interest almost guarantees overhearing or participating discussions in which gaming narratives are discussed. Whilst participants described trying to control their levels of exposure to spoilers by only frequenting certain sub forums and avoiding spoiler-text, controlling what they over-heard or read on a poorly moderated forum post was more difficult. Participant 15 recalled how he saw an advert in cinemas for Final Fantasy VII which revealed footage of the main character laying Aeris to rest, and how he did not realise the implications of this until he started the game himself. This lead him to treat the character differently, favouring others in assigning equipment and materia, whilst trying not to get emotionally attached to the character during narrative scenes.

Social norms may also assert themselves on players who are trying to progress through a game with a minimum of additional information. For example, Participant 25 spent a great deal of time trying to locate an NPC in order to complete a quest. He found this process of combing the game world to be highly rewarding, yet his in-game friends were much more oriented towards completing quests as quickly as possible. Consequently, as he progressed through the levels, he found the pressure to perform efficiently in terms of time management and ability development was growing, peaking when he joined a raid guild that required him to stay current on a number of topics. The focus on using online information sources to maximise his avatar was one of the things that drove him away from WoW.

⁴³⁴ Materia are magical material in Final Fantasy VII that gives specific abilities or bonuses to stats.

I had to find someone's wife. There's no clues, or no hints or anything to start you off but you finally build up a picture of where she is. I remember spending ages on that. I finally found her, there was a bit of cursing going on, and my mate says "You could go on a website to tell you where it was." And I was like... "Yes, I know, but why would you do that?" I had so much fun in that week. Trawling through clues to find out what the hell was going on. Finding her was fantastic... My mate was like "Go on WoWHead, you can look it up". That's a buzz killer, isn't it? [P25]

8.4 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that encounters with paratexts can influence the development of projective identities both in ways that players desire and ways they find detrimental to their playing experience. The information contained in paratexts can be used to plan the numerical and narrative development of avatars to the finest detail and players try to control the depth to which they allow the intake of information to shape their plans and attitudes. Unintended encounters with information can have a detrimental effect on how players connect with NPCs, whilst social norms of online games occasionally force players to extensively use online tools if they are to fit in.

The social connections and online habits of participants demonstrated that avatars are not constructed in isolation, even when played alone in a single-player RPG. House mates, society members, unknown contributors to online forums can all potentially affect the reasoning of players as they consider which direction they want to take their avatars. Projective identity is not just about how developers shape an avatar, nor what players bring to an avatar, but how outside forces and social norms acting through various information channels can impact on how an avatar is constructed.

Chapter 9: Discussion of findings

The findings related by the previous chapters illustrate the relationships players have with their avatars, and how players separate and compartmentalise aspects of the avatar and deal with these aspects differently. This chapter will compare and contrast the results and ideas raised by this research with that in the current literature. Each section of the avatar system described by participants can be related to separate areas of research but it is also the goal of this thesis to unify these separate parts of the experience.

9.1 Creativity in avatar appearance customisation

To begin the discussion, the focus will be on the different aspects of participants' experience where they described exercising their creativity and expressing their own taste in avatar options weighed against the desire for efficiency. It appears that the main area in which participants were encouraged to express their creativity was appearance customisation. There are other ways to express creativity in-game than just through customising an avatar such as solving problems and developing a plan for avatar growth, but appearance customisation was the only way to express visual creativity for most participants.

Newman⁴³⁵ controversially stated that the appearance of a digital game avatar had little to do with how much a player identifies with it, although the work of other researchers shows that this is not necessarily the case. For example, Isbister's application of psychological principles to the design of fixed avatars shows that gamers can interpret what they see when looking at an avatar and do not necessarily just see a collection of affordances⁴³⁶. Tyschen believes that appearance can serve as a vital visual link between player and character, and good game design should seek to integrate this appearance with the overall theme and style of a game world⁴³⁷. MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler also highlight avatar appearance as being one of the only ways a player can lastingly affect their environment whilst playing an MMO⁴³⁸.

⁴³⁵ Newman, ref. 80.

⁴³⁶ Isbister, ref. 106.

⁴³⁷ Tyschen, A. *Innovations in Character: Personalizing RPGs, Retaining Players*.

<http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/132101/innovations_in_character_.php?print=1>, 2008, [accessed 01.07.12].

⁴³⁸ MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler, ref. 78, pp.225-246.

This thesis has also shown that players can find meaning in the avatar appearance customisation options: some participants put effort into presentation options in order to achieve specific desired characteristics outcome and to help develop ownership over an avatar. There were, however, participants who lend credence to Newman's argument by claiming appearance customisation was the last important part of defining an avatar for several reasons.

Firstly, for some participants not having the appearance customisation of their avatar directly linked to the efficiency or abilities of their avatar meant that they preferred to disregard that aspect of the customisation process. They were much more concerned with the ongoing problem of how to maximise the affordances available to them, which is a key aspect of Newman's argument for considering avatars primarily as a collection of affordances⁴³⁹. Some participants claimed linking abilities to the body shape and other aspects of an avatar's appearance might add further depth to a game, changing their indifference to this portion of avatar creation.

Secondly, user interfaces for face building/morphing were problematic for participants in that it was difficult to find previous options they had selected and they were unclear on how and why certain options were linked to each other. Majewski argues that *Mass Effect* is particularly guilty of this, with inappropriate use of interface elements⁴⁴⁰. This includes, for example, the use of sliders to represent a list of facial features such as lips which is largely responsible for gamers being unable to locate presets they had previously found. Majewski claims that a better menu would show all of the preset options together to allow gamers to compare the differences.

Thirdly, appearance customisation can have long lasting implications on player satisfaction with their avatar yet they were often impatient to bypass this stage of customisation in order to play a game. This is indicative of a larger problem described by Short⁴⁴¹ as customisation options being 'clumped' together at the beginning of a game instead of being

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁰ Majewski, K. *Mass Effect: Massive Interface Fail Part I.*

<<http://gamedesignreviews.com/reviews/mass-effect-interface-fail/>>, 2009, [accessed 01.07.12].

⁴⁴¹ Short, E. *In-Depth: Character Creation, Gender and Fallout 3.*

<http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/119296/InDepth_Character_Creation_Gender_And_Fallout_3.php>, 2010, [accessed 01.07.12].

available to a player when they have the desire to change something about their avatar. This research found that the clumping of avatar creation features often occurs with RPG character creation and in avatar creation across other games such as the WWE Superstar modes.

Earl reflects that placing the bulk of avatar creation decisions at the beginning of a game avoids the narrative implications of someone deciding to change their avatars face, abilities and other traits mid-way through a game⁴⁴². Some games have already sought to provide plausible reasons for mid-game face changes⁴⁴³, have implemented facial changes/body morphing in response to expressing an alignment or personality (the *Fable* and *Mass Effect* franchises) or made minor cosmetic changes possible at any time during play (the makeup and hairdressing system in *Fable* and *World of Warcraft*⁴⁴⁴).

Avatars are a perpetual work in progress and the results of this thesis indicate participants would prefer to have the option to rethink the appearance options posed to them at the beginning of a game. Earl's concerns over narrative consistency were not shared by participants who regretted their avatar customisation choices and wanted continued access to appearance option menus, indicating that narrative inconsistencies will be resolved by players without an in-game justification if the need is big enough. This flexibility would also encourage gamers to select less conservative options safe in the knowledge that they can always change their appearance at a later date. Encouraging the wider use of these features would also help justify the time developers spend on implementing the necessary editors as it would be hard to dismiss the necessity of budget expenditure on avatar appearance if more users were able to enjoy the end product.

Another key finding relating to appearance customisation is that some players were driven to transplant some of their physical characteristics in single-player games, in addition to the

⁴⁴² Earl, V. *Avatar Alteration in Games: A Framework*. <http://www.gamecareerguide.com/features/1063/avatar_alteration_in_games_a_.php?print=1>, 2012, [accessed 01.07.12].

⁴⁴³ *Fallout 3* allows facial reconstruction if and when players find a plastic surgeon. *Mass Effect's* Shepard is killed and resurrected between the first and second games in the franchise enabling players to change his/her face as the body is reconstructed by machines.

⁴⁴⁴ WoW players can also pay using their real money to totally remodel their characters appearance.

self-representation described by Yee⁴⁴⁵ and Bailenson, and Kafai⁴⁴⁶ that occurs in online games through appearance customisation. There is little literature that addresses this occurrence in single-player games and amongst these participants it was not a common practice to explicitly set out to replicate themselves in-game. The present study's participants could not always explain why some single-player games elicited a transposition of their physical elements into game space more than others. Shaw's interviewees also demonstrated that some of the processes of identification are subconscious so when players are selecting avatar characteristics they identify with they may not always be aware that they are doing so⁴⁴⁷. This thesis confirms this as some participants described finding they had unintentionally created avatars that looked like themselves, in addition to cases where participants had consciously chosen to recreate elements of non-virtual selves or implementing facial features they found attractive. It was also clear that some participants were aware that sports games could be used to enact old ambitions and fantasies where they envisioned themselves as professional athletes or footballers.

The testimonies of some participants are also in line with what Bruckman⁴⁴⁸ and Riegelsberger et al.⁴⁴⁹ suggested about gamers creating avatars to strategically manipulate other players' behaviour and to signal their gaming qualities. For example, Participant 19 aimed to make his avatar in *Runescape* look as different as possible to the trends that had been established within the game in order to trigger a reaction from players and to signal his individuality from the crowd of similar avatars. He wanted his reputation as a knowledgeable and skilled player to be associated with his unusual appearance, essentially manipulating how he was perceived by the community.

It appears that the alternate clothing practises described by MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler⁴⁵⁰ where MMO players differentiate themselves from the popular high-end armour

⁴⁴⁵ Yee & Bailenson., ref. 85.

⁴⁴⁶ Kafai et al., ref. 91.

⁴⁴⁷ Shaw, A. "He could be a bunny rabbit for all I care": Exploring identification in digital games.

[Paper presented at DiGRA2011: Situated Play. Utrecht School of the Arts, Utrecht, Netherlands, September 14-17 2011, p.11], <<http://www.digra.org/dl/db/11313.28005.pdf>>, 2011, [accessed 01.07.12].

⁴⁴⁸ Bruckman., ref. 94.

⁴⁴⁹ Riegelsberger et al., ref. 95.

⁴⁵⁰ MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler., ref. 78.

sets was not transferred to single-player open-avatar games. It can be theorised that this is because the participants spent a shorter amount of time overall in single-player games preventing the aesthetic choices from becoming stale, and/or are not exposed to the same armour sets by NPCs wearing the same. It could also be that there is no downtime in single-player games where participants would think about wearing non-practical gear for appearances-sake, and there is not an audience to show off the gear too. There was also no mention by female participants about the often impractical and revealing armour and items that female avatars have compared to male avatars as reported by Consalvo and Harper⁴⁵¹. This can be attributed to a combination of factors such as the heavily male-oriented sample, maybe a reluctance for female participants to bring the issue up themselves, or maybe participants had not encountered female armour in a game they objected to.

For the most part this study has not uncovered the motivations for participants' actions and the transference (or "bleed through") of perceived appearance or idealised characteristics remain unenlightened by participants. Part of this is down to the rarity with which this study's participants confessed to exploring appearance features. This may also be explained by participants' unfamiliarity with explaining their avatar customisation process, as Shaw⁴⁵² also found her participants had trouble articulating how they identified with the characters they played, identifying and identification were not regular parts of this thesis' participants thought processes or manner of interacting with systems.

Waggoner's observations of his participants led him to believe that his participants put a great deal of thought into the appearance of their avatar and that being able to view the body seemed to aid with identification⁴⁵³. This contrasts with this thesis' participants who perceived themselves as not caring about appearance, yet it is unlikely Waggoner's results are an accurate reflection of their normal customisation habits. The act of contriving a situation for the participant where the player knows their activities are being observed raises questions regarding the observer-expectancy effect.

The dissonance participants described caused by inaccurate recreations of their own appearances, or hearing another voice coming out of their avatar's mouth is similar to the

⁴⁵¹ Consalvo & Harper., ref. 116.

⁴⁵² Shaw., ref. 447.

⁴⁵³ Waggoner, ref. 15, p.172.

theory of the “Uncanny Valley”⁴⁵⁴. The results of this study lend support to Mori’s theory and for Schneider, Wang and Yang’s⁴⁵⁵ application of the “Uncanny Valley” to digital game character design. Although the evidence is not conclusive it suggests that the difficulty users encounter whilst trying to re-create elements of their own appearance in a game can elicit the feelings of disgust associated when something human and familiar is combined with the properties of something unfamiliar and inhuman. The recommendations that can be made for helping designers overcome this problem are limited because the fidelity offered by avatar creation tools will inevitably determine the traits players can implement. Avoiding or encountering the effects proposed by the “Uncanny Valley” theory also depends on players’ mastery of these tools and their ability to identify and rectify problems with their avatar’s appearance.

9.2 Morality and the avatar

Computer role-playing games are sometimes marketed as containing content that will challenge the moral decision making of players, but this thesis’ results show that such claims are no guarantee as to how players will respond to in-game moral problems. In order to discuss results regarding morality and avatars Sicart’s⁴⁵⁶ typology of ethical digital game designs will be introduced. It is composed of closed ethical designs and open ethical designs. Closed ethical design, or “fixed justice scenarios”⁴⁵⁷, as named by Švelch, is where players have no choice over the actions they perform in a game, be they moral or immoral.

Švelch claims that these games can still present interesting moral experiences because of the tension that arises from the possible clashes “between the player’s moral values and the actions [they are] forced to take”⁴⁵⁸. Closed ethical designs are often used with closed-avatar games, so the majority of participants’ open-avatar-based experiences regarding morality

⁴⁵⁴ Mori, ref. 100.

⁴⁵⁵ Schneider, Wang & Yang, ref. 105.

⁴⁵⁶ Sicart, M. Beyond Choices: A Typology of Ethical Computer Game Designs. *International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations*, 1(3), 1-13, <<http://www.igi-global.com/article/beyond-choices-typology-ethical-computer/3956>>, 2009, [accessed 01/06/12].

⁴⁵⁷ Švelch, J. The good, the bad, and the player: The challenges to moral engagement in single-player avatar-based video games. In: Schrier & Gibson., (Eds.) *Designing Games for Ethics: Models, Techniques and Frameworks*, 2010, p.58.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.60.

and ethics took place in open ethical systems games that allowed their values to influence the game⁴⁵⁹.

Perdue⁴⁶⁰, Zoss⁴⁶¹, Švelch⁴⁶² and Melenson⁴⁶³ have all established that games use a variety of systems to track the moral decisions players make, often through assigning a value to a particular decision which shifts a player towards a particular alignment on a continuum. Švelch calls this the “accumulation of deeds scenario” because of the way the moral decisions are collected together and measured against scales⁴⁶⁴.

Another option for measuring the accumulation of deeds is to remove the continuum and have two categories of moral alignment that can co-exist at once. Both of these options are open to manipulation, however, particularly when rewards are assigned to reaching high scores on one particular alignment. This encourages players to make a series of choices on the same alignment so they can have access to higher level rewards. Some participants tried to experiment beyond using one alignment in games such as *Mass Effect* and *Fallout*, whilst others found they could not ignore the practical value of choosing one alignment, even if they did not morally agree with it.

The desire to unlock the highest upgrades and maximise attributes was very attractive for some participants, but sticking to one particular alignment for the benefit of upgrades was a common practice even amongst players who did not feel the need to play as efficiently as possible. Sicart argues that the quantification of moral decisions (i.e. the light points and dark side points used in *Knights of the Old Republic*) renders the choices players make “not ethical, merely statistical”⁴⁶⁵. The utility of sticking to one alignment is a well known strategy

⁴⁵⁹ Sicart., ref. 456.

⁴⁶⁰ Perdue, B. *Ethical Dilemmas and Dominant Moral Strategies in Games*. <http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/134828/ethical_dilemmas_and_dominant_.php>, 2011, [accessed 01/06/12].

⁴⁶¹ Zoss, J.M. *Ethics 101: Designing Morality in Games*. <http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/5324/ethics_101_designing_morality_in_.php>, 2010, [accessed 01/06/12].

⁴⁶² Švelch, ref. 457, p.60.

⁴⁶³ Melenson, J. The Axis of Good and Evil, In: Schrier & Gibson, *Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values through Play*, 2010, pp.57-71.

⁴⁶⁴ Švelch, ref. 457, p.60.

⁴⁶⁵ Sicart, ref. 147, p.209.

within these social groups and it takes mechanics such as the interrupts of *Mass Effect* to convince players to spontaneously experiment with other alignments.

Both Melenson and Švelch have pointed out that alignments are often symbolic of highly simplified world views, and it is unlikely that the choices available on any given moral problem will satisfy everyone^{466 467}. The results of this thesis reflect this, with some participants having to choose between solutions to moral problems that they could not identify with. Even if participants wanted to subvert their own value system, the possibilities were sometimes limited by the developer's work.

Out of all the games participants played, the *Fable*, *Fallout* and *Elder Scrolls*' franchises were most frequently mentioned as presenting choices that participants did not agree with. Bioware games were generally praised for the choices available, and there are several contributing factors to this. Reasons for limiting the available choices are tied into the narrative, so throughout *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age: Origins*, players are faced by choices constrained by the resources of their companions and crew, the concessions conflicting NPC factions will find acceptable and the only tactically viable strategies. All of these are carefully defined by the developer and add to the challenge some participants felt in trying to resolve problems to their taste.

The *Fallout* franchise seemed less successful in this respect, perhaps due to the relative isolation of the player. They are not surrounded by a cast of extras to provide context for a player's moral choices, nor is the primacy of the player's avatar in the narrative ever disputed. The narrative mechanics that Jørgensen⁴⁶⁸ identified were apparently missed by participants as they frequently defaulted to making decisions that only benefited themselves. It can also be argued that in a survival situation similar to that in *Fallout 3* where the player who puts themselves ahead of any other potential beneficiary of their questing is enacting a more realistic response to the narrative setting. However, according to proponents of applying ethical principles to game design, it is the developer's job to make sure moral choices are compelling enough to at least make players stop to think carefully about their choices.

⁴⁶⁶ Melenson, ref. 463, p.65.

⁴⁶⁷ Švelch, ref. 457, p.61.

⁴⁶⁸ Jørgensen, ref. 143.

The problem with attempting to design moral choices is that there are a wide variety of motivations for each action and choice the player makes. Švelch has categorised player motivation into three main categories including gameplay concerns fictional concerns and contextual concerns. These motivations give rise to a variety of gameplay styles (see Table 3) which will Švelch believes will help determine the level of moral engagement a player has with a choice and the behaviours that participants have described to correspond with these styles. Gameplay concerns include:

- Strategising, with a focus on winning the game and an instrumental use of morality systems shaping decisions to achieve gameplay goals).
- Meta-gaming where players are finding their own goals within a game, disconnecting from the fictional and main goals of a game in order to establish their own.
- Exploration, where players are trying to discover all the content in the game, discovering limits and the outcomes of choices. This style is associated with behaviours such as reloading saves to ascertain all of the different outcomes of a scenario before finally choosing the consequences that are the most appealing. Exploration does not necessarily negate moral engagement as once the exploration is complete, players can begin to think of the choices available to them in terms of the moral emotions they evoke.
- Honest play is a transposition of a player's moral code into a fictional world where players reaffirm their own moral beliefs based on their moral emotions. Several participants have confessed being unable to do harm to certain NPCs or finding some actions unacceptable. This study also presents evidence that participants rarely stick rigidly to their own moral code in a game with different issues such as theft and murder triggering stricter stronger or weaker adherence. Here contextual factors also come into play as the participant's mood was shown to influence how they behave in game.
- Role-playing is where players adopt moral profiles different to their own, although it is argued that this is different from what is thought of as traditional role-playing. People adopt different moral profiles without necessarily establishing a character like in a table-top RPG, and some participants maintain that what they are doing is not role-playing at all but the moral profile they have adopted is also nothing like how they would behave in real life.

- Spectator driven style is contextually driven by having someone else observe your playing session, perhaps overtly or unconsciously influencing your decision making process. There is evidence for this occurring between housemates and couples who game together and collaborate on one avatars development.

Player concern	Gameplay style	Moral engagement
Gameplay	Strategizing	
“	Meta-gaming	
“	Exploration	-/+
Fictional	Honest play	+
“	Role-playing	+/-
Contextual	Spectator driven	+

Table 3 – Švelch’s gameplay styles and their relation to moral engagement⁴⁶⁹

Bossche argues that moral choices in digital games will only matter to a player when something they care about is at stake⁴⁷⁰, and argues against Butts’⁴⁷¹ assertion that moral choices in games have little impact because they can be easily undone by reloading a saved game. By making an NPC or player-character something the player cares about then is one way to generate interest in the consequences of moral choices but this is not something that is achieved quickly. Bossche states that “fiction starts at zero interest and has to fight for every inch of relevance”⁴⁷². When a player encounters a new character or starts a new game, they will not care about what happens to NPCs or their avatar, they need to be provided with a reason for caring about the consequences of their actions. Jørgensen⁴⁷³ described techniques used by Bioware to encourage player investment in NPCs including the development of characters in *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Mass Effect 2*:

⁴⁶⁹ Švelch, ref. 457, p.66.

⁴⁷⁰ Bossche, A.V. *Analysis: When Morality Doesn’t Matter*.

<http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/125796/Analysis_When_Morality_Doesnt_Matter.php>, 2011, [accessed 01/06/12].

⁴⁷¹ Butts, S. *Ethics Without a Net: Making Morality Matter*.

<http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/issues/issue_308/8908-Ethics-Without-a-Net>, 2011, [accessed 03/08/13].

⁴⁷² Bossche, ref. 470.

⁴⁷³ Jørgensen, ref. 143.

- Second-hand information (learning about characters through information described around the game environment and making them interesting before the player meets them),
- Through micronarratives having players engage in quests to secure the loyalty of their companions where the back story of a companion is explored and conflicts from their past are resolved in a fashion ultimately decided by the player.
- Separating the player character from the protagonist of the story allows for a narrative experience that does not entirely rely on the player's involvement for progression
- Through pairing the bleed effect with catharsis where the player's investment in the wellbeing of characters and the player's relationship with NPCs collides with dramatic events and moral choices which serve as points of no return.

As evidenced by the enthusiastic response of some participants to the NPCs and set-pieces of the Bioware games, these techniques appear to have been successful at creating memorable moments and characters for participants to engage with. The characterisation of NPCs by developers has been known to work against the effectiveness of moral dilemmas. Perdue⁴⁷⁴ believed the lack of redeeming qualities in the characters of Kaiden Alenko and Ashley Williams in *Mass Effect* diffused much of the tension in choosing which one to sacrifice. Some participants agreed with Perdue's assessment, often slightly favouring one character over another or disliking both.

Based on participants' testimonies, *Dragon Age: Origins* was more successful at providing morally engaging dilemmas. For this game, participants were less sure of the consequences of their actions and the potential impact on favourite NPCs and factions. By not including any morality tracking systems, by postponing the consequences of many moral decisions and by using the techniques described by Jørgensen⁴⁷⁵ (separating player character and protagonist, pairing the bleed effect with catharsis, developing characters through second-hand information, companions as micro-narrative protagonists), *Dragon Age: Origins* appears to have been more successful at making participants feel their relationships with NPCs were in jeopardy.

⁴⁷⁴ Perdue, ref. 460.

⁴⁷⁵ Jørgensen, ref. 143.

9.3 Disinhibition and guilt

Another issue regarding the ethics and morality of digital games that researchers are preoccupied with is how players can enjoy acts of violence in digital games. A group of German researchers have sought to explain the process by which players regulate emotions that may adversely affect their enjoyment of violent games, calling it “moral management”⁴⁷⁶. Building on Bandura’s theory of moral disengagement, Klimmt et al. have reasoned that players use a variety of strategies to disinhibit themselves which games actively contribute to through moral cues⁴⁷⁷. A lot of the cues mentioned by Klimmt et al. are sourced from games where player values do not influence the game, where players are mostly forced to adapt the objectives of the game and fight the enemies that are thrown at them.

The cues described by participants are somewhat different, having originated from games with predominantly open-ethical designs, where players have some choice over who they smite. Klimmt et al. describe the narrative framework of games which provide moral justification or violent action so the player is essentially defending freedom, or protecting the weak. Open-ethical design games sometimes present the chance to kill innocents where different moral cues are used to make the act enjoyable for some. Participants described the scripted voiceovers of villagers in *Fable II* as making them amusing targets for violence, whilst the stylised ultra-violence of *Fallout 3* made dismemberment more humorous than horrific. The use of humour to mask potentially horrific acts of violence is also helped through a pervasive dehumanisation of both hostile and non-hostile NPCs.

This thesis argues that part of the experience of digital games is that players are often reminded of the virtual nature of NPCs which has a cumulative effect, particularly as they become familiar with NPC animations and voiceovers and players begin to perceive repetitious behaviour. This contributes to the dehumanisation of NPCs in the eyes of some players, making casual acts of cruelty and violence easier against a non-hostile NPC population as a player spends more time in game.

⁴⁷⁶ Klimmt et al., ref. 160.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.115-116.

The results of the present study also support Hartmann, Toz & Brandon's findings on unjustified virtual violence producing guilt in some players⁴⁷⁸. With guilt being conceptualised as an automatic response, Hartmann, Toz and Brandon argue for guilt as "a spontaneous feeling resulting from intuitional moral judgements"⁴⁷⁹. Participants who recalled instances of unplanned, accidental and unjustified incidents of violence against NPCs also associated guilt with those memories, with some still feeling guilty on remembering such incidents.

Gollwitzer and Melzer also looked at the guilt some players feel when playing games, finding that inexperienced players were more likely to report feeling moral distress after committing acts of violence in games than frequent players⁴⁸⁰. This thesis supports this finding, as participants who described themselves as being new to computer gaming who mentioned having regrets over their choices in games that lead to the harm of NPCs. Whilst some experienced participants did suggest that they would feel guilty over accidental acts of violence, there was also a strong suggestion from many participants that game violence through avatars was normal to them and did not cause moral distress. Like the defence mechanisms reported by Hartmann, Toz and Brandon, this present study had participants who preferred to clearly draw a line between what was real and what was not, so that if they could remind themselves that their actions did not really matter.

The researcher cannot comment on how moral distress in games with avatar personalisation compares to games without such features because participants did not volunteer such information and were not prompted to do so. This was perhaps a missed opportunity as experiments by Fischer, Kastenmüller and Greitemeyer indicate that playing with a personalised avatar as opposed to a static avatar alters the way players behave in a game, particularly their levels of aggression. When the subject of aggression and moral decision making arose in interviews, participants were cynical regarding the potential impact games could have on their real life behaviour and values. This can be interpreted as a reaction to the continued media, political and scientific interest in the negative effects of digital games

⁴⁷⁸ Hartmann., Toz., & Brando. ref. 157.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.355.

⁴⁸⁰ Gollwitzer, M. & Melzer, A. Macbeth and the Joystick: Evidence for Moral Cleansing after Playing a Violent Video Game. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* [In Press], <<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S002210311200131X>>, 2012, [accessed 01/06/12].

on users. Instead of worrying about these issues and the studies that claim to show an increase in aggression^{481 482}, these participants preferred to dismiss such findings they heard about.

One of the ways that participants experienced moral dilemmas in digital games was to think of the capacity for violence and enacting change in games as part of a system that can be explored. Some participants preferred not to consider the implications (for themselves or NPCs) or meanings behind moral decisions and appeared to perceive games as a collection of affordances to be tested. These participants did not worry about what their actions meant, beyond the enjoyment they felt from getting to wield power in a virtual world. As Consalvo⁴⁸³ stated, it appears that being aware of the “gameness” of a game and through perceiving games as systems for choices allows players to draw on a different set of values from which to judge their actions, or even to try to put value judgements aside for entertainment.

9.4 Optimisation

A great deal of effort is put into optimising equipment and attribute management in MMOs but to what extent does the culture of optimisation influence avatar development in single-player games? This research has shown that some participants gained a sense of achievement from pursuing optimisation strategies in single-player games, but there were those who played MMOs and were afraid of their optimisation habits eclipsing other aspects of the avatar development experience.

9.4.1 Min-Maxing

Min-maxers, alternately known as “mini-maxers” are defined by Masters as “a player who attempts to exploit every aspect of a game’s rules to maximise character power for

⁴⁸¹ Brushman, B.J. & Gibson, B. Violent Video Games Cause an Increase in Aggression Long After the Game Has Been Turned Off. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 21(1), 29-32, <<http://spp.sagepub.com/content/2/1/29>>, 2011, [accessed 01/06/12].

⁴⁸² Adachi, P.J.C. & Willoughby, T. The effect of video game competition and violence on aggressive behavior: Which characteristic has the greatest influence? *Psychology of Violence*, 1(4), 259-274.<<http://psycnet.apa.org/?&fa=main.doiLanding&doi=10.1037/a0024908>>, 2011, [accessed 01/06/12].

⁴⁸³ Consalvo, ref. 202, pp.185-186.

minimum cost of any kind – hence, by implication a variety a power gamer.”⁴⁸⁴ Adams and Dormans describe the optimal condition for min-maxing as one of positive reinforcement provided by the games mechanics⁴⁸⁵. He names the process “playing style reinforcement” where “slow, positive, constructive feedback on player actions (actions that have another effect on the game) causes the player’s avatar or units to develop over time.”⁴⁸⁶ The avatar becomes specialised as the player feeds back into the game mechanics and reflects the player’s preference and style, however it can also inspire min-maxing behaviour, regardless of their preferences or taste.

Adams and Dormans argue that when players find that min-maxing is successful it takes over as the dominant strategy. That appears to have been the case with many of the present study’s participants who had learned that they could progress easier through games if they paid attention to the resources their avatars consumed and took care to learn the rules that governed the game. More often it was concerned with minimising investment in abilities that were not considered useful, minimising attributes that were not useful and minimising the equipment that boosted those attributes.

Min-maxing may sound clinical but participants enjoyed the process, finding entertainment in figuring out the best configurations for their avatar. Some of the entertainment appears to come from not knowing immediately what the best options are and having to learn about a system in order to master it. Indeed, Hopson claims that in order to stop or delay min-maxing, players need to be presented with more complex problems where they are less likely to be able to identify the optimal solution without exploring a system first⁴⁸⁷.

This tactic of introducing more complex problems may make min-maxing a more organic process for some players, but as some of this thesis’ participants described, there are always players who are willing to use paratexts to figure out the optimal solution. They also appeared to enjoy this process but it highlights that implementing more complex problems

⁴⁸⁴ Masters, P. *On The Vocabulary of Role-Playing Notes Towards Critical Consistency?* <<http://www.philm.demon.co.uk/Miscellaneous/Vocabulary.html>>, [n.d], [accessed 01/06/12].

⁴⁸⁵ Adams, E. & Dormans, J. *Game Mechanics: Advanced Game Design*, 2012, pp.333-336.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁷ Hopson, J. *The Psychology of Choice*. <http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/131420/the_psychology_of_choice.php>, 2002, [accessed 01.08.12].

as Hopson suggests is not going to stop players from quickly finding out the most efficient solution through other means. Another strategy Hopson suggests is to have contingencies based on probabilities, but this would lead to a great deal of uncertainty in any system and would not be suitable for attribute modelling. There is already some element of uncertainty in C-RPGs with random item drops which participants negatively associated with the need to repeatedly kill enemies for long periods of time (grinding) for specific items.

There was evidence that participants applied their min-maxing strategies to moral decision making and several gameplay mechanics encouraged this behaviour. “Moral high scores”⁴⁸⁸, as Perdue called them, involved the quantification and scoring of moral perspectives sometimes coupled with rewards, influencing how players negotiated moral problems. The present study indicates that this is sometimes the case but as Švelch⁴⁸⁹ argued, players morally engage and disengage depending on their own goals and what the game provides them, and they are not necessarily disengaged when aiming for optimal results or moral high scores. Choosing the most practical or rewarding option for an avatar can also be driven by a commitment to role-playing a particular moral code, the input of spectators, and through projecting elements of their own moral code.

In table-top RPGs, min-maxing is tolerated but not always celebrated, and depending on the group, may be discouraged entirely^{490 491}. This attitude was associated with a desire for different type of experience and character building by this study’s participants who played C-RPGs, MMOs in addition to table-top RPGs. If such a participant wanted to win and place their character above all else then they played a single-player RPG, if they wanted to do something similar in a social environment then MMOs were played, whilst table-top RPGs were reserved for more creative play. A variety of play-styles were exhibited by WarSoc members but playing for the sake of winning was unfavourably considered to be a form of power gaming.

⁴⁸⁸ Perdue, ref. 460.

⁴⁸⁹ Švelch, ref. 457, p.64.

⁴⁹⁰ Dormans, J. On the Role of the Die: A brief ludologic study of pen-and-paper roleplaying games and their rules. *Game Studies*, 6(1), <<http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/dormans>>, 2006, [accessed 01.08.12].

⁴⁹¹ RPG Net forums. *Minimaxing, Rebooted*. <<http://forum.rpg.net/archive/index.php/t-211842.html?s=0a1a559dd7b970fae21ac10f1298dd3b>>, 2006, [accessed 01.08.12].

9.4.2 Cookie cutter builds

It also appears reinforcement from the community has a role in the pursuit of min-maxing. Predominantly mentioned in the literature in the context of MMOs^{492 493}, this is also an issue for single-player RPGs as some participants chose to seek out the optimal builds for their avatars from online sources as opposed to choosing talents according to their own judgment.

Cookie cutter talent builds are essentially player produced recipes for success based on the previous experience within the gaming community of what generally works best for a given class or for a particular scenario⁴⁹⁴. They are the product of the general discussion of gameplay mechanics and empirical testing of design elements, or theorycrafting as it is often known⁴⁹⁵. For a player who comes to an MMO six months after the release date they will find that a lot of the experimental learning they are engaging in has already been documented and analysed by other players. Moberly argues that players quickly learn that “the quickest route to success is to adopt the “cookie-cutter” talent builds and play styles that the player community as a whole endorses as the most effective”⁴⁹⁶.

Some participants eventually rebelled against the cookie-cutter builds because they do not like the idea that they have no real choice over how they play their character, or that talent systems are simply a check to see if they have been paying attention to how the game

⁴⁹² Nardi, B.A., Ly, S. & Harris, J. Learning conversations in World of Warcraft. [Paper presented at HICSS-40, Hilton Waikoloa Village Resort Waikoloa, Big Island, Hawaii, January 3-6 2007, pp.1-10] <<http://evols.library.manoa.hawaii.edu/bitstream/handle/10524/1601/Nardi-HICSS.pdf?sequence=1>>, 2007, [accessed 01.08.12].

⁴⁹³ Moberly, K. Commodifying Scarcity: Society, Struggle, and Spectacle in World of Warcraft. *Journal for Computer Game Culture*. 4 (2), pp.215-235, <http://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/viewArticle/123/179#_ednref3>, 2010, [accessed 01.08.12].

⁴⁹⁴ WoW Wiki. *Cookie cutter*. <http://www.wowwiki.com/Cookie_cutter>, 2009, [accessed 01.08.12].

⁴⁹⁵ Thomas, D. Scalable learning: from simple to complex in World of Warcraft. *On the horizon*, 17(1), p.40 <<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/journals.htm?articleid=1771029>>, 2009, [accessed 01.08.12].

⁴⁹⁶ Moberly, ref. 493, p.230.

mechanics work⁴⁹⁷. Others thrived within the restrictions of these established builds because they knew that their choices were safe and were going to work when required.

This is at odds with Sylvester who suggests that good decision-based gameplay design dictates that decision must be hard in order to be fun and meaningful⁴⁹⁸. In the context of MMOs some players are happy to bypass the decision-making portion of shaping their avatars build in order to fit in with the results being obtained by the community. For single-player avatar-based games some participants preferred to reduce the stress they felt when faced with a hard decision by reducing the uncertainty around the outcomes of decisions. Other participants enjoyed having to make difficult choices (such as moral dilemmas) and such scenarios strengthened their emotional investment in avatars.

There is evidence of animosity towards cookie-cutter builds in online forums and also claims these builds are proof that talent systems only provide the illusion of choice^{499 500}. Like the practice of min-maxing, cookie-cutter builds and archetypal approaches to playing are not always appreciated in table-top role-playing games. DeHart argues that table-top role-players see rigid acceptable paths in games are analogous to the cookie cutter aspect of American life where the pressure to succeed and take a career that is a safe bet is limiting the creativity people have in their lives⁵⁰¹. DeHart's participants believed that creative play whilst role-playing a character is the antithesis of the cookie-cutter attitude:

The games offer to gamers a way to be more than a —cookie cutter person – to express personal, individual identity traits that would be rejected by the requirements of mainstream culture; to challenge the way

⁴⁹⁷ Stickney, A. *Mists of Pandaria says bye-bye to cookie-cutter builds*.

<<http://wow.foystiq.com/2012/05/15/mists-of-pandaria-says-bye-bye-to-cookie-cutter-builds/>>, 2012, [accessed 01.08.12].

⁴⁹⁸ Sylvester, D. *Decision-based Gameplay Design*.

<http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/130677/decisionbased_gameplay_design.php>, 2005, [accessed 01.08.12].

⁴⁹⁹ xXxHaVeN [GameFAQs username]. *So tired of these cookie cutter builds*.

<<http://www.gamefaqs.com/boards/606312-/62748292>>, 2012, [accessed 01.08.12].

⁵⁰⁰ happyscrub1 [Gamespot username]. *People need to stop being sheep with the cookie cutter builds...* <<http://uk.gamespot.com/league-of-legends/forum/people-need-to-stop-being-sheep-with-the-cookie-cutter-builds-63065215/>>, 2012, [accessed 01.08.12].

⁵⁰¹ DeHart, G.L. *Issues of identity, acceptance, and creativity in tabletop role-playing games*.

Masters Thesis, Ball State University, Indiana, p.86

<<http://cardinalscholar.bsu.edu/handle/123456789/193592>>, 2008, [accessed 01.08.12].

*they see themselves and their culture; and to garner the respect and acceptance of the social group (i.e.: other players) while doing it.*⁵⁰²

The participants who played table-top RPGs adopted this attitude towards table-top games (this assertion is based on interview explorations of their table-top play-style) but when it came to single-player games they considered their avatar to be part of a solution to a problem with an optimal configuration. This may be ascribed to the authorial relationships between game, avatar and player, where the player is mostly free to do what they want with their character in a table-top game but must recognise that the experience of a single-player game is much more constraining.

9.4.3 Theory crafting and everyday-life information practices

It has long been established by Taylor⁵⁰³, Paul⁵⁰⁴, Mortensen⁵⁰⁵, Karlsen⁵⁰⁶ that theorycrafting has a role to play in how gamers shape their MMO avatars, but what about for single-player games? The current results show that players conduct their own casual testing of gameplay mechanics with no intention to publish their results, but often refer to paratexts to help their understanding of such systems. Sometimes this understanding is shared with friends (helping to boost their gaming capital and standing within their social groups as Consalvo postulates⁵⁰⁷) but for the most part the current participants do not feel the need to share or test their findings through submitting it to online communities. Paratexts such as game-related wikis contain information on game mechanics that is often derived from configuration files which are defined by developers leaving little room for speculation or “theorycrafting” as such.

The present study’s interviewees suggest they have learned the habit of seeking out and applying the findings of theorycrafting to their avatars in single-player games through

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*

⁵⁰³ Taylor, ref. 212, p.73.

⁵⁰⁴ Paul, ref. 216.

⁵⁰⁵ Mortensen, T.E. Training, Sharing or Cheating? Gamer Strategies to Get a Digital Upper Hand. *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 7(1), 79-89.

<<http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/elea.2010.7.1.79>>, 2010, [accessed 01.08.12].

⁵⁰⁶ Karlsen, F. *Theorycrafting: from collective intelligence to intrinsic satisfaction*. [Paper presented at DiGRA2011: Situated Play. Utrecht School of the Arts, Utrecht, Netherlands, September 14-17 2011, pp.1-16], <www.digra.org/dl/db/11301.06109.pdf>, 2011, [accessed 01.08.12].

⁵⁰⁷ Consalvo., ref. 202, p.18.

participating in MMOs and, in particular, raiding guilds. Other participants have claimed that they have sought out game mechanic information on single-player avatars because of their table-top role-playing methods, whilst some participants have never played MMOs but still seek out game mechanic information derived from console commands and configuration files.

The findings of this study support Adams⁵⁰⁸ application of McKenzie's⁵⁰⁹ model of information practices to MMOs, whilst showing this model is applicable to single-player games as well as the MMOs that Adams originally worked with. For example, participants actively sought out information in forums to fix bugs, sought out non-player characters for which some participants had interrogation strategies, and consulted paratexts for information on game mechanics and fiction. Participants described active scanning which consists of semi-directed browsing or scanning likely locations (Adams⁵¹⁰ described as including scanning the in-game environment, or reading through forums). Participants fulfilled this category of the model by describing their daily scanning habits whereby they frequently visited game-related websites to help plan an avatar before the release date of a game. They also had community websites that they would frequently visit to share their progress with friends or discuss other gaming-related matters.

The non-directed monitoring portion of McKenzie's model consists of is serendipitously encountering and recognising sources. Adams believed that this determined much of her understanding of the MMO she was playing, whilst participants of the current study also describe moments where they understood game mechanics just through playing a game. The results of the present study indicate that participants encountering of books and other information sources embedded in games are not necessarily because of active scanning, as players do not necessarily have to pay attention to their surroundings to stumble across these sources.

The by-proxy category of McKenzie's model is where another individual identifies you as an information seeker and directs you to a source which Adams believes is fulfilled by NPCs, in-game social interactions and online forums. The results of the present study agree with Adams, but add that housemates and face-to-face meetings with society members are also

⁵⁰⁸ Adams., ref. 199.

⁵⁰⁹ McKenzie., ref. 189.

⁵¹⁰ Adams, ref. 199, p.689.

sources of by-proxy information practices, particularly when a game is being played in front of an audience who can then volunteer information to help the player progress through the game.

Bowman's ethnographic treatment of role-playing games revealed that table-top and live-action role-players often used books and magazine articles not directly related to the mechanics or fictional universes of their chosen games to gather material for their characters⁵¹¹. This behaviour was not observed in the present research in relation to single-player games, although some participants did use this approach with their characters in table-top games. Participants have also used paratexts that are directly related to a game such as official guides or the game-related wikis to help shape an avatar's and establish their relationship with game factions. This reflects the nature of digital games, which are more of a closed-system than table-top RPGs which are more adaptable and capable of incorporating player-defined material.

The present study has shown that everyday life information practices play an important part in helping some gamers define their avatars, but because this topic was not mentioned by all participants the subsequent findings on the subject are limited in scope. Given the large variety of paratexts that have been developed to support players of all abilities there is a need for more research that shifts the focus away from elite power gamers and theorycrafters to the creators and consumers of game-related wikis and video walkthroughs/tutorials.

9.5 Emotional attachment to avatars

Moving on from the selection of avatar class and abilities, it was found that participants held predominantly practical reasons for equipping progressively more powerful items with a small selection of items being highly sought after for their unbeatable statistics. There were some exceptions due to participants collecting items they found attractive even if they had no intention to wear them, similar to the aesthetic admiration of items Klastrup and Tosca⁵¹² found in MMO players but not for the purposes of role-playing as MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler⁵¹³ described. The *Fable* series encouraged players to choose the clothes they

⁵¹¹ Bowman, ref. 203, pp.161-163.

⁵¹² Klastrup & Tosca, ref. 110.

⁵¹³ MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler, ref. 78.

preferred aesthetically with little or no improving statistics attached to items, but most participants who played the franchise could not remember the clothes they chose. When players had unlimited space, choosing which attractive items to keep was not a problem but for games which forced players to manage their inventories carefully this sometimes made participants give up items they prized, even if they were no longer practically useful or never had been.

A thread on the support forums for *Gaia Online* shows how other players have felt a similar attachment to their items, often focused around their first quest rewards, along with unusual looking and rare items⁵¹⁴. The players responding to a blogpost in EpicSlant also view the value of loot as determined by the hard work necessary to get it⁵¹⁵. EpicSlant's respondents saw items gained from a group raid in MMOs represent a shared achievement, whilst the current study's participants created attachments to items in single-player games associated with memorable trials, items used for long portions of a game, or they preferred how older items looked in comparison to newer acquisitions. This goes beyond just having a favourite type of item (if you lose a sword in *Oblivion* it can often be replaced with an exact copy from somewhere else), participants got attached to specific instances of these items they associate with a milestone they achieved or they have had with them for a long time. MacCallum-Stewart described such attachment to items as being quiet role-play, where ephemeral items are associated with the fabric of a characterised self⁵¹⁶.

There appears to be little academic discussion on why players develop a bond with their equipment, but there is some discussion from game designers on how they may encourage emotional attachment to in-game items. Nearing suggests that games can encourage attachment through having items, or units, level up so that players start to associate those items with their own achievements beyond just being rewarded the items or acquiring them⁵¹⁷. He also mentions the possibility of being able to capitalise on this attachment to

⁵¹⁴ Tao Kai Tze. *Sentimental Attachment to Items*. <http://www.gaiaonline.com/forum/gaia-community-discussion/sentimental-attachment-to-items/t.9926180_1/>, 2005, [accessed 01.08.12].

⁵¹⁵ Ferrel. *How do you view loot?* <<http://www.epicslant.com/2011/08/how-do-you-view-loot/>>, 2011, [accessed 01.08.12].

⁵¹⁶ MacCallum-Stewart, ref. 113, p.86-87.

⁵¹⁷ Nearing, J. *Creating Emotional Attachments to Game Items*. <http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/JustinNearing/20110628/89712/Creating_Emoional_Atachments_to_Game_Items.php>, 2011, [accessed 01.08.12].

items or units, so that if an item were broken or a unit killed after the player had been developing it for a long time then they would be more likely to use the option to buy back that item for a small fee of real money. This may not be what players would appreciate being implemented in their traditional RPGs but has potential for exploitation in MMOs and other free-to-play games.

The attachment players develop to their items may become part of how they value their in-game time. A report on social games indicates that a variety of game mechanics result in players being more likely to stay in a game, one of which being the amount of time players spend configuring their avatars items and questing for new ones, along with the money costs associated with some microtransactions means people are playing games for longer⁵¹⁸. The results of the current study also suggest that such emotional, social and monetary investments can contribute towards “the long goodbye” described by some of the MMO playing participants. Yee names elaborate reward cycles as being one of the main attractions for MMO players and the current study’s participants became disillusioned with a game when they no longer found those cycles attractive⁵¹⁹. The other main attractions (relationships and the immersive nature of the virtual world) were no longer enough to keep these players in-game leading to them quitting altogether.

The “long goodbye” was also accompanied by participants feeling melancholic over what was left after they chose to hang up their armour. Some wondered if they had they wasted their time in-game. What was the point of gathering all this equipment if it can no longer be of any use to the player or their friends? Not being able to leave a legacy brings into question the ownership rights of virtual items and the right to pass them on once they are no longer needed.

A Dutch court has ruled that virtual items do have worth due to the time and energy that players invest in acquiring those items, but developers appear to be slow in recognising any

⁵¹⁸ Deterding, S., et al. *Social Game Studies: A workshop report*. <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/40055484/Social-Game-Studies-A-Workshop-Report>>, 2010, [accessed 01.08.12].

⁵¹⁹ Yee, N. *Attraction factors*. <<http://www.nickyee.com/hub/addiction/attraction.html>>, 2002, [accessed 01.08.12].

of the potential rights that players may have in connection with their efforts⁵²⁰. Most EULAs instead state that players do not own the items, limiting the rights players have to dictate how their items are dealt with after they quit the game^{521 522 523}.

The life of an avatar ostensibly begins when they are created in-game, whilst the ideas that go into their creation can be conceived through engaging with paratexts as well as the game itself. The end of an avatar's life can come at one of several points, perhaps when a player loses interest in a game, decides to finish at the end of a storyline, and when a player deletes one avatar in order to create another.

In MMOs, avatars do not die entirely unless they or the account they are associated with is deleted. Instead they go into a state of suspended animation until the next time it is woken up, days, months sometimes years after it was last activated. The world around it continues on as normal and it is the persistence of this world, its continually churning economy of high value items and player relationships that can make it difficult for people to let go. They know that if they choose to return it is very likely that the gear they worked so hard for will no longer be worth what it once was. They also know that their game knowledge will also be out of date, a sore point for the participants who considered themselves experts at their respective MMOs.

In single-player games, it is within the player's power to end their avatars existence on their terms, either by reaching the end of a storyline and choosing a particular point to stop playing, or by losing interest in a game. Participants gained a sense of security that barring anything happening to their game save, that their digital achievements are still there if they need to be called upon again. Some felt no loss over the idea that they had lost access to their treasures, instead choosing to take with them a sense of completeness from having

⁵²⁰ De Rechtspraak. *LJN: BQ9251, Supreme, 10/00 101 J.*

<<http://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=nl&tl=en&u=http://zoeken.rechtspraak.nl/detailpage.aspx%3Fljn%3DBQ9251>>, 2012, [accessed 01.08.12].

⁵²¹ Purewal, J. *Virtual goods, real rights?* <<http://www.gamerlaw.co.uk/2011/08/virtual-goods-real-rights.html>>, 2011, [accessed 01.08.12].

⁵²² Dotson, K. *You Own Your Virtual Items in an MMO Game?*

<<http://www.mmobomb.com/virtual-items-mmorpg-game>>, 2012, [accessed 01.08.12].

⁵²³ Taylor, T.L. "Whose Game Is This Anyway?": Negotiating Corporate Ownership in a Virtual World. [Paper presented at *Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference 2002*, June 6-8, Tampere, Finland, 227-242] <<http://www.digra.org/dl/db/05164.58571.pdf>>, 2002, [accessed 01.08.12].

progressed through a games narrative or playing until they were satisfied they had seen enough of the game.

9.6 Projective identity and the avatar experience

In this final part of the discussion the findings of this research concerning Gee's concept of projective identity will be restated and compared to the existing literature. This discussion has been split into two parts as per Gee's definition of projective identity. The first part deals with the values that are transferred between player, avatar and developer whilst the second part examines the avatar as a project or work in progress.

9.6.1 Transferring values, bleed and the projective identity

Gee⁵²⁴ argues for his concept of projective identity which involves the transfer of values from player to avatar and Waggoner's⁵²⁵ results describe situations where his participants believe their values are being transposed in some way onto their avatar. Waern differentiated this projection from the avatar attachment exhibited in virtual worlds from that which occurs in single-player digital games: the avatar in virtual worlds also happens to be a representation of the player to other players, whilst in single-player games the player projects themselves into a fictional context⁵²⁶. It is this narrative world that both Waern and Jørgensen⁵²⁷ have shown can evoke emotion and projection in players, influencing their decisions and developing connections between NPCs that are rarely found in virtual worlds.

For the most part, the participants of the current study have also hailed the narrative aspects of their experience as highly important, even though their focus can often be on the development and growth of their avatars they have recognised that a "good story" was vital towards making them feel something more than mild satisfaction at acquiring loot. There were some NPCs that participants seemed to care for (notably Alistair from *DA: O*, Tali, Garrus, and Joker from the *ME* series), expressing regret over their deaths or continued concern that something might still happen to them. The techniques that Jørgensen⁵²⁸ described for divorcing narrative power from the player and giving the player character

⁵²⁴ Gee, ref. 1, pp.54-66.

⁵²⁵ Waggoner, ref. 15, p.14.

⁵²⁶ Waern, ref. 144, p.6.

⁵²⁷ Jørgensen, ref. 143, pp.324-348.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.322.

some of their own agency also appeared to empower participants who enjoyed having a measure of control over the actions of the paragon of virtue/renegeade Shepard.

Taking the role of a defined character does not necessarily harm a player's chances of projecting their own values onto their avatar, as long as there is enough scope for imprinting their own personality onto the defined characteristics of that avatar. This approach often was considered more enlivening and interesting than the mute blank-slate avatars of *DA: O* showing that some players do not mind watching their character act with a slight degree of autonomously, but also that the mute hero may not be as satisfying in a world where NPCs engage each other in conversation but your avatar can only offer short silent lines of text in response. In *DA: O* your avatar is along for the ride, albeit with the bonus of moral decision making, whilst in Mass Effect your avatar is an active agent within the cutscenes and interactions.

Montola's use of the concept of bleed to study extreme LARP games is relevant to the discussion of projective identity and value projection in that it talks about bleed in (a player's life influencing the game) and bleed out (the game influences the player)⁵²⁹. The most obvious conduit for bleed is the avatar which also bears the brunt of the player's agency within a game. Participants were generally unsure of how their choices reflected on their own values given that they had little frame of reference for what these choices could mean in the context of their daily lives (e.g. choosing fireball spells over a blizzard). Some participants could relate the choices of their avatar builds to some of their own characteristics, but this was not a widely acknowledged aspect of the experience.

Bleed out has been mentioned briefly by participants where they believe their love of games has influenced their career choices, relationships, school grades and hobbies, but participants denied that games influenced their values positively or negatively outside of game playing. Montola also describes the concept of indirect bleed where a player develops

⁵²⁹ Montola, M. The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Role-Playing, [Paper presented at Nordic DiGRA 2010: experiencing games: games, play, and players, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden, August 16-17 2010, p.2. <<http://www.digra.org/dl/db/10343.56524.pdf>>, 2010, [accessed 01.08.12].

strong feelings that do not match a characters' feelings, such as a player feeling guilt over the actions of a remorseless character⁵³⁰.

This indirect form of bleed was encountered by participants who accidentally triggered violent responses to dialogue options or accidentally killed NPCs. The avatar is remorseless but the player can have feelings of guilt when violence was unintentional or by acting out an alignment that was markedly contrary to their own value system. Another possible instance of indirect bleed include the revulsion described by some participants at the romance animations of the *Mass Effect* series which is directly opposite to the feelings of the avatar.

They did, however, recognise that games were influencing their decisions all the time through reward systems and the choices presented to them by developers. Gee believes that games are not entirely free from the influence of the outside world where "video games build on and play with a stance that is the norm for effective physical and social human action in the world"⁵³¹. Player conduct can still be manipulated by social norms even in single-player games as the current study's results have shown, particularly when gaming in the company of proximity of others.

The norms of the social groups players belong to seem to influence how they play and recall events (i.e. some participants first talked about how "we" might go about solving a problem in a game instead of "I", an affectation which sometimes faded as interviews went on), to the point where they sometimes mix up which one of their own or friends' avatars did what. So along with the values of their immediate social groups that might influence how a player shapes their avatar, there are also the social norms bought to the attention of players by developers, as Taylor has pointed out⁵³².

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵³¹ Gee, J.P. *Pleasure, Learning, Video Games, and Life: The Projective Stance*. Chapter in: Knobel, M & Lankshear, C (Eds). *A new literacies sampler [Online]*. pp.95-114, <http://montclair.academia.edu/MicheleKnobel/Books/243432/A_New_Literacies_Sampler>, 2007, [accessed 01.18.12].

⁵³² Taylor, T.L. *Intentional bodies: Virtual environments and the designers who shape them*. *International Journal of Engineering Education*, 19(1), 25-34, <<http://www.computingscience.nl/docs/vakken/vw/literature/Taylor-Designers.pdf>>, 2003, [accessed 01.18.12].

Taylor referred to the “digital body”⁵³³ and how it is shaped by the developer as well as the user, suggesting that “in these virtual worlds the bodies themselves explicitly become vehicles for building, conveying, stabilising, and often challenging, identity and community.” The designers that Taylor interviewed were generally aware of this function of the body and quite often program and build with particular value systems in mind.”⁵³⁴ The values Taylor found the game developers she interviewed wanted to instil included responsibility and some permanence of identity, where the implemented customisation tools make sure players do not change their faces at a whim⁵³⁵. This allows them to become recognisable in the community. As the present research shows, the values of developers are also open to misinterpretation, with one participant believing that *Fable’s* association of Caucasian skin and blond hair for avatars with good alignments was arbitrary and slightly racist. Another participant thought *Fable II’s* romance system was too skewed towards expecting players to marry the NPCs they bed. For the most part, though, participants did not recall questioning the values inherent in such systems.

9.6.2 Avatars as projects: The role of goal setting in the project

One half of Gee’s concept of projective identity was that players view their avatars as a project or series of tasks to develop, shaped by their aspirations for what they want that avatar to be, and become.⁵³⁶ To plan and have aspirations for the avatar is to recognise that the avatar will move forward. In a sense, it is born, grows and is eventually put away when the player grows tired of the game or finishes it completely (the avatar equivalent of death which shies away from the finality of being deleted). The current study’s results indicate that the cessation of player goal creation or goal fulfillment is a harbinger of avatar abandonment. Goals not only play an important part in how games function (see Salen and Zimmerman⁵³⁷); they also influence the player’s relationship with their avatar as Gee and Lankoski have argued.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, p.26.

⁵³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.29.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.29-30.

⁵³⁶ Gee, ref. 531.

⁵³⁷ Salen & Zimmerman., ref.20, pp.71-81.

From Lankoski's perspective goals lend a meaning to the player experience, giving them something to aim for, adding weight to their decisions⁵³⁸. In sharing goals with the avatar (or player-character as he prefers) are potentially a "mechanism or a device for empathy", where the player experience in games which do not rigidly enforce goals is influenced by the goals players set for themselves⁵³⁹.

Lankoski believes that the regulating goals established by game developers evoke emotions in the same ways that players set for themselves, but the current results show that players feel stronger connections with the game world when they are defining their own goals in opposition to what the regulating goals would have them do. The prime example is choosing to freely explore the game-world of *Oblivion* over pursuing the main quest line which is mentioned multiple times by participants as an empowering moment, one where they felt in control. Being able to ignore one set of regulating goals in order to choose another set, or living outside of the regulated goal systems (quest-lines) held a powerful lure for these participants. Predominantly there was a close relationship between the goals of the player and the goals of the virtual identity as Gee would call it in the open-avatar based games that players described.

A disconnect between player goals and goals of a virtual identity described in the interviews with participants was often accompanied by a change in how they referred to their relationship with their avatar. Generally players refrained from referring directly to their avatars, preferring "I wore Ebony" as opposed to "he wore ebony". When instances were described by participants of virtual identities acting with more prominence than the input of the player (such as during a cutscene where the player loses control of the avatar or when the avatar itself is talking) then they referred to these incidents in the third person, not the first.

Reinforcing the assertions of Gee and Lankoski, the present study found that as soon as a disconnection appeared between the goals of a player and the goals of the virtual identity there is a change in the relationship between player and avatar. This momentary change is

⁵³⁸ Lankoski, P. *Goals, Affects and Empathy in Games*. [Paper presented at The Philosophy of Computer Games conference, University of Modena/Reggio Emilia, Italy, January 25–27 2007, p.1] <http://game.unimore.it/papers/lankoski_paper.pdf>, 2007, [accessed 01.18.12].

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.297.

not necessarily patched over when cutscenes or exposition ends, when supposedly the player would be forced to internalise the goals imparted on them lest they fail the game.

That participants' still referred to their avatars in the third person, particularly when discussing cutscenes they disagreed with indicates that these rifts between player and avatar can be long-lasting. The moments when a virtual identity over-rode the agency of the player to the extent where the player no longer agreed with the virtual identities actions or found the ways in which they were asked to accomplish goals did not agree with how they would approach those situations were memorable. Another indication of the importance of allowing players to define their own goals comes with the participants rejection of *Final Fantasy XIII*, where they expected to be able to choose to do side quests and explore open areas but were disappointed by the inability to do so. Even though the *Final Fantasy* series has predominantly closed avatars that have their own script, voice acting and motives, it appears that giving players some say in how they progress through the avatars story and to occasionally choose their own goals is a staple of the *Final Fantasy* series these participants missed.

Montola writes about the role of consequences in making goal selection a meaningful activity⁵⁴⁰. Without the sense that their decisions have weight to them, choosing one goal over another would mean very little to a player. The current participants sometimes talked about hasty decisions during avatar creation that resonated through playthroughs in negative ways because they did not understand the consequences of their decisions. Similarly, there were participants paralysed by indecision due to their imaginings on the possible consequences during avatar creation, resource allocation or conversation with NPCs. Throughout games, participants try to predict the possible consequences of their actions and realign their short term goals to patch the perceived deficiencies in their avatars defences.

9.6.3 Avatars as projects: Pushing the boundaries of the avatar project

Some participants took their planning activities from simply envisioning the capabilities or narrative outcomes they wanted to gathering information from paratexts and friends in

⁵⁴⁰ Montola, M. *Designing Goals for Online Role-Players*. [Paper presented at DIGRA 2005: Changing Views – Worlds in Play, University of Vancouver, Vancouver, Canada, June 16-20 2005, pp.1-8] <<http://perg.sics.se/Publications/Designing-Goals-for-Online-Role-Players.pdf>>, 2005, [accessed 01.18.12].

order to help them establish total dominance over the game environment. Whilst much of the calculation necessary for the avatar to function takes place within the software of games, some participants were known to simulate their own versions of these calculations through spreadsheets and handwritten notes. The avatar, like the player-character of the table-top role-playing game is not limited to one particular medium; the avatar draws on information from sometimes disparate sources to inform and realise the goals that in turn shape avatar creation and development. Some of the goals that players simulate through paratexts or in their minds may never come to fruition in game; they still represent the potential that an avatar can reach, even if the motivation is not there to fulfil those goals entirely.

The porous boundaries of the avatar project allow multiple people to contribute to the creation of one avatar. The current participants exhibited this behaviour, with some partners preferring to focus on one aspect of customisation whilst collaborating together to work out the details of other aspects. In taking into consideration the social norms and opinions of gamers, the channels through which they are communicated and the face-to-face social dynamics that also shape the outcomes of players' decision making, it is difficult to claim that any one of the current study's participants are entirely responsible for the creation of their avatars.

9.7 Conclusion

This chapter has compared and contrasted the results of the current study with that of other game scholars. It is clear that given the wide variety of areas necessary to discuss these results that this study has looked at the issue from a broader perspective than most. The experience of managing and playing with avatars touches on research findings from several fields within Game Studies but also involves aspects that have not yet been studied in great detail.

The process of planning how one will play a game, from reading about a game before it is released, consuming the trailer and news, reading through wikis, talking about it with friends all means that players often have a good idea about how they will approach a game before it is released. This process which some players engage in is amongst one of the main findings of the research. The next chapter will take this result and other main findings, presenting conclusions and recommendations for further research into understanding the

relationship between player, avatar and the world around them from the player's perspective.

Chapter 10: Conclusions

10.1 Main findings and conclusions

Past research into avatar customisation tends to focus on one aspect of the avatar creation experience, or has focused on only one game. To address this gap an exploratory approach was taken that covered several avatar customisation systems that make up the interface between player, avatar and game over a variety of games and genres. The **first aim** of the research was to determine main features of projective identities in digital games. The first objective relating to the first aim (**1.1**) was to understand existing perspectives on avatar customisation and projective identity in digital games.

By critically reviewing literature relating to projective identity to establish how researchers had previously examined avatar customisation, a research gap was identified. This informed the development of a method for data collection and interpretation to address the gap. Once the results relating to objective 1.2 had been interpreted, the literature was revisited in order to compare this study with existing work.

The second objective relating to the first aim (**1.2**) was to identify the main features of projective identities as perceived by gamers, achieved through semi-structured interviews with thirty participants. Analysis of interview transcripts highlighted distinct sections of avatar customisation and interaction that preoccupied participants:

- Attribute and resource management
- Appearance customisation
- Narrative mechanics
- Moral engagement
- Information practices

The implications of participants' interactions with these areas of avatar development on the ways of interpreting projective identity have been evaluated, and the findings are summarised below.

10.1.1 Resource management and attribute development of avatars

Once the main customisation avatar features had been identified the **second aim** of the research was to explore those features through phenomenological description and

interpretation of participants' accounts of playing with avatars. Consequently the first objective associated with the second aim (2.1) was to gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings that players assign to the resource management and attribute development of avatars in digital games. Participants reported growing in confidence and feeling satisfaction from pursuing gearing-up strategies, particularly when those strategies took them beyond the minimum level required for them to overcome an obstacle. Even the few participants who did not like investing time into attribute, equipment and talent systems could appreciate the need to carefully manage their resources and to develop strategies that maximised their avatars' strengths.

Being forced to kill enemies for experience points and random loot drops in single-player games was only satisfying in the short term, although the self-directed completion of sub-quests and clearing of dungeons for specific rewards was often motivated by the need for specific rewards. The ability to identify and then pursue these rewards allowed participants to feel in control of how their avatar developed.

Experimenting with abilities where the benefit was not immediately obvious (i.e. it might take several levels worth of investment in order to see the consequences) was often viewed as wasteful and so in games where participants only had one opportunity to choose where to place a talent point or spend money on abilities, they often chose conservatively. Still, cookie cutter builds are not as prevalent in how these participants played single-player games compared to how they approached MMOs, and there is some experimentation when resources permit. Participants also described referring to online sources and getting advice from friends on builds that maximised their avatar's strengths so there is the potential for similar builds to emerge within social groups. The tendency for min-maxing to assert itself as the dominant strategy also lessened when some participants were on their second playthrough of a game and felt more confident to experiment due to their knowledge of game mechanics and forthcoming narrative events.

There also appears to be some projection of real life characteristics onto avatars through class, attribute, equipment and talent systems. Talent and attribute builds sometimes reflect what participants thought they were physically or mentally capable of in real life, taking into account their perceived strengths and weaknesses. For example, participants who thought they had lower reaction times favoured builds which allowed them to plan and control

situations or gave them multiple escape routes. Participants who enjoyed complex magic systems claimed that reflected their attraction to the brainy wizard stereotype, whilst some participants preferred direct action and up-close violence which some linked to their impatience for waiting and enthusiasm for hitting things. Participants who reported playing social simulators such as *The Sims* reported prioritising the hobbies and activities they personally preferred onto some of their sims.

10.1.2 Appearance customisation and the avatar

The second objective associated with the second aim (2.2) was to gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings that players assign to avatar appearance customisation in digital games. Participants were often quick to dismiss the impact that customising an avatar's appearance could have on their enjoyment of a game. Some of the biggest frustrations voiced by participants were linked to the menus for customising avatar appearance which hints to some basic changes that can be made to increase the usability of appearance customisation systems. Participants had low expectations on the level of attractiveness or normality that they could achieve with avatar appearance customisation options so they were surprised when they found an avatar creation looking attractive or normal. This is based on low confidence in games being able to provide tools to create attractive avatars, but also a lack of confidence in their own abilities to use the tools provided. Customisation systems can be powerful but hard to master with the timing of the customisation menu being perceived as an obstruction towards participants actually playing a game. This leads to participants sometimes rushing through the process and later regretting their choices.

Despite the indifference leveled at appearance customisation by interviewees, participants still chose cosmetic features they found attractive and some also selected avatar race and class based on how they corresponded with their real life traits. Some of these projections were elicited by features such as make up, tattoos, cosmetic-only clothing (with no stats bonuses) in *Fable II* that were all temporary and did not penalise players for experimenting with their appearance by making such choices permanent. There were also instances where participants tried to recreate their own facial structure but were repulsed by the results due to the "Uncanny Valley" effect where familiar yet slightly inhuman appearances make players uncomfortable. This is due to the limitations of cosmetic customisation systems and

also the limits of participants' patience in learning how to obtain attractive results in a customisation system.

This research also provided evidence of participants using their open-avatar appearance to humiliate, confuse and offend other players in multiplayer scenarios. The prime motivation for this was to gain satisfaction from defeating their opponents or forcing people to interact with an avatar that subverts community norms on what an attractive, powerful avatar should look like. There is also evidence of participants drawing on associations they see between the game world they are about to enter and various films, books and television shows to construct an appearance that is an amalgamation of tropes from different sources. Participants have also designed avatars to fit in with the aesthetic rules of game worlds in order to avoid being easy to spot by enemy forces, advertising faction loyalties that could attract unwanted attention and to create what they perceive as intimidating appearances. Participants were mostly aware that the games and NPCs did not take the cosmetic attributes of avatars into account but found it fun to pretend and plan their avatars as if games were more aware than they really were.

Console avatars, whose customisable attributes are almost exclusively cosmetic, are associated with an Xbox user account or console and so have a longer persistent life cycle than in-game avatars. Perceived as a novelty, console avatars were used to mirror the real appearances and clothing tastes of participants. Console avatars were also the only instance of participants admitting to paying for premium DLC, in this case being items replicating the appearance of in-game armour and garments. This was sometimes done to stand out from friends who use Xbox Live or from a waste aversion triggered by small amounts of leftover virtual currency. These avatars fuse together participants' non-virtual characteristics with the elements of games they identify with and want to represent their fandom by incorporating into their account.

The results of this study therefore suggest that participants are often enticed into engaging with their avatar's appearance but there are several usability issues that must be overcome to help players use the tools presented to them. In the process of cosmetic customisation, participants can draw on many inspirations and intertextual references in order to envision the appearance-related goals of their projective identity. Despite low opinions of the importance of appearance customisation, many participants refused to accept the default

appearances of open-avatars claiming that it required little effort to make changes which helped them feel invested in an avatar along with the sense that they could do better.

10.1.3 Morality, ethics and the avatar

The third objective associated with the second aim (2.3) was to gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings that players assign to the morality and ethics of digital games.

RPG-playing participants described how their in-game moral and ethical choices (causing harm to NPCs by deception, stealing and killing and other problems) impacted on the growth and progression of their avatar, and how these consequences changed their play experience. RPGs often quantify a player's morality (e.g. *Fallout 3*, *Mass Effect*) so that a player's moral position in a game-world may be easily tracked and if necessary, manipulated in order to reach a level of influence or unlock access to abilities and equipment the player desires. Participants often took a utilitarian approach to ethical problems by basing their decisions on how the different quest outcomes would maximise the usefulness of their avatar against future challenges. As a result, participants were often reluctant to ascribe meaning to ethical dilemmas beyond them being opportunities to receive loot.

With regards to the projection of moral values, it was difficult for participants to articulate and disentangle how their own moral values interfaced with the possibilities offered by digital games. There does appear to be some transfer of moral values from participant to avatar with some participants finding it hard to dismiss certain elements of their moral codes although this varied depending on in-game context (e.g. whether NPCs are rude, aggressive, judged to be overly wealthy or belonging to an ill-favoured faction).

Some interviewees associated their difficulty in deviating from moral codes with their ability to easily empathise with NPCs or strong feelings concerning theft or deceit. Other participants developed strategies that easily allowed them to engage with the possibilities digital games offered. The day-to-day emotions of participants also influenced how much harm they viewed as necessary or enjoyable in goal formulation and accomplishment, with some acts of in-game violence contrived specifically for coping with class-room politics or to exorcise memories of a frustrating day. Participants were sceptical of any potential influence

that a game might have on their own character and behaviour in real life, although they acknowledged the time impact that it had on their daily lives.

The primary defence mechanism used by participants to avoid guilt over acts they would normally find troublesome was the dehumanisation of both friendly and enemy NPCs. Some participants regretted optional kills or not developing relationships with NPCs when they had the chance. There were also instances where developers managed to encourage participants to feel animosity towards NPCs or to make them seem inferior to the player's avatar guiding them towards feeling better about any eventual violence. Participants criticised developers for writing one-dimensional villains (e.g. The Replicated Man in *Fallout 3*) which served to simplify potentially complex moral dilemmas.

Certain dilemmas caused participants to question their own moral codes, leaving them struggling to figure out which response would be the most appropriate path to take and to look beyond utilitarianism. This begs the question "are ethically challenging games desirable?" and the answer for most participants was "yes" as they enjoyed ambiguity and challenging situations, even if the actual decision making process was difficult. The agency and burden of responsibility participants felt, particularly with decisions linked to treasured NPC companions, gave them the sense of real power over situations.

Presenting a dilemma with ambiguous consequences where the NPCs and factions have complicated motives and imperfect resolutions can make players question the min-maxing mentality they may have adopted. Players still can try to alleviate the difficulty of choosing an outcome by referring to paratexts for advance information on the narrative and further consequences of their actions, so there is no perfect solution for trying to encourage moral engagement when players are determined to survey information before they make a decision. Through the quantification of an avatar's moral position and by grouping actions under labels such as paragon, renegade, chaos, neutral, RPGs signposted the alignment of moral choices. This worked to remove the ambiguity for participants who interpreted these labels and moral position scales as evidence that they were doing the right or wrong thing.

The developer's influence over the formation of avatars was felt most keenly when participants were faced with a set of decisions or resolutions they would not support if given the choice, or interpreted some game features as promoting values and prejudices they did

not agree with. Participants did not give any other examples where they felt the values embedded in the game world were intrusive or interfered with their play style.

10.1.4 Narrative mechanics and the avatar

The fourth objective associated with the second aim (2.4) was to gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings that players assign to the role of narrative mechanics in the creation and maintenance of projective identities in digital games. This was accomplished through the analysis of participant accounts of interacting with NPCs (a process during which many of the decisions that influence the course of a game's narrative are made), along with participant strategies for identifying and pursuing the branches of non-linear narratives that were the most attractive. The most popular strategy was simply to reload to previous saves after exploring all possible options before making a final choice whilst some participants preferred to refer to walkthroughs.

The branching dialogue system was identified as one of the most common methods through which participants could interact with a game's embedded narrative. Although there is an element of choice to this system which can serve emergent narratives (depending on how tightly scripted a game is and the consequences of choices), participants' freedom of expression was generally limited to a small number of options. Participants criticised such systems for making interactions with NPCs feel like one-sided interrogations.

It is through linear cutscenes and branching dialogue systems sequences that players are presented with the goals of the embedded narrative originating from the avatar's virtual identity or from NPCs. Acceptance of these goals is not necessarily the key to enjoying a game, although it will help a player feel more connected with their avatar and virtual identity. For participants, being able to formulate their own goals, having the freedom to choose from a list of choices, and figuring out how to address a problem or quest was empowering. The current study's participants believed having the option of performing side quests gave them a pleasing degree of control in games where their avatar had a strong pre-defined personality and a relatively linear story (e.g. *Final Fantasy*).

The options and methods for interacting with NPCs are not only limited to dialogue and combat. The *Fable* and *Mass Effect* franchises made use of expressions and interrupts, the latter encouraged participants to make spontaneous decisions and to think outside of the

typical moral codes they employ in games. The implementation of expression systems for communicating with NPCs by gestures received mixed opinions: several participants enjoyed the freedom of being able to interact with NPCs in a manner other than the traditional branching dialogue systems but few participants considered gestures to be part of the core experience of the game (*Fable II*) due to the system rarely impacting on narrative goals. Conversely, when expressions were made a necessity for narrative progression during *Fable III*, the participants were annoyed by the repetitive and unskippable nature of the interactions with NPCs.

Expression systems have the potential to provide a different experience for players from branching dialogue systems but have benefitted from the same level of integration paired with optional usage with narrative goals. Neither expression or interrupt systems appear to be viable as replacements for traditional dialogue menus but can serve to augment the player's desires. Offering the player the option to dismiss a speech-making NPC with a silly gesture or violent interrupt would allow frustrations or boredom to be alleviated and extend the player's agency further in the game world.

This study also considered how participants developed and managed working and romantic relationships with NPCs. Some participants were committed to exploring the romance options, actively pursuing the NPCs they felt attracted to or judged were the best companion for their avatar. Participants responded to these features in different ways: establishing a relationship with NPCs represented just another achievement to some participants whilst others were curious about the extra step they could take in their relationship with NPCs. None admitted to developing the level of connection that other researchers have demonstrated can emerge between player and NPC companions⁵⁴¹. The writing and animations of conversations and sex options were labeled by participants as distractingly clumsy, making it difficult for participants to invest in the relationships beyond the level where they were exploring a novelty game feature.

10.1.5 Information practices and the avatar

The fifth objective associated with the second aim of the research (2.5) was to gain an in-depth understanding of the role of everyday information practices in the creation and maintenance of projective identities in digital games.

⁵⁴¹ Waern, Ref. 144.

Paratexts (including message boards, FAQs, walkthroughs, news sites, guide books) were a part of many participants' daily routine of immersing themselves in their gaming hobby. Through these paratexts they often felt connected to games and the associated fictional universes and were able to plan their in-game activities even when they did not have time to play. Through the daily monitoring of paratexts, actively searching paratexts to answer specific queries and discussing their in-game actions online or in-person, participants linked the progress of their avatars to their engagement with information sources.

Such paratexts provided participants with insights into the different avatar lifecycles possible in a game, from creation to the end of a main narrative, and can help promote ideas on the most effective ways to play or provoke experimentation with options and quest solutions. This study has shown that information practices in the gaming community are not just confined to reverse engineering MMO mechanics (theorycrafting); they are a vital part of how players anticipate the future demands on their avatars and overcome obstacles.

Even participants who played alone described their play styles and avatar customisations as being shaped by online and offline social interactions. Almost all participants were either members of gaming societies, surrounded by friends and housemates who gamed, or were in relationships with gamers. Participants were aware that conversations during breaks at work or at meet ups influenced how they chose to develop their avatars and which moral choices they were willing to make.

Some friends and couples playthrough games together. Participants also described scenarios where two players would complement each other in both having skills and understanding that the other lacked. They could combine their knowledge and interests to make one whole avatar while deriving satisfaction from different aspects of the game. For example, one player may prefer to manage the avatar's relationships with NPCs whilst the other may be more concerned with developing the combat skills of the avatar. There were also instances of having to negotiate which direction they want to take the avatar if they had conflicting opinions

In this study, the participants who played MMOs described competitive pressures that urged them to establish a reputation through impressing other players with game knowledge and to secure valuable equipment to improve their avatar. Participants who preferred single-player games were grateful that they did not have this aspect of MMO culture to contend

with and that they had the freedom to experiment without expectations of developing their avatar along the path that best serves a community. MMO playing participants also treated their single-player game avatars as a rest from community influence but some were concerned that they may be transferring their MMO optimisation mindset to single-player games. Retaining control over increasing immersion to paratexts and community influence was a source of concern for these participants, even though they derived great pleasure from following information sources and talking to friends about games.

It is worth noting that at the time of data collection (2010) certain gaming paratexts such as video Let's Plays produced by YouTube personalities were still in their infancy. As of 2013 the subscription numbers and views for gaming video content is higher than at the time of data collection. The choice of game-specific wikis has also expanded greatly, with each major release supporting several active wikis. If this study were to be repeated in 2013, participants would be expected to report more usage of wikis and Let's Plays as part of their enjoyment of digital games.

10.1.6 The avatar life cycle

The findings of this study inform a view of the avatar life cycle, the start of which is when the player begins to think about how they would like to play a game and start to conceive vague goals involving the aforementioned avatar systems. These goals may be informed by research using paratexts or sometimes creating trial avatars whose experiences will inform the direction of the player's 'proper' avatar and playthrough. The actual birth of an avatar is complete once a player finishes the process of opening customisation, putting their initial plans (if they have any) into action.

The early stage of avatar growth for an avatar is characterised by rapid development as players learn the basics of each avatar system and receive positive reinforcement for their actions. Players are rapidly receiving, formulating and accomplishing goals in response to the abundance of game content. Eventually the gaps between reinforcement become larger and goals take longer to achieve. By this stage the avatar is reaching maturity and the decisions that players make regarding attributes and ability structure may be fewer.

Participants indicated that the end of the avatar life cycle was heralded by goals and rewards being harder to achieve and becoming less frequent. The avatar may have reached a

maximum level in the players preferred skills for development and so there is less satisfaction associated with further development. This was particularly the case in open-world games when the game only ends when a player decides they have exhausted all enjoyment from the experience or in more linear games when players decide to trigger the final mission after becoming tired with side quests. Participants also associated a maximised avatar with a lack of challenge and a cessation or reduction in the previously steady stream of reinforcement that ultimately leads to extinction.

The process of quitting a game was sometimes drawn out by a participant's reluctance to leave a game world behind, and in MMOs this was exacerbated by the charms of community membership; one participant called this the "long goodbye." The extended process of saying goodbye to a game can be lengthened by the emotional attachment to items and the achievements they represent and desire not to invalidate achievements by leaving items behind. These participants did not necessarily forge emotional attachments to the avatars themselves, rather the set of affordances and items associated with avatars.

10.1.7 Paratexts, the community and avatar ownership

Through collection of rich accounts of avatar customisation this study demonstrates many different opinions and strategies for using systems that range from the chaotic and impulsive, to the carefully controlled and planned. The concept of projective identity has room for the player's own aspirations, the objectives of the developer as embodied in the avatar's virtual identity, but this research has shown that, as a project, the avatar extends far beyond the confines of the lone player and the boundaries of a game. Players are exposed to information from a variety of sources that influence how they view a game and its systems, as well as how they formulate their own long-term avatar development goals. The avatar is a focal point for all of the ideas its creator is exposed to through their information practices and social interactions with gaming communities.

Despite the collective pooling of knowledge each avatar can represent, participants did not credit their gaming friends and online sources for their in-game successes. Within self-established boundaries of what is considered acceptable levels of information to be exposed to, players are content to absorb a multitude of ideas, implement them and still claim ownership over their avatar. It was sometimes difficult for participants to recall where avatar development ideas came from, be it their own original tactics, from research or from

information volunteered by friends. The actual experiencing of achieving in-game goals was more important and memorable for participants than the particulars of who contributed specifically to their achievements. There were exceptions with participants who described instances of receiving too much information which ruined surprises and detracted from a sense of autonomous achievement, but predominantly the process of researching and discussing games was satisfying.

10.1.8 Concluding remarks

This study explored the experience of avatar customisation, highlighting the different avatar systems through which players transfer their values, likes and dislikes in response to the embedded values and design decisions of developers and the larger gaming community.

Though participants have tried to explain the reasoning for their choices, the many values and tastes manifested in-game and the link to non-virtual beliefs and behaviours is complex and difficult to untangle. The motivations for why participants make particular decision are complicated and vary depending on game, mood, company kept and on which point in the avatar life cycle they are. The projective identity formed as an avatar is developed can be the product of ideas from many sources; participants still felt ownership of their creations through the implementation of other players' tactics and achievement of their own goals. This research has also highlighted a selection of software usability issues and game design choices that have negatively impacted on participants ability to form a projective identity.

10.2 Limitations

The study might be criticised for having too small a sample, however, as an idiographic IPA study it does not aim for generalisation. The analysis of results and the employed themes are part of the researcher's interpretation; others might have seen different themes and patterns arising from the data.

Although one of initial aims for this study was to encompass experiences from a broad range of open-avatar games, the interviews and therefore the analysis veered towards avatars in RPGs rather than social simulators and sports games. Although participants were asked about their experiences in other genres, their playing time (or the playing experiences they wanted to talk about) was much more relevant for RPGs, strategy games and first-person shooters.

Having 30 participants is at the upper limit for the range of samples used in IPA studies⁵⁴². As a result, the analysis of each participant has not been as thoroughly written up as if using a small sample of 3 or 5 participants. Although this study has shown themes that have emerged at a group level (predominantly the different systems involved in avatar customisation) there were also themes that emerged at an individual level allowing for some exploration of how particular participants experienced games. Some of these themes remain unexplored in the analysis.

Another limitation is that this study relied on participants remembering and being able to articulate their experiences. Have participants remembered correctly when discussing games they played four years ago? For games as old as *Morrowind*, *Oblivion* or *Knights of the Old Republic* this study has discussed participants long-term memories of experiences and not the moment-to-moment annoyances or victories that were recalled for games such as *ME2* and *DA: O*.

This thesis lacks observations of gameplay which, coupled with interviews immediately after the sessions, would have helped to raise issues and record participants thoughts on their experience before they had chance to forget their motivations or reasoning. There are a few problems implementing this as by contriving a situation for participants to play in their behaviour may be altered so that they make choices they would not do normally. Having players think aloud may also change their reasoning and there is also no guarantee that participants would be able to remember their motivations after the observation session.

This thesis was initially determined to move beyond the field's preoccupation with virtual worlds and MMOs. Despite this, data has been collected that concerns avatars in MMOs and consequently more of the analysis and discussion is focused on multiplayer avatars than was initially envisioned. The benefit to this it has been possible to compare and contrast some of the different behaviours that participants have described between the two mediums but then, arguably, the space dedicated to MMO results could have been used to convey more detail on single-player games. This is largely a reflection of the nature of the data collection,

⁵⁴² Brocki, J.M. & Wearden, A. J. A critical evaluation of the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) in health psychology. *Psychology and Health*, 21(1), 87-108, <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14768320500230185>>, 2006, [accessed 01.08.12].

and not being able to anticipate how participants draw comparisons and connections between the experiences they have.

10.3 Future directions

This study has raised several questions that can be investigated with further research:

- A study where several players playthrough a single-player game together collaborating on an avatar in the process. The social interactions and decision making processes that occur can be studied in much more detail using observations and interviews. In addition to focusing on rich accounts of participants' gaming sessions, it would be beneficial to find out how many gamers do this regularly and which games in particular elicit this behaviour.
- The information practices of gamers require further investigation away from the confines of theorycrafting, power gamers, MMOs and 'cheating'. Players constantly receive updates from developers and news sites through social media and there are a range of information sources used by gamers to research and plan their gaming sessions. The extent to which gamers are relying on wikis, walkthroughs and Let's Plays is unclear so more work needs to be done in this area on the positive impacts of information usage and also on the possible negative impacts (such as the effect spoilers have on players' enjoyment of games).
- The attitudes towards avatar customisation in single-player games still need to be explored beyond this small group of participants and there are still many opportunities to perform qualitative data collection to gather opinions on the areas of customisation similar to the main categories raised in this study.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Literature search terms

Appendix 1.a - Literature search first stage search terms

First stage search terms			
Avatars	in	Single-player	Computer games
Player characters	and	Multiplayer	Video games
Projective identity			Digital games
Projection			
Identity			Role-playing games (RPG)
Phenomenology			First-person shooters (FPS)
Player experience			
Player strategies			
Avatar customisation			
The relationship between player and avatar			

Appendix 1.b – Literature search second stage terms

Second stage search terms			
Ethic/moral dilemmas	in	Single-player	Computer games
Moral management	and	Multiplayer	Video games
Non-player characters (NPCs)/relationships with			Digital games
Theorycrafting			Role-playing games (RPG)
Attributes/Spells/Abilities/Equipment			First-person shooters (FPS)
Reward systems			
Appearance customisation			
Narrative			
Information behaviour/practices/usage			
Paratexts			
Player goals			
Player motivations			
Choice			
Uncanny Valley			
Emotional response/investment			
Co-operation			
Guilds/Factions			
Role-playing			

Appendix 1.c – Databases, search engines, conferences, journals and professional magazines searched

Search engine	Databases	Academic/professional journals and magazines	Regular conferences
Google	Science Direct	Gamasutra (the online free version of Game Developer Magazine)	DiGRA
Google Scholar	Web of Science	Game Studies	Philosophy in computer games
	LISA	International Journal of Roleplaying	Role-playing in games
	Zetoc	Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture	Under the Mask
	ACM Digital Library	Games and Culture: A Journal of Interactive Media	
	ASSIA Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ProQuest)	International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations	
		Journal of Virtual Worlds Research	

Appendix 2: Interview schedule

1. Background

1. What are you doing at Loughborough University?/What's your occupation?

2. Gaming Literacy (warm up questions)

1. What are your earliest memories of gaming?

2. How would you describe your current gaming habits? (More or less than in the past?)

4. Do you game with friends? (What, when, time spent gaming with others versus alone)

5. Tell me about some of your most memorable gaming experiences.

6. Do you think you have ever been affected or influenced through playing computer games?
(to clarify: Perhaps in how you react to situations in everyday life, maybe it's had an impact on your education, relationships with others or your long term life goals)

If they haven't mentioned already answered the following during the course of the interview, ask them:

Is there one type of game that they like above all others?

Is there one particular game or franchise they hold in high regard?

3. Avatar development (also warm up questions)

1. Please tell me about some of the avatars/player characters you've customised in the past.

2. How do you think the avatars you build in one game compare to those in another game you have played?

3. What did it feel like to level up/get new equipment for your avatar/player character?

4. Have you changed the way you use avatars over time?

5. Can you tell me how you start out with a new avatar?

6. Could you compare for me what it's like to play with an avatar in a single-player game versus a multiplayer game? (or MMO/virtual world if they've played them)

7. Are there any things about developing an avatar/player character that you find satisfying?

Prompts to use: Can you tell me a bit more about that? What do you mean by #?

Avoid being over-empathic, manipulative or delivering leading and closed questions.

Specific examples: What did you want your character to be? or What did you want for your character?

How did you go about making this character?

Was it something you planned or did you take each decision as it came along?

Were you surprised by any quest outcomes?

Some game specific notes on choices:

Fable II

- Choices influence your characters appearance – mention delivering the Seal in place of Reaver – having the choice to sacrifice an unknown NPC to preserve your looks
- Gesture interaction system with NPCs
- Romance – side quest which can get you landed with a wife/husband
- Levelling up strategy – concentrate on one aspect or balanced them?
- House rental
- The final choice – sacrifice, love or wealth
- DLC – resurrected the dog and killed a villager?

Mass Effect 1

- Male or female?
- Paragon or Renegade – was neutral a viable position? Played both?
- Who survived Virmire?
- Romance options

Mass Effect 2

- Save game import – error with Conrad Verner
- Did Shepard’s appearance change?
- What choices do you remember making?
- Opinion on the ‘streamlined’ equipment system
- Recurring characters – did you remember who they were?
- ‘Interrupts’ – did you use them? Did they convince you to do some renegade/paragon actions?
- Romance
- Cerberus Network e-mails as a form of narrative closure from ME1 missions
- Rebel Geth – Legion’s personal mission - brainwash or destroy?

Fallout 3

- Perks – selection criteria
- V.A.T.S and appearance – was V.A.T.S used?
- Quest resolutions – Megaton, The Replicated Man, The Republic of Dave, Slavers, You Gotta Shoot Them in the Head, Final main story mission.

Oblivion

- Class and levelling system
- Factions – joined dark brotherhood?
- Completed main quest?

Appendix 3: Emergent themes

Appendix 3.a - Stats building (Attribute/ability/talent/perk management) and resource management

Stat-building is a colloquialism used by gamers to reflect the side of avatar development where they focus on building the numerical attributes of their avatars. This superordinate theme deals with how participants managed an avatars base statistics and abilities, and is a combination of two major themes put together due to close inter-relations between the avatar subsystems and the strategies of participants usually dealing with both systems at once. Many of the participants played role-playing or sports games where this management of base attributes was a common factor. A common theme was how participants went about optimising their avatars through the use of armour or other items.

Codes (either part of the resource management family or attributes/stats/ family)	Note	No. of participants	No. of quotes
Attributes/Abilities/Skills/Spells/Talents/Perks Management Supercode	Games are full of affordances, some of which can be improved through assigning ability or skill points. This is a supercode for the different aspects of these systems and strategies relating to them.	30	126
Attributes/Abilities/Skills/Talents/Perks reflecting real life	Where participants customised avatars either purposefully or subconsciously to conform to the abilities and skills they perceive themselves to have	8	10
Attributes/Abilities/Skills/Talents/Perks selection and monitoring	Attributes numbers which describe the extent to which an avatar possesses a characteristic such as strength – some participants described nurturing attribute development in certain ways	29	36
Attribute selection/monitoring – lack of strategy	For when participants described not wanting to formulate strategies for	13	17

	attribute selection or monitoring		
Class	Archetypes which may dictate the abilities/skills available to an avatar, which equipment they should aim for, which attributes to develop	29	63
Experience Points	A unit of measurement, experience points are collected in order to track the progress to the next avatar level.	10	21
Min-maxing	Optimising certain aspects of a build whilst neglecting others	24	38
Resource management supercode	Covers the management of different resource systems in games. Closely linked to the Attributes/Abilities/Skills/Spells/Talents/Perks Management supercode due to those systems consuming resources (though to a lesser degree than the equipment)	30	241
Currency	Accumulating and using in-game currencies	12	21
Equipment/Items/Loot - Favourite	Certain items became favourites for participants	6	8
Equipment/Items/Loot - Reflecting Morality/Ethics	Where items evolve to reflect moral/ethical choices	2	2
Equipment/Items/Loot – Selection Strategy	Why did people choose the equipment they did?	26	36
Equipment/Items/Loot (General)	Applied to general equipment/items/loot issues, often combined with other codes for more specificity	29	88
Min-maxing (shared between Resource Management supercode and the Attributes/Abilities/Skills/Spells/Talents/Perks Management supercode)	Optimising certain aspects of a build whilst neglecting others	24	38

Talent points	Talent points are often rewarded for levelling up and can be used to choose new talents/perks or to fortify existing investments	23	48
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Appendix 3.b - Appearance management

Code (All part of the “Appearance” supercode)	Note	No. of participants	Number of quotes
Appearance Management supercode	Supercode that contains all other codes relating to appearance management and mechanics.	30	173
Appearance (other)	For appearance quotes that did not fit into other codes	8	12
Attraction to certain appearance settings	Described some avatars appearances as “appealing” or “attractive”	14	17
Customisation	For all aspects of changing avatar appearance	30	92
Electronic Art’s Game Face	Mentions of this feature in EA games	2	2
NPC - Appearance	Feelings associated with the appearance of NPCs	6	8
Racism in character models	Some aspects of avatar appearance were flagged as racist by participants (does not include racism as a narrative device or factor in moral dilemmas)	2	3
Reflecting Morality/Ethics	Appearance of an avatar being linked to the moral/ethical choices of players	9	11
Reflecting a real appearance (self or otherwise)	Feelings that an avatar or NPC reminded them of themselves or someone they knew	19	23
Uncanny valley	Appearance being close to realism with something being slightly off/disconcerting for participants	4	5

Appendix 3.c - Moral/Ethical Management

Code (All part of the “Moral/Ethical Management” supercode)	Note	No. of participants	No. of quotes
Morality/Ethics Management supercode	Supercode that contains all other codes relating to moral/ethical management and mechanics.	30	471
(General)	A general code assigned to moral and ethical issues that did not fit in any of the following codes	12	14
For Achievements	Making choices/Doing tasks in a game for the achievements	10	13
Alignment	The orientation of the player/avatars moral compass	19	42
Alignment coercion by the game	Participants believed games sometimes employed methods of convincing them to pick certain alignments	6	13
Alignment in relation to real life	Participants often discussed how different or similar their choices in game were to their own values	29	32
Avatar continuity between games	For when players believed they were making the same moral/ethical choices over several playthroughs or between different games. This also refers to transferring entire avatars between games along with the narrative choices associated with it e.g. <i>Mass Effect</i>	14	19
Cheating	Participants had opinions on positive and harmful effects of cheating	17	33
Complexity/Shades of grey	When issues were perceived as being more complex than good or evil or outcomes were uncertain	15	19
Consequences (world reflecting user choices)	Feelings of their decisions having an impact on the world or gameplay	12	28

Consequences – don't go far enough	Feelings of their decisions not influencing the world or gameplay	13	17
Cruelty	Feelings that they were being encouraged to be cruel, or they enjoyed being cruel, or that the game was being cruel in some way	6	13
Evil choices being harder/better rewarded/or easier		9	13
Moral/ethical Experimentation	Trying out certain moral choices/narrative paths/ to test the outcomes	20	50
Good choices being harder/better rewarded/or easier		21	28
Killing	Feelings associated with the killing of NPCs or other players	29	62
Neutrality	The difficulties associated with remaining neutral in a game	12	15
Reward/goal based decisions/ Equipment/Items/Loot	Letting the prospect of material rewards dictate ethical/moral choices	19	41
Stealing	Feelings associated with stealing property	8	19

Appendix 3.d - Narrative Mechanics

Code (All belonging to the “Narrative mechanics” supercode)	Note	No. of participants	No. of quotes
Narrative mechanics supercode	Supercode that contains all other codes relating to narrative mechanics.	30	415
Avatar canon	When a participant had multiple avatars in one game, they occasionally referred to one as their ‘canon’ playthrough – that one had the storyline and decisions that mattered.	6	6
Avatar continuity between games	For when players believed they were making the same narrative choices over several playthroughs or between different games. This also refers to transferring entire avatars between games along with the narrative choices associated with it e.g. <i>Mass Effect</i>	9	11
Ending	The conclusion of the narrative of a game	12	17
Guild/Faction affiliation	Specifically, non-player character faction group affiliation	4	6
Narrative (General)		27	101
NPC Interactions - Dialogue	The verbal communication of NPCs	16	23
NPC Interactions - Gestures/Emotes	For non-verbal communication with NPCs	8	10
NPC interactions – NPCs and their character traits	For when participants described the character traits they perceived in NPCs	19	31
NPC interactions – NPCs with poorly received character traits	Some NPCs were perceived as racist, meglomaniacal, stubborn and dislikable for a variety of reasons. Participants discussed how these issues influenced their relationships with NPCs	13	18
NPC Interactions – Relationships	Developing working and personal relationships with NPCs	16	29

NPC Interactions - Repetition	Some felt talking to NPCs became too repetitious	3	9
NPC Interactions –Voice acting	NPCs are sometimes portrayed with voice work	14	25
Perceived importance of narrative in experience	Participants discussed how important they believed a narrative, or elements of a narrative to their digital game experience	25	42
Personality of the avatar’s character	Pre-defined personality elements of the character/avatar coming through	6	11
Quests	Some Participants discussed the impact of narrative threads called missions or quests.	17	47
Role-playing – Character backstory	Sometimes participants formulated backstories and goals based on these backgrounds for their avatars.	11	19
Story/dilemmas encouraging reflection outside of the game	When a narrative “stays with” participants	6	10

Appendix 3.e - Information practices

Code (All belonging to the “Information practices” supercode)	Note	No. of participants	No. of quotes
Actively seeking information	Searching out specific pieces of information	16	28
Advice/stories from friends influencing playthrough	When participants mentioned being influenced by how other people played or information that had been shared	8	12
Avoiding spoilers	Taking steps to avoid encountering spoilers	14	23
Before-avatar creation/planning	Information practices that occurred before starting an avatar	14	27
Encountering spoilers	How/when/why encountering spoiler information	24	35
General Research/Planning/Preparation	Descriptions of planning that took place after creating an avatar	18	24
Information overload	Information received negatively affecting player experience	12	19
Information practices supercode	Supercode that contains all other codes relating to information practices.	30	252
Information source/paratext	Specific sources of information mentioned	21	29
Inter-game knowledge	Knowledge that gamers think applies between games	12	14
Monitoring	Routine visiting of information sources/paratexts	10	11
Passively seeking	Information browsing without a specific purpose	9	13
Receiving information from others	Instances where participants were fed information by other people	13	17
Sharing information	Sharing information related to avatar development	17	23

Appendix 3.f - Gameplay

Code (All pre-fixed by "Gameplay")	Note	No. of participants	No. of quotes
Achievements	What participants thought to achievements	29	52
Camera perspective	The role the camera has in the player experience	6	7
Challenge	The difficulty of overcoming obstacles in game	12	26
Co-Levelled World	A game world that alters its challenges to reflect the growing strength of an avatar	4	6
Combat/fighting	General code applied to descriptions of feelings associated with combat modes	26	78
Exploration	Feelings of being able to explore an environment or world	7	21
Freedom (Linearity vs non-linearity)	Feeling that participants have a choice in deciding how their avatar progresses, or that they do not, also emergent narratives vs linear narratives	30	58
Grinding (dislike of)	Dislike of repetitive tasks	9	14
Learning/Mastery	Where players felt they were actively learning about and mastering a game	17	35
Localisation	The effects of international localization on the portrayal of characters/translations		
Mutual exclusivity	The selection of some choices preclude others	7	12
Progression/growth	Feelings related to the levelling up/growth of an avatar	27	69

Replaying/Replayability	Feelings that there are elements of avatar customisation that makes a player want to go through a game again	19	40
Saved games	Snapshots of a players progress through a game	15	35
Simplification of mechanics	Some participants felt that avatar customisation systems were being simplified over time, and in particular franchises	6	9
Social play - Collaboration	Making an avatar together	13	31
Social play – Spectator gaming	Passively observing a game with friends	5	8
Social play – Trolling	Using an avatar to get a reaction from other players	4	6
Social play (General)	Playing with other people in the room/over the internet	28	106
Usability/Accessibility issues/Bugs		13	27

Appendix 3.g - Gameplay preferences

Code (All pre-fixed by "Gameplay")	Note	No. of participants	No. of quotes
Beginning customisation	Opinions/testimonies relating to the act of creating avatars at the start of a game	30	79
Games that shouldn't have customisation		6	6
Games with disappointing customisation		12	15
Genre Expectations	Expectations held by participants relating to established genre mechanics	10	16
Goals (General)	Applied when participants described envisioning an outcome they want to achieve	11	21
Impressive customisation in a game		14	14
Priorities/prioritising (General)	Applied when participants described assigning different levels of importance to different aspects of avatar customisation	6	16
Rules/Personal standards	Rules that players hold themselves to	5	8
Time people are willing to spend on an aspect of customisation	When players specify a time	28	82

Appendix 3.h - Emotions/states

Code (All pre-fixed by "Emotion/State")	Note	No. of participants	No. of quotes
Anger/aggression	Strong feelings of anger/aggression or hatred in a response to game features	4	13
Boredom		8	8
Completionist/collecting compulsion	A compulsion towards finishing/collecting things in games	4	12
Confidence	Expressions of confidence and self-esteem in abilities	12	20
Emotion (Other)		4	16
Emotional investment/attachment to a character	Feelings of attachment or 'identification'	10	36
Fear		4	11
Fun	Scenarios or affordances described as 'fun'	17	46
Grief/melancholy	Unhappiness/reflectiveness inspired by the death of an NPC or other event	6	7
Guilt/regret	Expressing guilt over actions		
Humour	Scenarios or affordances that provoked humour	9	30
Immersion	Where players described being immersed, something causing immersion	19	33
Impulsive	When participants described their choices as being impulsive	4	7

Nostalgia	Looking back at a mechanic or game fondly, wishing it was still being implemented	5	12
Obsession/obsessive playing/Addiction	Thoughts of playing a particular game occurring or have occurred often	14	26
Pride	Taking pleasure from own achievements	9	19
Self-recognition/revelation	Feelings of having learnt something about themselves from games	7	10
Stress/Tension		6	9

Appendix 3.i - Other codes

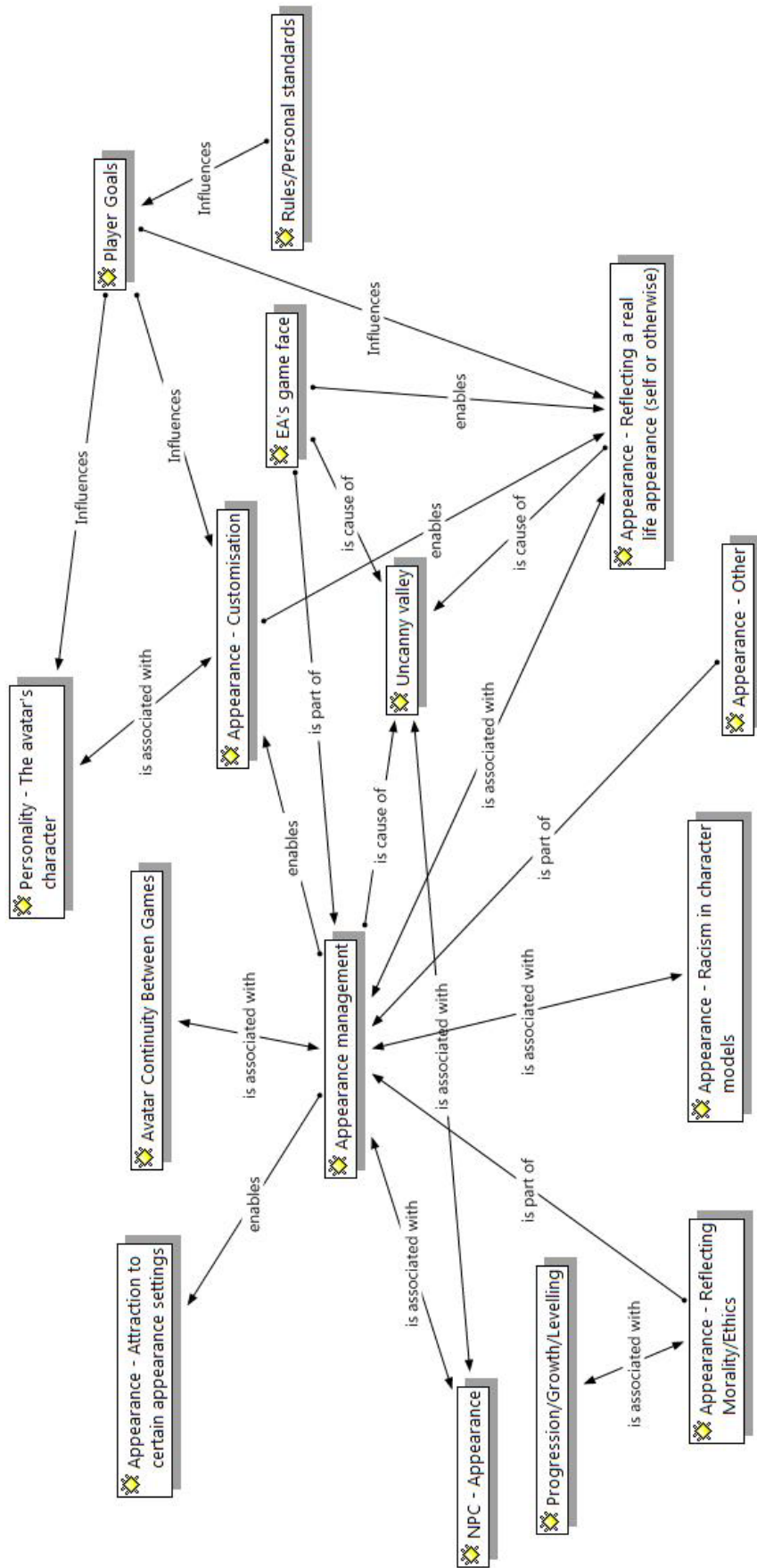
Code	Notes	No. of participants	No. of quotes
Achieving perfection	A motivation stated by some participants for their general conduct in a game	2	6
Character Consistency rewarded	Consistency in moral decisions creating rewards in terms of narrative progression/better abilities	7	11
Games encouraging experimentation	A general code for where participants felt that a system they were engaging with encouraged them to test different for different outcomes	8	18
Gaming as hobby	Participants mentioned how gaming figured in their lives, sometimes as their main hobby	5	9
Games escapism	When games were perceived as an escape from daily lives	7	7
Gender	For mentions of swapping genders through avatars, gender preferences, exploitative avatar/equipment models and other gender related issues	16	29
Genre	For mentions of game genres	26	46
Graphics	Where graphics influences a players feelings on their avatar or game world	12	20
J-RPGs vs Western RPGs	Participants highlighted differences between RPGs made in the West and the East and feelings associated with each	7	16
Managing risk	Feelings participants associated with the need to risk manage situations	9	15
Motivations – Character/options selection	A general code used to mark out where participants mentioned specific motivations behind a choice	28	124
			344

Politics	Where participants felt the game conflicted or gave an outlet for their political views	3	5
Projection	Applied whenever participants felt that they were projecting their real-life preferences into a game	17	40
Race		10	19
Realism (General)	Where participants believed realism either reinforced their experience or harmed it, or was not achieved	5	11
Religion		2	2
Sexuality	Where sexuality was portrayed negatively or positively according to participants	6	10
Transmedial/trans-game qualities of avatars	Where players believe that aspects of certain avatars carry over from game to game, or from medium to medium	9	15
Role-playing – Table-top	Comparing digital avatar experiences to role-playing in table-top games	18	67
Role-playing (General)	Participants trying to change their usual behaviour/create a distinct character that they play out	9	13

Appendix 3.j - Participant details and the impact of games on their real lives

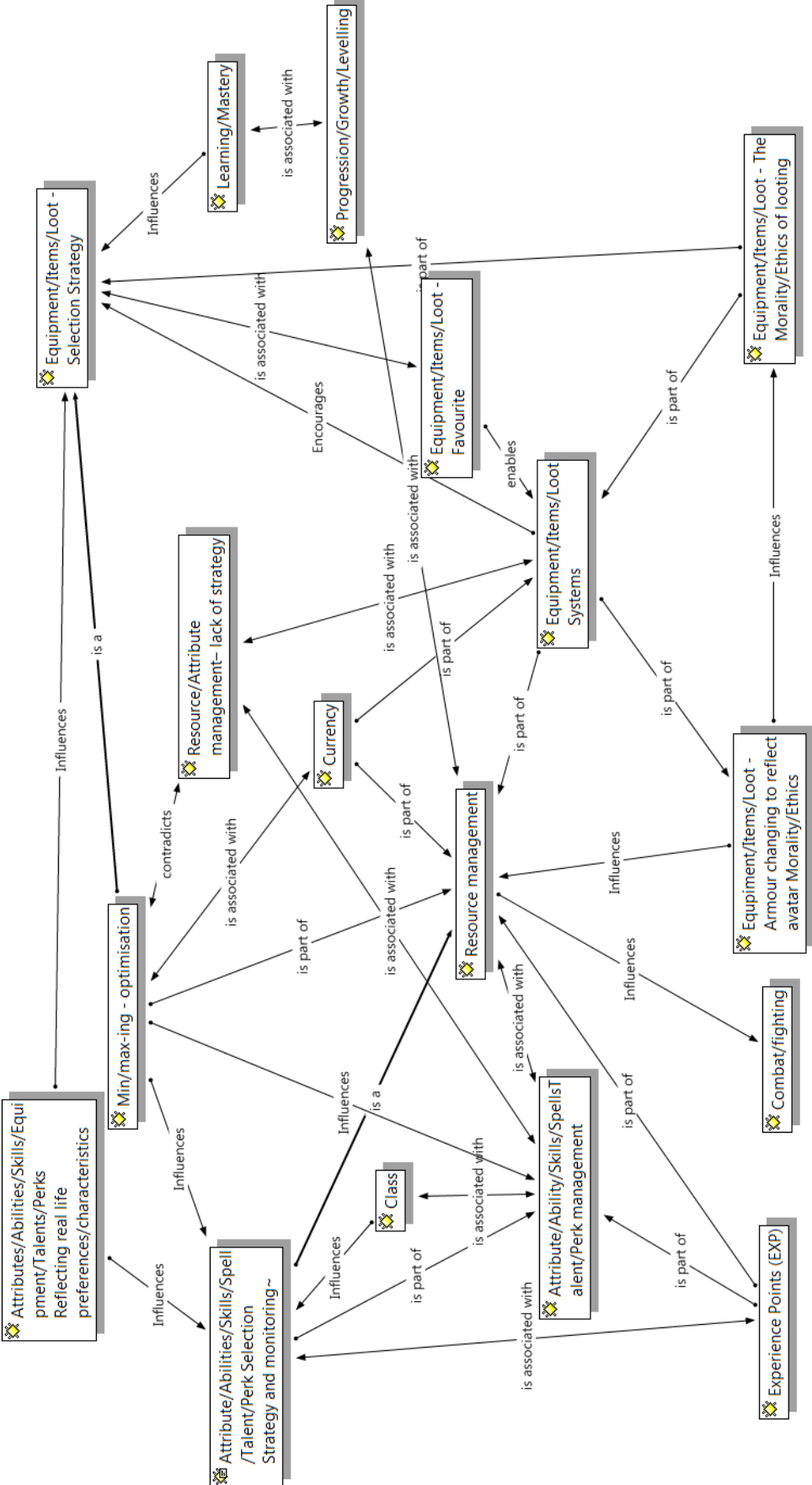
Code	Notes	Number of participants	Number of quotes
Participant Age		30	30
Participant background	Education, work, hobbies	30	41
Real-life relationships	Impact of real-life relationships on gaming habits/impact of gaming habits on relationships	19	20
Personality - real life (general)	Applied whenever participants compared/contrasted what they considered to be their own personality traits with what occurred in game	8	30
Impact on life	Applied when participants mentioned an impact on their real-life that games had	30	42
Earliest memories of games	The formative experiences of their gaming lives	30	34
Memorable moments	Parts of games that stand out in the memories of participants	29	29

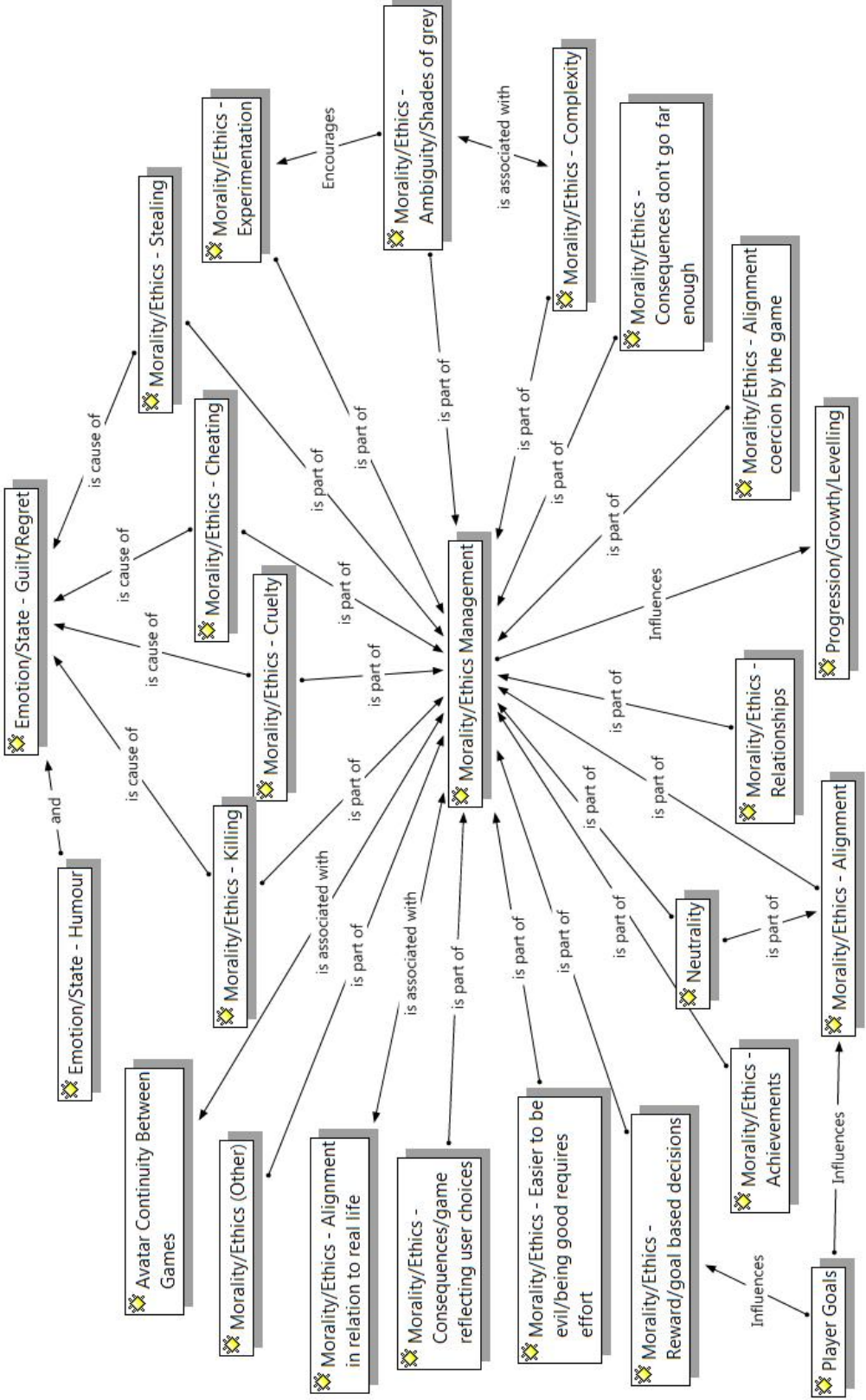
Appendix 4: Code relationship diagrams



Codes associated with the primary themes - Appearance management

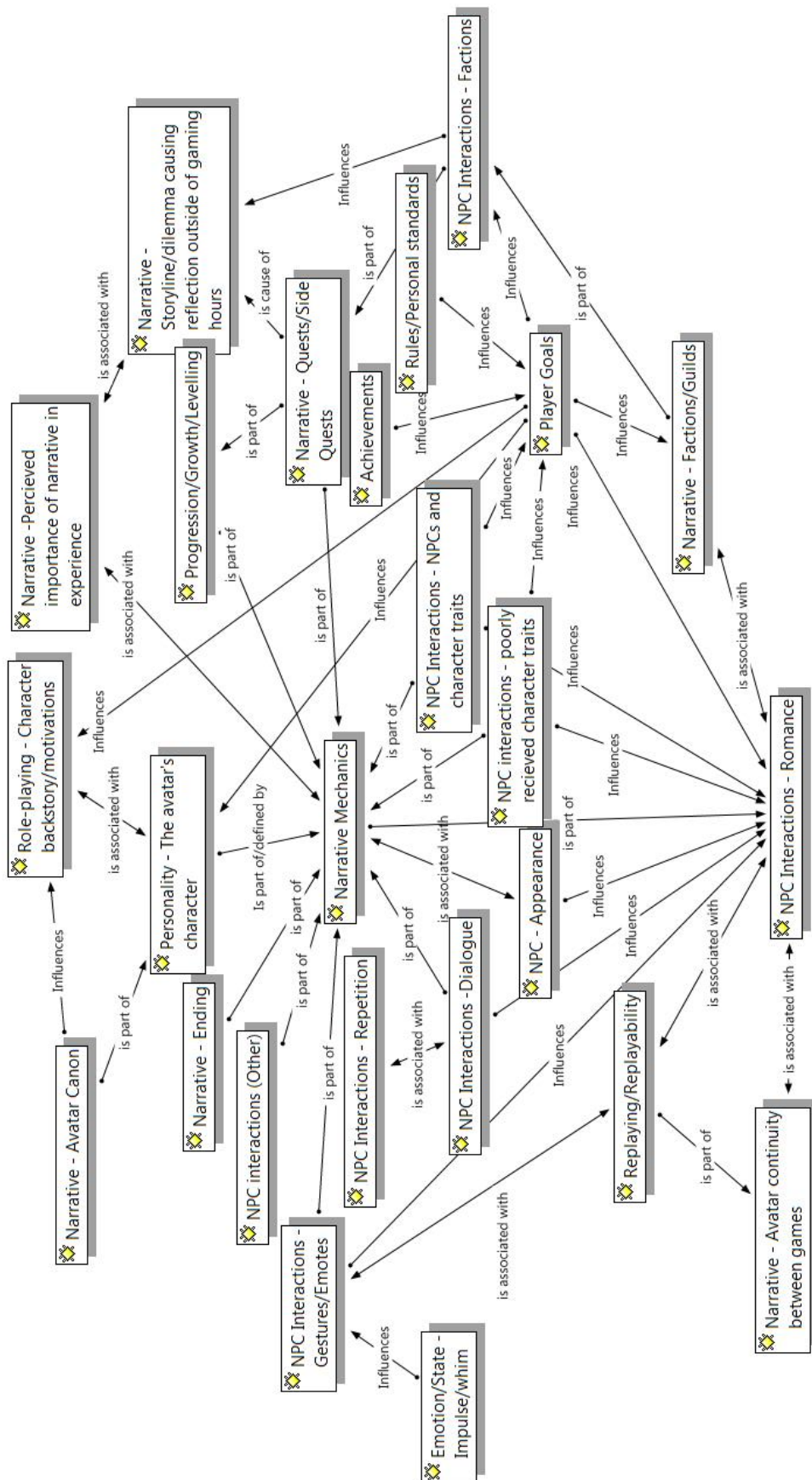
Stats-building and resource management





Moral/ethical management

Narrative mechanics



Information practices

