

HERE BE... DRAGONS?
A MICROETHNOGRAPHY OF SINGLEPLAYER CHARACTER CREATION
IN THE *DRAGON AGE* GAMES

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Abstract

In many video games, character creation is foundational to player experience; by configuring their character's appearance, abilities, and background, the player sets the conditions through which their subsequent gameplay will take place. Despite this significance, there is only a small body of multiplayer-based research that involves direct observation of the character creation process. Through a microethnographic study of eight participants' character creation and gameplay experiences in the *Dragon Age* series (BioWare, 2009–2024), I investigate how character creation unfolds in the underexplored context of singleplayer gameplay. Specifically, I ask how players and character creation interfaces (CCIs) interact to produce player characters (PCs)? And how do these custom PCs affect the ways players engage with and respond to singleplayer gameplay? Thematic analysis of the data revealed the significance of perception and social-material contexts in the character creation process as well as tendencies to use custom PCs as instruments of digital embodiment or sociodramatic expression.

Keywords: Character creation; microethnography; avatar; player character; affordance; media ecology; game studies; *Dragon Age*

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Figures	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
<i>Dragon Age</i>	2
Research Questions and Chapter Overview	3
Chapter 2: Literature Review	8
Actor-Network Theory and Place-Thought	8
Studying Digital Character Creation	10
Player–PC Relationships	13
Sociocultural Implications of Player–PC Relationships	21
Summary	24
Chapter 3: Methodology	26
Study Foundations and Design	26
Overviews of Participant Sessions	36
Summary	44
Chapter 4: Themes in Character Creation	46
Contextual Conditioning of Participant–CCI Interactions	46
Support and Challenge in Participant–CCI Interactions	53
Alternative Uses for Character Creation	68
Summary	72
Chapter 5: Themes in Player–PC Relationships	74
PCs: What are They Good For?	74
Avatars: Instruments of Embodiment	75
Characters: Instruments of Expression	85
Overlaps and Changes in Participant–PC Relationships	94
Patterns in the Characteristics Assigned to PCs	96
Summary	101
Chapter 6: Conclusion	103
Answers to the Research Questions	103
Directions for Future Research	106
References	112

Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Advertisement Posted to Discord Servers.....	124
Appendix B: Copy of “Information for Potential Participants” Google Doc	125
Appendix C: Interview Scripts.....	130
Appendix D: Copy of Gameplay Log Template Sent to Participants.....	132

List of Figures

Figure 1. CCI prompt that appears if the player attempts to create a casteless dwarf without a facial tattoo.....	24
Figure 2. Participant information chart.....	31
Figure 3. Examples of codes with excerpts	36
Figure 4. Participant 7 PC in the CCI.	60
Figure 5. View of Origins voice options.....	63
Figure 6. First screen of Inquisition’s CCI.	67
Figure 7. Killing of the scout..	84
Figure 8. Arby “The Meathead” McDonald.	91
Figure 9. Side-by-side screenshots of my PC and Participant 7’s PC.	101

Chapter 1: Introduction

If you have ever spent an embarrassing amount of time fine-tuning jaw width—and are not in the business of reconstructive surgery—then you probably know the importance of character creation in digital games. Likewise, if you have ever confirmed your choice of jaw width or hair colour or eye shape only to find that it just doesn't look quite right in the gameworld, then you know how annoying it can be when character creation options are lacking or poorly communicated. Far from being a seamless process in which the player projects their intentions onto the character creation interface (CCI), character creation is a messy negotiation of possibilities. In some instances, character creation may largely conform to a player's expectations, but it can also surprise, frustrate, and even delight. These experiences have given rise to phenomena such as the web series *Monster Factory*, in which the hosts seek out the most ridiculous possible outcomes in different CCIs for their audience's entertainment (Polygon, 2018), or the standalone release of CCIs to drum up interest in games themselves, as with such highly anticipated games as *Dragon's Dogma 2* (CAPCOM, 2024) and *Dragon Age: The Veilguard* (BioWare, 2024). Whether it involves a tweak of the jaw, a change of gender, or a total shift in starting abilities, character creation has been taken up in many areas of gaming culture as an important part of digital play; this is in no small part because the outcomes of character creation set conditions for the player's subsequent engagement with the game. Though some cosmetic features of the player character (PC) may be changeable throughout certain games, in general, the characteristics and potentials a player selects for the PC at this early stage stay with them for their entire playthrough.

Despite the significance of character creation, there have been relatively few ethnographic studies of the character creation process. Further, among those studies where

researchers observe the character creation process, the multiplayer context is predominant (Kafai et al., 2010; Isaksson, 2012; Jenson et al., 2015; McArthur, 2015). Such studies largely focus on how created PCs figure into interactions between players in these gameworlds; to date, there has not been a similar series of studies that directly observe how players create PCs in singleplayer games and what purposes those PCs serve. This is a significant gap because, as Stenros and Sihvonen (2020) and Smith (2025) note, singleplayer gameworlds afford opportunities for kinds of play with PCs that the presence of other players might complicate, threaten, or simply overshadow. This thesis aims to address that gap through a microethnographic study of character creation and gameplay encounters between eight participants and games from the *Dragon Age* series (BioWare, 2009–2024).

Dragon Age

Developed by BioWare and published by Electronic Arts, *Dragon Age* is a singleplayer digital roleplaying game (RPG) series that includes four main installments: *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009), *Dragon Age II (DAII)* (2011), *Dragon Age Inquisition* (2014), and *Dragon Age: The Veilguard* (2024). Each game sees the player control an individual custom PC as they assemble a party of companions, go on violent adventures, and make complex political and ethical decisions to address threats to the fictional continent of Thedas. Most importantly for this study, each *Dragon Age* game has its own idiosyncratic approach to character creation. Though each game presents the player with the same choice between three gameplay classes—mage, rogue, and warrior—other customization parameters markedly differ between installments. For example, *Origins* (2009) allows the player to choose the sex, fantasy race, and sociocultural background of their PC, while *DAII* (2011) only preserves the choice of sex, as the PC must in all cases be a human whom other characters call "Hawke." *Inquisition* (2014) restores the player's ability to

choose the PC's race but not their sociocultural background, while *Veilguard* (2024) adds a factional allegiance choice and the option to create transgender and nonbinary PCs. That the series has such varied approaches to character creation presents a unique opportunity to compare how players might interact with different CCI designs, as the general themes and aesthetics of the series remain the same even as the availability and structure of their CCI options shift. I would note here that while there has been much excellent scholarship on the *Dragon Age* games (Pelurson, 2018; Multanen, 2021) including textual analyses of its character creation systems (McArthur et al., 2015; Iantorno & Consalvo, 2023), this is a study *with* these games much more than it is a study *of* them. My main goal is not to make arguments about *Dragon Age*, but rather to use my participants' interactions with these games and their CCIs as examples of how character creation might unfold in a singleplayer context.

Research Questions and Chapter Overview

Building on Seth Giddings's (2009) "Glossary for the Microethnography of Video Game Play," I approach character creation as an encounter primarily between two agential parties: the player and the CCI. From this premise, I articulate the following questions to guide this research:

- 1) How do players and character creation interfaces interact to produce player characters?
- 2) How do these custom player characters affect the ways players engage with and respond to singleplayer gameplay?

Using data from participant sessions as well as my own play experiences, I provide tentative answers to these questions that point to a need for more ecological approaches to character creation. By ecological approaches, I mean models of character creation that treat each component of a media system as "a pattern rather than simply as an object" (Fuller, 2005, p. 4), wherein the meaning and functions of each component is contingent on the other components to

which it is articulated. Ecological approaches to character creation would thus acknowledge the agency of the multiple parties within the character creation encounter, the influence of the social-material context in which the encounter takes place, and the variety of functions that character creation may serve depending on factors such as agency and context. Below, I provide an overview of the chapters that comprise this thesis and its arguments.

In the next chapter, Chapter 2, I review four key areas of scholarly literature that this research draws upon. First, I note the frequent use of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as a framework to support microethnographies of digital gaming; without discounting the insights of these studies or the utility of ANT, I argue that Indigenous Place-Thought (Watts, 2013) is better equipped to address the agency of nonhuman actors in gaming encounters. I then discuss existing ethnographic studies of character creation and how they inform this research, with specific emphasis on McArthur's (2015; 2018) studies of CCI affordances. To explain how character creation can affect subsequent gameplay experiences, I also consult literature on player-PC relationships and present a novel distinction between the terms "avatar" and "character" based on functions that a custom PC can perform for the player within the gameworld. Lastly, I look at scholarship about the potential social and cultural affects of player-PC relationships, focusing on Nakamura's (1995) concept of identity tourism as it relates to the creation and appropriation of an identity in a singleplayer gameworld.

In Chapter 3, I explain the methodological foundations of this research. I begin by reviewing different approaches to microethnography within game studies and position my research as part of a semi-formal, constructivist strain of microethnography modelled off work by Giddings (2009), Taylor et al. (2015), and McArthur (2015), among others. I also touch on a secondary methodology, autophenomenography (Allen-Collinson, 2011; Witkowski, 2018),

through which I supplement participant data with my own situated, sensory experiences of the *Dragon Age* games. The rest of the chapter goes over the design and events of the study. In brief, I recruited eight participants through postsecondary Discord gaming servers and my personal networks. Each participant sat for a semi-structured interview about their prior character creation experiences before playing the first 90 minutes of a *Dragon Age* game of their choice, concluding with a debrief interview about the participant's creation and play experiences. I reviewed the resulting data through qualitative coding and thematic analysis; before delving into emergent themes in the following chapters, I also provide brief summaries of each participant's interviews and gameplay.

Chapter 4 directly addresses the first research question: how do players and CCIs interact to produce PCs? I identify three themes in answer. First, participants relied on their social-material context to navigate their interactions with CCIs, as cultural discourses, player communities, and the nature of the study environment and equipment all figured prominently in player-CCI interactions. Second, interactions with CCIs supported or challenged participants' initial approaches to character creation. Whether a participant was supported or challenged in any moment of character creation largely depended on the affordances they perceived in the CCI. By affordances, I refer to the "action possibilities offered by a tool, environment, or user interface" (McArthur et al., 2015, p. 233). When it came to character creation, the action possibilities of concern for participants included "does this CCI let me play as a PC who resembles me?" and "does this CCI let me play as an attractive PC?", among many others. Interestingly, the affordances participants found in the *Dragon Age* CCIs were not always simple reflections of their design functions; they were also conditioned by factors such as the way CCIs presented those functions as well as how players interpreted and reimagined various options

within the CCIs. The third theme is that participants sometimes discussed engaging in character creation for reasons that were largely unrelated to gameplay opportunities. For example, one participant mentioned that they enjoy character creation so much that they often lose interest in games shortly after creating their PC, while another participant discussed downloading a free game and using its CCI to help them visualize characters for their personal writing projects.

Chapter 5 addresses the second research question: how do custom PCs affect the ways players engage with and respond to singleplayer gameplay? Again, three themes proved instructive. I found that participants tended to use the PCs they created for purposes of embodiment and/or expression; I map these different uses for the PC onto the terms “avatar” and “character,” drawing on the distinction I articulate in Chapter 2. In my discussion of this theme, I describe various forms of avatar and character relationships that I observed in the research, which were less discrete and stable types than temporary “affiliative states” (Taylor et al., 2015). Though participants tended to strive for a particular relationship state—often using character creation to lay the groundwork for said state—circumstances inside and outside the gameworld would often push participants into other affiliative states that were likewise temporary and contingent on external factors. This dynamic led me to formulate the second theme: participant–PC relationships may overlap and shift over time. Though some of these changes appeared to be unconscious or at least unintentional, some participants also specified the circumstances that for them would lead to one state of affiliation over another. Lastly, I noticed that participants displayed different attitudes towards the social characteristics of their PCs, including race, gender, and socioeconomic class. Though at least one of these qualities seemed important in each participant–PC relationship, which quality or qualities were important varied between participants. Further, in addition to its significance as a parameter for customization in itself,

gender regularly figured as a general navigational device through which players made judgements about which other qualities to assign their PCs.

Chapter 6 concludes this thesis with a summary of my exploratory answers to the two research questions and an outline for future research on character creation. I argue that since participants drew on resources both inside and outside the CCIs to create their PCs, and since participants used their custom PCs for diverse purposes that sometimes stretched outside the gameworld, future research should adopt a media-ecological orientation towards character creation. This does not mean that scholars must engage with every possible use of character creation at all times—in fact, I argue just the opposite. Scholars could be specific with regard to the context in which their character creation research takes place as well as the contexts to which it is most applicable. For example, character creation *may* be the practice of creating an avatar to represent the player in a networked game space, as so many studies describe it (Pace, 2008; Ducheneaut et al., 2009; Yee et al., 2011; McArthur, 2018), but it does not need to be so. That common picture depends on a variety of circumstances that are by no means universal to every instance of character creation; the function and meaning of character creation may be entirely different depending on the specific mix of player intent, CCI design, and various contextual factors. To help chart a broader ecology of character creation than is currently reflected in game studies scholarship, my conclusion suggests directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This microethnography revolves around two key questions: how do players and character creation interfaces (CCIs) interact to produce player characters (PCs)? And how do these custom PCs affect the ways players engage with and respond to singleplayer gameplay? In this chapter, I review the literature necessary to explore these questions. I begin with a brief summary of the theoretical frameworks that underpin this research. Then, I discuss key works that have helped define the current scholarly understanding of character creation, player–PC relationships, and their potential sociocultural impacts. The purpose of this discussion is to situate my research in the disciplinary context that it draws from and to which it aims to contribute.

Actor-Network Theory and Place-Thought

In articulating his approach to microethnographies of digital gaming, Giddings (2009) argues that one cannot conduct a microethnography with a clear delineation between method and theory. For Giddings, microethnography is a "synthetic approach" that examines the interactions and overlaps between video games, gameplay, and game players (p. 147). He suggests the gaming microethnographer should not measure these subjects against an a priori theoretical framework and instead develop a theoretical framework through the interactions they observe. That said, in assuming that nonhuman actors exercise agency alongside humans to produce the gameric phenomena under study, Giddings's approach to microethnography draws from the foundational premises of Actor-Network Theory (ANT). As Latour (1996) explains, ANT studies how social phenomena are produced by and productive of relationships between actors in a network. The premises that actors can be "human or unhuman" and are "infinitely pliable" (Latour, 1996, p. 379) have been especially useful for scholars studying how actors in gameric networks produce affects and events through their interactions. Giddings himself acknowledges

Latour's influence on his approach to microethnography, and several other scholars who conduct ethnographic and microethnographic studies of digital play have likewise cited Latour in their analyses (Taylor et al., 2014; Banks, 2015; McArthur, 2015).

By conducting a microethnography, I adopt many of ANT's premises about the agency, pliability, and inherent relationality between actors in play networks. Yet, as the Anishinaabe-Haudenosaunee scholar Vanessa Watts (2013) makes clear, a majority of Turtle Island Indigenous peoples theorized sociality as involving human and nonhuman relationships countless generations before Latour formulated his theories. I acknowledge this to respect the often-ignored role Indigenous knowledge has played in shaping "Western" thought and to address key issues that Watts identifies in ANT and other posthuman theoretical orientations. Specifically, Watts argues that these orientations habitually relegate nonhumans to a level of agency subjugated beneath humans and that their emphasis on network mutability leads them to overlook or even deny fixed responsibilities between peoples and other actors, such as lands. Drawing from Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee cosmologies, Watts forwards Place-Thought as a framework that, in contrast to Western posthumanist theories, situates human and nonhuman actors on an equal playing field. Far from a metaphor, this playing field is anchored in the physical world; the central premise of Place-Thought as explained by Watts is that all beings, whether human or nonhuman, derive thought and agency from living lands. While lands differ from place to place, they always provide the foundation for interactions between the human and nonhuman beings that inhabit them.

Drawing on the strengths of Place-Thought is critical as I examine networks of interaction within and around the *Dragon Age* games. While it is often easy to view digitally rendered environments as disconnected from physical place, games studies scholars have

illustrated that the production and play of digital games are affected by the places in which those processes occur (Harvey, 2015; Bulut, 2020; Hammar, 2020; Taylor, 2024). The *Dragon Age* games were developed in Amiskwaciwâskahikan/Edmonton using physical and social resources taken from the land and its Indigenous inhabitants through colonization, while the series has primarily been marketed towards English-speaking audiences in settler-colonial states and imperial metropolises. These colonial origins are readily apparent in the narrative and aesthetic coding of different aspects of the *Dragon Age* gameworld, and in later chapters I consider how these colonial themes affect player–CCI interactions. Analysis that considers my own play experiences also accounts for the relationships that shape my position as a cisgender white male settler and longtime *Dragon Age* enthusiast from Edmonton. Place-Thought reveals the ever-present influence of land on interactions between human and nonhuman actors, which is sometimes overlooked in studies of gaming that rely primarily on ANT. While I still utilize insights from many of these prior studies and from ANT itself, neither I nor those who have used ANT before me would be able to do so without the Indigenous cosmologies that, in many ways, provide more comprehensive frameworks for analyzing social phenomena.

Studying Digital Character Creation

Though there is a wealth of scholarship on relationships between players and their PCs that spans multiple decades (Newman, 2002; Giddings & Kennedy, 2008; Banks, 2015; Fickle & Patterson, 2022), CCIs and player interactions with them remain relatively under-researched. Among the few observation-based studies of character creation currently published, researchers tend to privilege human actors and their goals over CCIs and their agency. For example, Grann (2021) engaged participants in a character creation exercise to better understand how creation supported their self-discovery and personal growth through play, while Isaksson (2012) observed

and interviewed participants as they created PCs to determine what they prioritize in creation systems and why. Though these studies are valuable, they do not explicitly explore the agency that CCIs exercise in character creation. Such exploration is necessary given the significance of character creation for how players receive and experience many games. Not only is character creation usually the player's first complex in-game interaction, but CCIs may also be released and reviewed separately from the full game (Gould, 2024; Henley, 2024), meaning that character creation can condition player engagement even outside the game itself.

A notable example of empirical character creation research that acknowledges CCI agency is McArthur's (2015) study of how CCIs influence practices of self-representation in digital gaming environments. I draw several tools and terms from McArthur's work, such as the term CCI itself and her insights on the role of affordances in technological agency. Using Gibson's (1979) foundational articulation of affordances as the action possibilities provided by a given environment, McArthur argues that CCIs are environmental actors that co-construct with players through the action possibilities embedded by designers. I support McArthur's argument concerning CCI agency and observed dynamic co-construction between players and CCIs in my microethnographic research, as participants often adapted their initial vision for their PC to take advantage of unexpected affordances or compensate for the lack of an expected affordance within a CCI. However, I would complicate McArthur's conception of affordances as design functions by drawing on Nagy and Neff's (2015) conception of "*imagined* affordances," a term that they argue better captures the crucial role of affect, perception, and imagination in user interactions with digital technologies. The idea of an imagined affordance emphasizes three things: users can only act through an affordance if they perceive it; users may imagine affordances for a technology that were not envisioned by its designers; and technologies can act

on the perception and imagination of users. If we are to realize the full extent of McArthur's claim that CCI's act and co-construct PCs with players, then we must acknowledge the potential within technologies to influence user imagination *and* the potential for users to imagine new uses for the technologies they are given. CCI's can thus be said to co-construct PCs through designed affordances that act upon players and influence what they perceive as possible or desirable, while players in turn imagine new affordances within a CCI.¹

Most observation-based studies of character creation have exclusively utilized multiplayer games (Kafai et al., 2010; Isaksson, 2012; McArthur, 2015; Turkay & Adinolf, 2015; Jenson et al., 2015). By contrast, the games I use here are singleplayer. This is a significant difference because the processes of character creation in these prior studies may have been influenced by considerations particular to the immediate visibility of PCs within multiplayer environments. These considerations include frequent hostility in player communities towards nonwhite or queer presenting PCs (Nakamura, 1995; Condis, 2018), expectations that a PC should match the player's offline appearance (Valkyrie, 2017), a need to stand out in a crowd of other PCs (Ducheneaut et al., 2009), and more. These considerations do not at all diminish the validity of those prior studies, and indeed, some of these studies explicitly investigate how player-to-player interactions influence character creation and vice versa (Kafai et al., 2010; McArthur, 2015; Jenson et al., 2015). However, this does mean that insights generated through those studies may not be universally applicable to character creation in singleplayer games, which Stenros and Sihvonen (2020) note have unique affordances for private experimentation with digital bodies and identities. My research explores the unique dynamics and considerations

¹ For specific examples of how CCI's can exert agency through designed affordances or a lack thereof, see accounts of the character creation experiences of participants 1 and 2 on pp. 61-65. For examples of how players can imagine new affordances in a CCI, see the experiences of participant 1 on pp. 61-63 or Smith's (2025) study on how nonbinary players circumvent restrictive, designed gender affordances using imagination.

that factor into the relatively private and heretofore under-observed context of singleplayer character creation.

Player–PC Relationships

Characters versus Avatars

Approaches to player–PC relationships often differ not only in how they model the nature of these relationships, but also in how they portray the significance of player–PC relationships to gameplay experiences. As I engage with these models, I must also grapple with an issue of terminology. Several of the scholars I cite here refer to what I call "PCs" as "avatars," and the "player–PC relationship" as the "player–avatar relationship." In academic scholarship and casual parlance, the terms "avatar" and "character" or "player character" often refer to the same digitally rendered agent whose actions are guided by the player. As such, works that refer to avatars are generally applicable to this research. However, even though the terms refer to the same digital agent, they discursively prioritize different aspects of that agent. Klevjer (2006) delves into this distinction, arguing that the "avatar" is the set of digital capabilities the player manipulates as a game piece, while the "character" refers to a diegetic persona that may be associated with a game piece, but which exists independently of the player and the capabilities they take on through the avatar. Klevjer's distinction has been taken up in other scholarship on the 'player-agent,' to use a more neutral term. For example, Vella (2016) proceeds from Klevjer's distinction to sketch the semiotic structures through which players are given information about the "character" associated with the "avatar" they control, using the predefined player agents of *Gone Home* (Fullbright, 2013) and *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) as case studies.

As useful as Klevjer's distinction is in many contexts, it is ill-suited to discussions of player-agents in most digital RPGs.² I say this for two reasons: elements that define the player-agent as a game piece in RPGs are often inseparable from those that define their associated personality; and those elements are often player-determined, meaning they are not wholly "given" to the player as in those processes of characterization described by Vella. Therefore, I advance a related yet novel distinction between characters and avatars specific to contexts involving character creation, wherein each term corresponds to a different way of relating to the created player-agent. Specifically, "characters" refer to those agents whom the player uses for expression, whereas "avatars" are those agents whom the player uses for embodiment.³ To better articulate this distinction, I briefly look to genealogies of each term's use in the gaming context.

De Wildt et al. (2020) describe how Anglophone tech culture appropriated the term "avatar" from Hindu theology, where it describes an "object of worship and the manifestation of divinity that descends on earth" (p. 964). The purpose of this appropriation, they suggest, was to advertise the exotic, embodied experiences a player might access inside the realms of digital gaming. Applied in contexts of extensive customization, I argue that the term "avatar" should refer to an agent that the player creates to serve as an embodiment of themselves within the gameworld. This is similar to Klevjer's (2006) description of the avatar as a kind of prosthesis, yet the created avatar can be much more than a conduit for the player's agency inside the gameworld. When I say the created avatar is an embodiment of the player, I mean to say that they approach the agent as another self; this may mean they view the actions of the agent as their

² Klevjer himself admits this, saying that "one of the defining features of the prosthetic avatar is that it does *not* depend on role playing or character customisation" (p. 14).

³ This distinction is similar to one articulated by Bayliss (2007) in that it treats "avatar" and "character" as distinct ways of relating to the player agent. The difference between our distinctions is that where Bayliss connects avatars with ludic activity and characters with narrative activity, the tendencies of embodiment and expression I describe may have both ludic and narrative significance.

own, that they perceive things done to the agent as being done to them, and/or that they see themselves represented in the agent's appearance. The term "character," by contrast, should refer to an agent that the player creates for purposes of expression. Again, a look to the word's origins is instructive: "character" derives from the Ancient Greek *kharakter*, which referred first to a tool for stamping and then to the stamp itself (Blom, 2022). A player may create an agent to serve as an expressive character/*kharakter* in a number of ways. For example, they might create an agent that helps them perform a particular dramatic role within the games diegesis (Linderoth, 2005; Stenros & Sihvonon, 2020) or by creating a character to serve as a prop in interactions with others co-situated around the play environment (Linderoth, 2005). These are just two of several different ways a player might use their agent as an instrument of expression or even an expression in itself. In such instances of expression, the agent is something *of* the player but is not perceived as the player themselves.

This character/avatar distinction can complement typologies of specific player-agent relationships, such as Banks's (2015) influential description of four archetypal "player-avatar" relationships: avatar-as-object, avatar-as-me, avatar-as-symbiote, and avatar-as-other. Through interviews and cooperative play sessions with 25 players in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004–Present), Banks connects each of these archetypal relationships to a certain playstyle. She found that those who viewed their agents as objects or tools tended to play for competitive achievements, for example, while those who related to their agents as fully-formed 'others' tended to seek immersive play experiences within the gameworld's diegesis. When I speak of the avatar relation as one of embodiment and the character relation as one of expression, I do not intend for these relations to replace these archetypes, nor do I situate those relations as complementary archetypes. Instead, they are base-level relations through which the player

constitutes their customized agent as a character or an avatar that may then become a party to one of these specific relationship types. When I describe the details of the relationships participants enacted with their PCs in Chapter 5, I present these relationships through my character/avatar distinction. This means I would describe what Banks calls an “avatar-as-other” relationship as a relationship of character performance, wherein the player expresses themselves through a dramatic persona that exists somewhat outside their sense of self. When referring to player agents in the abstract, i.e. when I am not describing a specific relationship or moment of gameplay, I continue to use the abbreviation “PC.” I privilege the term “character” in this way because the process at the centre of this research is generally known as character creation.

Instruments of Engagement

As my distinction between characters and avatars suggests, players generally interact with their agents with the intent to *do* something in or through the gameworld. Newman (2002) places a similar premise at the heart of player–PC relationships in his critique of “representation-oriented approaches” that neglect the agential goals of game players. Specifically, Newman challenges the idea that the primary function of PCs is to serve as objects of identification through their physical appearance on screen. He argues that, during gameplay, the player–PC relationship becomes one of “vehicular embodiment” wherein the only things that matter are the mechanical possibilities afforded to the player by their PC. As an example, Newman references Kinder’s (1993) observations of the group play of male children, where boys would often choose to play as a female PC to take advantage of her unique gameplay abilities. Where Kinder suggests that the boys risk transgender identification by playing as a female PC, Newman argues that the role of gameplay abilities in this instance of cross-gender play indicates that representative identification is of little importance in the player–PC relationship. Here, Newman

helpfully illuminates an instrumentality in player–PC relationships that is sometimes overlooked in models of identification borrowed purely from other disciplines such as film studies (Giddings & Kennedy, 2008). Instrumentality is indeed an essential part of gameplay and the player–PC relationship in all its various manifestations; however, subsequent scholarship has revealed two problems with the purely instrumentalist approach encapsulated by Newman's assertion that "when playing videogames, appearances do not matter." Firstly, non-mechanical qualities such as appearance *can* matter a great deal in player–PC relationships depending on who is playing and why. Secondly, appearance and gameplay are often entwined—especially when character creation is involved.

A player's in-world goals and actions are often linked to attributes of the PC outside their mechanical capabilities, including but not limited to their appearance. As I previously discussed, players who create PCs for multiplayer worlds often craft appearances that facilitate desired social interactions and/or stave off undesirable interactions (Nakamura, 1995; Ducheneaut et al., 2009). Similarly, players who create a PC for singleplayer worlds may do so for certain kinds of simulated social experiences. Smith (2025), for instance, interviewed 25 nonbinary players about relationships between their gender identities and gameplay experiences. They found that some participants used the player–PC relationship to experiment with forms of gender expression they did not yet engage in or to express and affirm gender expressions they already practiced or would practice were it not for safety concerns. These participants placed great importance on how they could use these avatars—these alternate incarnations of themselves—to interact with NPCs and gameworld objects through a different kind of appearance/gender presentation. For these players, PCs have an instrumental quality not unlike the kind of "vehicular embodiment" described by Newman (2002), yet they use their instruments for subjective purposes that are not necessarily

connected to how they overcome gameplay challenges. Smith also touches on the importance of other visible characteristics besides gender presentation such as race, noting the frustrations of one participant who found that a certain CCI did not allow them to embody both the Black and nonbinary aspects of their identity in the gameworld. Players may thus pursue their subjective experiential goals through the PC's mechanical capabilities and other qualities such as their appearance. Meanwhile, CCIs variously help, hinder, or redirect the player's pursuit of these goals through their affordances.

In fairness to Newman (2002) and other scholars who prefer to treat the appearance-based qualities of PCs as separate from their mechanical capabilities (Aarseth, 2004; Klevjer, 2006), these two things are often disconnected in the rules of a given game. Yet even when this is the case, players themselves may draw connections between certain types of mechanical capabilities and visual characteristics without a basis in the game rules. Yee et al. (2011) illustrate this through survey data that suggests both male and female *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004–Present) players were more likely to play as a female PC when taking on healing roles, even though playing as a female PC does not grant any advantages to healing in the game's mechanics.⁴ Male and female players were also more likely to engage in competitive combat activities using male PCs, likewise with no mechanical benefits. The researchers found no significant preference for healing or competitive roles among male or female players in and of themselves. While playing with a PC that does not match one's public offscreen gender presentation can carry transgressive and transformative potential—as Smith's (2025) study shows—Yee et al. note that the cross-gender play of survey respondents tended to reflect socially constructed, conservative norms around which visible subjects should engage in

⁴ Based on Yee et al.'s data reporting, it appears male and female were the only gender identities that could be selected in their survey.

which activities. To use the vehicular metaphor, survey respondents seem to have chosen the car that they felt would express what their preferred style of driving was, even when the cars in and of themselves had the same driving capabilities.

The effects of appearance on player engagement are also apparent when appearance *is* connected to a PC's mechanical capabilities. It may be true that the boys observed by Kinder (1993) could look through their female PC to take advantage of her gameplay capabilities, or that players may project an appearance-gameplay relationship without a basis in mechanics. Yet many games do connect the appearances and gameplay capabilities of PCs. For example, in the *Dragon Age* games, the affordances a PC offers in mechanical and dramatic interactions are both shaped by their fantasy race. This ensures gameplay, narrative, and PC appearance are intertwined. Take the hypothetical case of a *Dragon Age* player who wants to use their PC to experience the thrills of defeating foes through magic: this player could not create a dwarven PC, as *Dragon Age* dwarves cannot be mages. They would have to play a PC of another race, such as an elf, in which case nonplayer characters (NPCs) would respond to the PC's visibly elven race markers. Such interactions would ensure the player is aware that their dialogues are conditioned by a primarily appearance-based quality, and that other experiences—dwarven ones, in this case—are only available to them if they create a new, non-mage PC with different gameplay capabilities. Stenros and Sihvonon (2020) rightly point out that a player might prioritize gameplay/combat over the dramatic elements of RPGs or vice versa, though it seems fair to assume that at certain points players pay some attention to both aspects of these games. Even if they do not evenly prioritize the various aspects of digital roleplay, the design of CCIs in *Dragon Age* ensures that players cannot completely separate considerations of how a PC performs mechanically, how they figure into the gameworld's diegetic drama, and how they look.

Malleability and Multiplicity

Like any relationship, a player–PC relationship can shift to accommodate changes in its constituent parties or their surrounding context. Banks (2015) acknowledges this and concludes the article outlining her typology with a suggestion that future research should explore the ways these relationships shift over extended periods of time. However, it is also worth noting that research by Taylor et al. (2015) shows that player–PC relationships also change from moment to moment during gameplay. They argue that these changes are the result of the interplay between "attractors," or "the tendencies in observed processes to move toward predictable states" (Taylor et al., 2015). In microethnographic research on gameplay in *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2011), Taylor et al. observed that participant relationships with the PC were consistently affected by the pull of four attractors: simulated attractors, or the force exerted by stimuli within the game itself; situated attractors, or the force exerted by mental or bodily stimuli in the physical context of play; conventional attractors, or the force exerted by expectations derived from genre conventions and like media; and lived attractors, or the force exerted by lived experiences and worldviews. The way participants in Taylor et al.'s study related to and used their PC changed depending on interactions between these attractors, as participants sometimes used the PC to satisfy their extradiegetic desires and at other times prioritized the PC's diegetic needs. With these contextual shifts in mind, I avoid approaching character creation as the total determining moment from which a consistent player–PC relationship emerges. Rather, I treat character creation as the beginning of the play of attraction that shapes evolving player–PC relationships.

Another aspect of player–PC relationships that is often sidelined in typological frameworks is their potential multiplicity; one player can have several relationships of different kinds with different PCs, sequentially or simultaneously. Jenson et al. (2015) make this neglected

multiplicity a key focus in their article on character creation and sex-swapping in online play. Through a mixed-methods study involving over 300 players across five online games, these authors found that some players use PCs of different sexes to facilitate different modes of engagement with the same game. They even observed cases where a player's relationship with one PC of a certain sex influenced their relationship with other PCs of a different sex. For example, a female player in the study had one male PC whom they kept at a low level and used as a "mule" to carry extra in-game items for their female PCs. This male PC could be described as a character who, through his relationship to the female PCs, expressed the player's desire for a certain kind of gender hierarchy—in her play activities, at least. While that particular case involves dynamics specific to online games where multiple PCs can interact with the same gameworld instance, player–PC relationships can affect one another in singleplayer games as well. In the *Dragon Age* games, a repeat player might create a PC and enter into a relationship with them that is based on their desire to have a different experience from a previous playthrough with a different PC. Further, *DIII* and *Inquisition* utilize import systems that obtain information about the player's activities in previous games, meaning that PCs in each of those games can exist in a world marked by prior player–PC relationships.

Sociocultural Implications of Player–PC Relationships

Among concepts used in the sociocultural analysis of player–PC relationships, identity tourism is perhaps the most influential. As originally explained by Nakamura (1995), identity tourism refers to the practice of digitally appropriating an Other's identity for leisure purposes. While Nakamura originally used identity tourism to describe the performance of Orientalist caricatures by white players on a networked, text-based roleplaying site, the concept has since been articulated to a wide range of contexts, including the study of singleplayer games (Hammar,

2020; Fickle & Patterson, 2022; Consalvo & DeJong, 2024). This broad relevance stems from the fact that any gameplay which takes place through a PC involves a degree of identity appropriation, as the player must navigate the gameworld by acting through the appearance, ability, and sociodramatic status of the PC. Through such identity tourism, the player receives information on how different subjects relate to their environments, which leads to a number of follow-up questions: does this information purport to represent reality outside the gameworld? Is that information accurate? How might this information affect the player and the ways they relate to others outside the gameworld? For example, Hammar (2020) considers whether playing as Lincoln Clay under *Mafia III's* (Hangar 13, 2016) virtual Jim Crow orients players towards actionable antiracist positions, or whether it merely serves to provide players a leisurely simulation of marginalization that can be easily reconciled with dominant power structures. Of course, as Hammar notes, answering questions like these requires analysis that goes beyond the PC and their position in the gameworld; one must also account for where the player sits in relation to the PC.

In thinking about the implications of different positional configurations in player–PC relationships, it can be helpful to refer back to Place-Thought and its emphasis on land as the point of origin for all relationships (Watts, 2013). As much as digital gameplay relies on circuits of malleable, co-constitutive media technologies, the player enters this circuit already constituted in relation to the land on which they play. Indeed, the phrase “identity *tourism*” frames gameplay in terms of a pleasure predominantly enjoyed by well-off settlers or citizens of an imperial metropole as they exercise their pronounced privilege of mobility for leisure (Tucker, 2019). Though experiences of play and identity tourism may impact the way a player views themselves or the world around them, it cannot in itself change their positionality. To briefly revisit the

example of *Mafia III*, a white settler who tours the Jim Crow South as Lincoln Clay will return to their ordinary life as a white settler irrespective of how closely they identified with Clay while they played, just as a white settler who goes to Bali will return to their home as a white settler irrespective of whether they picked up any Balinese.⁵ It would of course be most accurate to say that the *Mafia III* player in this example never stopped being a white settler during play, as one's ability to play digital games is linked to their position in a matrix of social-material power relations that also affect the production of games and the representations therein (Hammar, 2020; Baeza-González, 2021; Taylor, 2024). Meanwhile, Black games critics have expressed appreciation for how playing as Clay allows them to take forceful, cathartic action against manifestations of white supremacy that they recognize in their own lived experiences (Moosa, 2016; Cole, 2018), even if the game itself elides strong structural critique (Russworm as cited in Hammar, 2020). Therefore, judging the implications of a specific instance of identity tourism or whether "tourism" is the correct descriptor in the first place requires an assessment of where the player is coming from in the social-material context of play.

Like considerations of positionality, the matter of character creation complicates pictures of identity tourism. After all, the player does not always receive a position in relation to a predefined PC; in some cases, they design their PC in concert with the CCI. Thus, a player can partly determine the degree to which the PC's identity is kindred or Other to their own. I say "partly" because the CCI also exercises agency by presenting the player with identity categories and options. For example, in addition to conventional categories such as race and gender, *Origins* (2009) allows the player to select between six distinct sociocultural backgrounds that

⁵ I do not mean to be reductive here and suggest that play across/through difference cannot have prosocial potential. Fickle and Patterson (2022) and Kampe (2022) both give excellent examples of how playing with identity can foster empathy, but it is worth noting that these authors discuss empathy less in terms understanding an Other's experiences and more in terms of respecting the necessarily subjective, situated nature of knowledge.

each elicit unique responses from the gameworld. This selection and its consequences have the potential to foster critical thinking about how power relations condition one's perspective, as the player can begin their tour of Thedas from radically different positions. At the same time, *Origins* and its CCI sometimes paint marginalized positionalities in sensationalist terms, seemingly to tantalize privileged players. Consider the prompt the player receives if they attempt to create a casteless dwarf PC without a facial tattoo (see figure 1), and the fact that casteless dwarves gain an automatic bonus to their thievery skills. As Trammell (2018) notes in his application of identity tourism to RPG studies, the degree to which gameplay has problematic implications depends on interactions between positionality, player action, and designed affordances—interactions that can be studied through ethnographic methods.



Figure 1. CCI prompt that appears if the player attempts to create a casteless dwarf without a facial tattoo. Screenshot by the author.

Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed four areas of scholarly literature that guide my investigation into how players and CCIs interact and how the PCs that result affect singleplayer experiences. First, I discussed the foundation of gaming microethnographies in ANT (Giddings, 2009; Latour, 1995), a framework that in turn repackages insights about human–nonhuman relationality that

have been practiced by Turtle Island Indigenous peoples for countless generations (Watts, 2013). In my research, I combine the insights of prior ANT studies with the strengths of Place-Thought; grounded in Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee cosmologies, Place-Thought begins from the premise that the cognition and agency of all beings are irrevocably tied to the living lands from which they emerged (Watts, 2013), a connection that I argue can be traced all the way into interactions between players and game technologies. Second, I reviewed the state of observation-based character creation research, which has largely taken place in multiplayer contexts (Isaksson, 2012; Jenson et al., 2015; Turkay & Adinolf, 2015) and often focuses on how players create PCs for player-to-player interaction (Kafai et al., 2010; McArthur, 2015). I apply the knowledge produced by these studies—especially McArthur’s (2015) work on CCI affordances—to the heretofore under-studied context of singleplayer character creation. I then examined literature around player–PC relationships, using genealogies of “avatar” (de Wildt et al., 2020) and “character” (Blom, 2022) to suggest that the two terms signal distinct player–PC relations that tend towards embodiment and expression, respectively. These relations are supported by Newman’s (2002) argument that, at their core, PCs are instruments of action, and subsequent scholarship has shown that players can use these instruments for mechanical, dramatic, and/or appearance-based purposes (Yee et al., 2011; Banks, 2015; Smith, 2025). Finally, I touched on the potential sociocultural implications of player–PC relationships through the concept of identity tourism, or the player appropriation of a PC’s identity for leisure purposes (Nakamura, 1995). In the next chapter, I explain the methodological foundations of my research, review the details of the study design, and provide short overviews of each participation session.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter consists of two main subsections: the first section covers the methodological foundations and conduct of the research, while the second section summarizes the events of the study. I begin the first section by reviewing the primary and secondary methodologies employed in my research—microethnography and autophenomenography, respectively—before elaborating the details of my study design. These details include how participants were recruited, the activities involved in participation, and how data was recorded and analyzed. The second section consists of brief descriptions of how each participant engaged with their chosen game through the PC they created, focusing on whether their engagement matched any expectations or plans they may have had before interacting with the CCI.

Study Foundations and Design

Overview of Key Methodologies

Much like traditional ethnography, microethnography is a qualitative approach to research in which the researcher “studies a particular social/cultural group with the aim to better understand it” (Kramer & Adams, 2018). What distinguishes a microethnography and makes it “micro” is the scale of the study object and the methods used to analyze it. As Bayeck (2023) explains, microethnography is “a fine-grained analysis of microbehaviours or actions.” Instead of looking at the social life of a group as a whole through months or years of immersive fieldwork, a microethnography closely examines specific actions that carry social meaning within a group. For example, one might conduct a microethnography of how cashiers at a grocery store greet customers in a checkout line, looking not only at the words exchanged by the cashier and the customer but also at how gesture, posture, facial expressions, and the surrounding environment factor into the interaction. Given that such details are difficult to capture in fieldnotes alone and

may be missed as the action quickly unfolds, audiovisual recordings are frequently used for a comprehensive analysis of the otherwise fleeting microethnographic object (Bayeck, 2023). Some microethnographic researchers base their analyses entirely on what may be seen or heard in their video data (Linderoth, 2005; de Castell et al., 2008). This objectivist approach contrasts with a constructivist strain of microethnography that compliments video recordings with interviews and other ethnographic methods (McArthur, 2015; Taylor et al., 2015; Owen, 2017). Constructivist microethnography draws on the subjective testimonies of parties within an interaction—constructing/reconstructing the interaction through their testimonies—while objectivist microethnography exclusively studies the action recorded on video without reference to the interpretations of those involved.

Game studies scholars have approached microethnography with varying degrees of constructivism, objectivism, and formalism. For instance, Rusk et al. (2024) draw on over nine hours of recorded *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve, 2012) gameplay before rigorously coding and analyzing a single 115-second match to find out how location callouts shape the structural organization of player activity. Their study exemplifies an objectivist approach to microethnography in game studies that also uses formal procedures for gathering and analyzing data. Giddings (2009), by contrast, describes his approach to microethnography as a "nonscientific, improvised, [and] opportunistic" examination of the affective interactions between human and nonhuman gameplay actors (p. 149). Though relatively informal, Giddings's approach is objectivist; he foregrounds video recording to such an extent that he suggests using the term "microethology" instead of "microethnography" to signal a focus on observed behaviour, or "ethos," over a human collective, or "ethnos" (p. 152). In its affiliation, the microethnography I conduct here is perhaps closest to the one carried out by McArthur (2015) in

her research on character creation in *Rift* (Trion / Gamigo, 2011–Present). Like McArthur, I gathered data in a relatively formal way—under consistent conditions in a research lab—and supplemented this data with interviews that drew on participants’ subjective accounts of their play experiences. The main difference between my microethnography and McArthur’s is that, where McArthur studied player practices of self-representation in the context of multiplayer character creation, I studied how players pursue varied instrumental goals in the context of singleplayer character creation.

While it may be easy to describe singleplayer gaming as asocial given it centres a single human participant, singleplayer gaming can be profoundly social in terms how the player interacts socially with elements of the gameworld (Simon, 2007; Banks, 2015; Smith, 2025) and in how play consists of social interaction with material, nonhuman actors outside the gameworld (Galloway, 2006; Giddings, 2009). As Giddings explains in his articulation of a microethnographic approach to game studies, gameplay is an event that occurs through social interactions between a human player or players, a nonhuman game-machine, and learned media-cultural practices.¹ This makes microethnography—with its focus on social interaction—an optimal methodology for studying singleplayer gameplay as it unfolds both within and outside of the diegetic game space. Following Giddings’s lead, I use microethnography to first examine how players, games, and media-cultural practices act upon one another to produce character creation as an event, and then to consider how this event affects subsequent gameplay and player–PC relationships.

I supplement the data I collect from participants with my autophenomenographic play of the *Dragon Age* games. Autophenomenography explores the researcher’s personal, embodied

¹ As noted in the previous chapter, Giddings’s expansive view of sociality is built upon actor-network theory (Latour, 1996), which repackages and refracts aspects of older Indigenous relational cosmologies (Watts, 2013).

experiences of the object of study and thus combines elements of autoethnography and phenomenography. It is distinct from autoethnography in that the researcher's personal narrative and their relationship to a culture are not at the fore of analysis; rather, autophenomenography focuses on the nature of a researcher's sensory experience as it unfolds in the moment (Allen-Collinson, 2011; Witkowski, 2018), hence the substitution of "ethno" with "phenom" in the methodology's name.² For this research, I engaged in autophenomenography by drawing on anecdotes from my personal *Dragon Age* gameplay that relate to character creation, player-PC relationships, and different modes of engagement. Some of these anecdotes concern events that occurred over a decade ago, as I have played different *Dragon Age* games on and off since 2013. While I must rely on memory to reconstruct those moments and my feelings therein, I have also replayed portions of the *Dragon Age* games during my research and recorded those experiences in gameplay journals.

In each journal, I took note of what I was trying to accomplish in character creation or a period of subsequent gameplay, whether I was able to achieve my goals using the PC I created, and how these experiences made me feel. In addition to providing a body of new autophenomenographic data, this gameplay and journaling process allowed me to revisit my memories by re-experiencing phenomena I had encountered in old playthroughs. All anecdotes I draw from my personal gameplay provide points of comparison and contrast to my participants' experiences, which remain the focus of my analysis.

² An additional difference between autophenomenography and autoethnography is that the latter often implies the use of personal reflection to explore an intimate or traumatic issue that is difficult to address through conventional qualitative methods. See Stern (2015) and Fletcher (2018) for examples.

Participant Recruitment

I recruited eight participants for this study through an advertisement (attached as Appendix A) shared with two Discord servers and friends whom I knew played video games with some regularity. Each Discord server had been established to connect gaming hobbyists who are current or former students at one of the two postsecondary institutions affiliated with my graduate program: York University and Toronto Metropolitan University. I chose these servers as I could reasonably assume that members may be interested in participating in a study of digital gameplay and would have access to at least one of the campuses where the study took place. The only exclusion criteria was that all participants must be 16 years of age or older, as the play activities of children fall beyond the scope of this study. The advertisement contained a QR code that linked to an online document with detailed information about the study and instructions for a short email questionnaire (attached as Appendix B). I asked interested persons to email me their preferred name along with answers to the following questions:

- 1) Have you played any games from the *Dragon Age* series before, and if so, which ones?
- 2) Have you played three or more roleplaying games that involve character creation?

Anyone who submitted an email with answers to these questions became a potential participant. I sought to recruit a mix of participants who had played *Dragon Age* games, participants who had experience with RPG character creation but not in the *Dragon Age* series, and participants with little to no experience with RPG character creation. This emphasis on experience stemmed from prior research that indicates a player's familiarity with a specific game or genre can influence their priorities and habits in character creation (Isaksson, 2012; Jenson et al., 2015). With regard to the experience factor, recruiting participants from among my friends proved particularly useful in diversifying the participant pool, as respondents to the Discord ad were uniformly well-

experienced with RPG character creation. As an inducement, participants received a digital download of the *Dragon Age* game they played in the study or a cash value equivalent in cases where they could not continue playing on their own equipment. The figure below describes the play experience and chosen game of each participant.

Participant Number	Previously known to the researcher?	Experienced with RPG Character Creation?	Had played <i>Dragon Age</i> before?	Chosen Game
Participant 1	No	Yes	No	<i>Origins</i>
Participant 2	Yes	No	No	<i>Origins</i>
Participant 3	No	Yes	Yes	<i>DAll</i>
Participant 4	Yes	No	No	<i>DAll</i>
Participant 5	No	Yes	No	<i>Inquisition</i>
Participant 6	No	Yes	Yes	<i>Veilguard</i>
Participant 7	No	Yes	Yes	<i>Veilguard</i>
Participant 8	Yes	No	No	<i>Inquisition</i>

Figure 2. Participant information chart.

CCIs inherently convey ideological assumptions about which expressions or combinations of personal characteristics are possible in a certain world, and as existing research has shown, factors such as a player's gender, race, and sexuality can strongly influence the way they negotiate these assumptions in their interactions with CCIs (Kafai et al., 2010; McArthur, 2015; Stenros & Sihvonen, 2020; Smith, 2025). For this study, I did not ask participants to fill out any demographic surveys or disclose any specific aspects of identity; however, I allowed and encouraged participants to discuss aspects of their identity whenever they found such aspects to be particularly relevant to their CCI interactions. I took this approach for two reasons. First, I wanted to reduce the work required from participants to sign up for the study and to allay potential participant concerns about providing personal information to a researcher they may only have been familiar with from an online advertisement. Second, I believed that participants would discuss the influence of race, gender, etc. on their CCI interactions in the interviews if

they felt comfortable doing so. As the interviews were semi-structured, I also had the opportunity to ask participants follow-up questions on matters related to personal characteristics provided a participant brought such matters up first in response to a scripted question. I was fortunate in that my participant group was diverse in terms of race, gender, and sexuality, and that several participants indeed felt comfortable enough to discuss these things during their interviews. This informal approach to demographic information means I cannot provide a standardized breakdown of each participant's self-identification; instead, I address a participant's identifications as they become relevant in my analyses of emergent themes.

Participant Activities

Participation in this study involved two semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews and an audiovisually-recorded gameplay observation session. The first interview and the observation session took place sequentially and in person, while participants had the option to conduct their second interview remotely up to a week after the initial session. During the session scheduling process, I asked participants to choose the *Dragon Age* game they would play under observation out of a provided selection. To obtain multiple axes of comparison, I did not allow more than two participants to play any one game. While the first participants could select any of the four games, once two participants had selected a game, subsequent participants could only able to select between the remaining games.³ This ensured I could compare how different players might interact with the same CCI and how different players might interact with different CCIs.⁴ When each participant arrived for their interview and observation session, I verbally reviewed the study activities and informed them that they could revoke their consent to participate at any time, in

³ Had more people responded to the advertisement, I would have allowed them to choose from all four games. However, five ad recruitments and three network recruitments resulted in two participants per game.

⁴ Given more time, it would have been interesting to examine how one player might interact with different CCIs. Fortunately, participants with prior *Dragon Age* experience sometimes compared CCIs during interviews.

which case all data collected from them up to that point would be deleted; participants received written consent forms with information to the same effect.

Though the advertisement estimated the first interview would take between 10–20 minutes, actual times for this interview ranged between 7–14 minutes. The questions asked differed slightly depending on a participant’s prior play experiences. For example, participants who had experience with RPG character creation were asked: “Have you created any player characters you find particularly memorable or that you feel strongly about?” Meanwhile, participants with little to no RPG character creation experience were asked a version of the same question that included video game protagonists in general, even ones they did not create. All questions for the first and second interviews are attached as Appendix C.

After the first interview, participants played the first 90 minutes of their chosen *Dragon Age* game, beginning from character creation. Their gameplay was captured through a screen-recording program and an in-room camera; this dual method of recording enabled a deep microethnographic analysis of gameplay, as I was able to examine what stimuli were coming from the game at a given moment and how the participant responded both through their in-game action inputs and their embodied, in-room reactions. I also sat behind the participant during the play session and recorded observations through handwritten notes. Before the start of observation, I informed each participant that they could make no wrong choices during the exercise, and that they were not expected to progress to any particular point before the 90 minutes elapsed. My primary goal as an observer was to create an environment in which participants could interact with CCIs in as naturalistic a manner as possible. While subsequent gameplay yielded useful data—all participants ended up playing for at least 45 minutes—the value of this data was not worth setting a time limit on the character creation phase. Such

restrictions would diminish the authenticity of CCI interactions and potentially make participants anxious, and so participants were free to interact with the games at their own pace.

The second interview either occurred in-person or remotely, depending on participant preference. Though the advertisement estimated the interview would last 20-40 minutes, actual times ranged from 10-19 minutes. I asked participants about their character and their creation experience to see how they felt about the outcome of their interactions with the CCI, whether they were able to achieve the goals they had for their PC and/or play experience, and whether those goals changed during the creation process. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Once participants had completed the interview and observation activities, they were also given the option to continue participating by submitting gameplay logs via email. Participants were provided with a gameplay log template to help them track potential changes in the ways they engaged with the game and/or related to their PC. Unfortunately, no participant submitted any gameplay logs. There could be several reasons for this: several participants were postsecondary students and likely were busy balancing competing educational, professional, and personal responsibilities; there was no material incentive to submit logs; and the log template may have been unclear or appeared too demanding, leading participants who may have otherwise submitted logs to choose not to. In reality, the lack of logs was likely due to a combination of these and other factors; I have attached a template of the gameplay logs as Appendix D in case a future study wishes to improve on this idea in a way that might generate a response from participants.

Data Analysis

All written data generated from each participant during the study was shared with that participant so they could review its accuracy and affirm their consent to have their data included

in the analysis. If participants noticed that something had been mis-transcribed or that a statement did not match their recollection, they could correct the record. Further, if a participant felt uncomfortable with any information contained in the written data upon review, they could redact that information from the data and subsequent analysis. Finally, if a participant felt uncomfortable with the data as a whole, they could revoke their consent to participate, and all data collected from them would be deleted. Participants could revoke consent at any time up to when the analysis was completed in December 2025. This process of participant checking ensured that the data was accurate before it was subjected to analysis and that the study conformed to best practices around ongoing consent.

I developed several emergent themes through open coding of both the participant-checked written data and synced versions of the in-room, onscreen gameplay recordings. Codes for the written data included a mix of descriptive codes that marked which topics were discussed or which actions were being performed within a given unit of data, as well as codes that marked a certain type of relation between the participant and game elements or changes in those relations. Codes of the latter kind were sometimes applied inductively through subjective interpretation of a participant's words or actions, though participants often explicitly described how they experienced their relationships with various game elements and the purposes of their actions. For the audiovisual data, codes were applied either to indicate continuous affective states, such as a change in participant posture, or momentary reactions, such as participant laughter. I conducted initial coding of the interview transcripts and observation notes upon participant approval and then followed up with a second round of coding that included the audiovisual data once the study was complete. Through this process, I used 50 codes to help me compare data between participants (see Figure 3). This allowed me to identify 6 themes

concerning how participants interacted with the CCIs and the ways these interactions conditioned their subsequent engagement with the games.

Code	Description	Excerpt
Affordances	The participant discusses what they perceive as possible or not possible within a CCI	R: Was there anything you found surprising? P7: I think the ability to choose masculine or feminine voices for any character. And the use of pronouns, even like she/her, he/him, they/them.
Connections & communities	The participant discusses how in-person or online connections have influenced their character creation experiences	P1: I'm not really like a <i>D&D</i> head or anything. My friends are, and so I kind of like, I can understand what people are saying when people are talking about that kind of, like, you know how the system... there would be the stats or whatever.
Laugh	The participant reacts to something onscreen with laughter.	Fieldnote: Participant 6 laughed a little as they accidentally made their PC leap into a chasm instead of walking across the beam as intended.
Identification As	The participant behaves or expresses themselves in such a way that suggests they identify as their PC.	Fieldnote: Participant 2 verbally commented on Bhelen's betrayal. Upon discovering Trian's corpse, they said: " <i>My</i> other brother? Did he really—what an asshole!"

Figure 3. Examples of codes with excerpts.

Overviews of Participant Sessions

In the following section, I provide individual summaries of each participant's interviews and gameplay session. The summaries go over a given participant's established play and character creation habits, whether they created a PC that allowed them to access their desired play experience and, if not, what happened instead. I also include a short overview of my history and experiences with the *Dragon Age* series. The purpose of this overview is to contextualize the discussions of character creation experiences and enacted player-PC relationships that follow in Chapters 4 and 5, respectively. These chapters draw heavily on small interview excerpts and

observed micro-interactions between participants and specific CCI parameters; the session summaries here are meant to give a sense of the people behind the words and actions at the heart of this research.

Participant 1

Not previously known to the researcher	Experienced with RPG character creation	Had not played <i>Dragon Age</i> before	Chose to play <i>Origins</i>
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This participant explained that, for them, character creation is often an end in and of itself; they seek out games with deep visual customization options because they enjoy the process of creating highly personalized PCs, and they reported that they often do not play more than a few hours total after creating a PC. The participant stated that they create PCs who resemble how they would like to appear within the gameworld. Rather than creating an “ideal self” (Bessière et al., 2007; Banks, 2015) that possesses qualities that the participant aspires to in their offscreen life, they build self-recreations tailored to match the aesthetics of the gameworld in question. However, when this participant began *Origins*, they found that its CCI offered limited representations of Blackness that did not include their skin tone or preferred hairstyles. Given that the participant could not see themselves in their PC as they had planned, they chose to create a distinct dramatic persona instead. Specifically, they took inspiration from labels applied to the CCI’s different voice types to create a PC who appeared and acted “mean.” Once in the gameworld, the participant found the dialogue options presented made it difficult to enact this persona without veering into bigotry, yet they also said they enjoyed the challenge of enacting their vision within those constraints and viewed it as an opportunity to add complexity and depth to this persona.

Participant 2

Previously known to the researcher	Not experienced with RPG character creation	Had not played <i>Dragon Age</i> before	Chose to play <i>Origins</i>
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The participant stated that their primary goal when playing a singleplayer game is to experience a good story, which they associated with memorable, complex PCs who have detailed relationships with the narrative elements of the gameworld. The participant could only name predefined characters who fit these criteria, and they stated their opinion that expansive customization options mean the PC's dramatic relationships must become more generic because the game cannot account for all possible PC configurations. The participant said that, given this weakness, they tend to recreate themselves in CCIs and use their PC as an avatar for their own ego and agency.⁵ Yet when they started interacting with the *Origins* CCI, this participant was drawn towards options they had not encountered in other games, such as the ability to create a nonhuman PC. They quickly abandoned their initial goal of recreating themselves and instead chose to make a "cool warrior dwarf." The participant felt they were able to actualize this PC in-game and seemed satisfied with how the world responded to the characteristics they had selected. In this case, the CCI did not change the participant's preferred mode of engagement, which remained to experience a compelling narrative. However, interacting with the CCI did change their character creation goals, and their subsequent gameplay helped them realize that, in the right circumstances, they could experience a compelling narrative through a custom PC.

⁵ I apply the terms "avatar" and "character" here according to the distinction between the two that I articulated in the previous chapter and partly developed through this research. Participants, for the most part, described their PCs as their "character," perhaps following the language I used in the interview questions.

Participant 3

Not previously known to the researcher	Experienced with RPG character creation	Had played <i>Dragon Age</i> before	Chose to play <i>DAll</i>
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This participant said they play RPGs like the *Dragon Age* games largely to experience immersive exploration. They explained that they enjoy the sense of entering another world and learning about that world by connecting the threads between information, events, and characters at different locations. When it comes to character creation, the participant said they tend to either create an avatar of themselves or a character with a distinct persona and appearance grounded within the gameworld's diegesis. They associated the former approach with sci-fi RPGs and the latter with fantasy. True to form, the participant created a PC that was visually distinct from themselves; they reported that they designed this PC to look and act in a way that matched their mental image of a "champion," which is how the PC of *DAll* is described in a pre-customization cutscene. The participant said they felt the game provided the options required for them to enact this vision in a satisfying way. Further, the participant paid close attention to spontaneous dialogues between their NPC companions, which was a feature of exploration they found particularly enjoyable in their experiences with *Inquisition* outside the study context.

Participant 4

Previously known to the researcher	Not experienced with RPG character creation	Had not played <i>Dragon Age</i> before	Chose to play <i>DAll</i>
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The participant stated that their usual goal when playing singleplayer games is to go on an adventure, which is an experience they associate with exploration and puzzle-solving. They explained that they largely play Nintendo exclusive games with predetermined protagonists or minimal customization systems. When customizing PCs, the participant said they focus on clothing options and that they find it easier to invest in or relate to a PC that display a sense of

style similar to their own. The participant moved through character creation relatively quickly and, upon starting the game, laughed at how much their PC deviated from how they expected them to appear within the gameworld. Though the participant tried to engage with this unfamiliar game and odd-looking PC, they showed signs of fatigue and disengagement as the session progressed. As a result, we ended the gameplay session approximately 20 minutes early. In their debrief interview, the participant said that by trying to pull away from the stereotypically aggressive, straight-male masculinity represented in the default male preset, they accidentally made the PC feminine in such a way that they looked “like a middle-aged lesbian.” This outcome seemed to reinforce the participant’s stated preference for simple character customization schemes. The participant likewise did not enjoy the game very much, saying it did not offer their preferred kind of experience.

Participant 5

Not previously known to the researcher	Experienced with RPG character creation	Had not played <i>Dragon Age</i> before	Chose to play <i>Inquisition</i>
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This participant said they seek out RPGs that allow them to experience at least one of two things: a good story or detailed exploration. The participant identified strong overlap between story-based experiences and character creation. Specifically, they said that creating a PC whose life history and personality are grounded within the gameworld’s diegesis helps them become immersed in the overarching storyline. However, when asked how they employ this approach in unfamiliar gameworlds, the participant said they start new games with a short self-insert playthrough to gather information about the gameworld that they then use to create diegetically-grounded PCs. As they were unfamiliar with *Dragon Age*, the participant created a self-insert PC who visually resembled them and who conformed to what they called their usual, magic-focused playstyle. The participant seemed generally happy with how their PC appeared and acted within

the gameworld, though they added they felt somewhat misled by the short prompts on the game's dialogue wheel. They also said they did not always have the dialogue options needed to express their opinions or ask the right questions.

Participant 6

Not previously known to the researcher	Experienced with RPG character creation	Experienced with <i>Dragon Age</i>	Chose to play <i>Veilguard</i>
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The participant said they generally try to create PCs that resemble them as closely as possible to facilitate a strong sense of identification and embodiment within the gameworld. This intersects with their main experiential goal in singleplayer RPGs, which is to enjoy personalized storylines over which they feel a sense of ownership. The participant expressed a special appreciation for *Origins* and its system of distinct PC prologues, as they felt it expanded the storyline personalization possibilities and allowed them to experience different social realities. When it came to character creation in *Veilguard*, the participant was largely able to achieve their usual goals; they created an avatar that resembled them physically and who possessed diegetic traits they personally identified with from their previous *Dragon Age* experiences. In the debrief interview, the participant said they were satisfied with how this PC performed as an incarnation of themselves within the gameworld, though they expressed some ambivalence when it came to how the dialogue wheel did not allow them to see their PC's full lines before they said them. Finally, they said they appreciated how the first few NPC interactions incorporated their avatar's dwarveness, saying it was something "for the dwarven players."

Participant 7

Not previously known to the researcher	Experienced with RPG character creation	Experienced with <i>Dragon Age</i>	Chose to play <i>Veilguard</i>
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This participant said that their usual goal when playing singleplayer RPGs is to engage in free self-expression; for them, this begins with the ability to customize their PCs—both in terms of subjective traits as well as mechanical capabilities—and carries forward into control over gameplay styles and narrative action. The participant said they generally prefer to create characters that differ from themselves and have some nonhuman or animal-like qualities. The participant enacted this approach in the *Veilguard* CCI, spending a few minutes surveying the presets and description texts for all the nonhuman races before deciding to make an elven PC. The participant customized their PC in-detail and said they wanted to make a character that matched conventional perceptions of elves as “ethereal” and “androgynous.” However, they also said that they wanted to achieve those qualities while making their character dark-skinned, which they noted was a deviation from conventional depictions of elves as ethereal *and* white. The participant also made use of *Veilguard*’s pronoun options, choosing to have their PC go by “they/them,” a choice they said was motivated by curiosity about how the game would implement this feature. While the participant was generally satisfied with the CCI and the PC they had produced, they seemed ambivalent about the game itself, saying their PC’s lines felt emotionally flat and that the introductory sequence was poorly paced.

Participant 8

Previously known to the researcher	Not experienced with RPG character creation	Had not played <i>Dragon Age</i> before	Chose to play <i>Inquisition</i>
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The participant stated that their usual goal in playing a singleplayer game is to experience a good story that unfolds from the perspective of a predefined protagonist, which allows them to

adopt a more spectatorial position in relation to narrative action similar to that of a film viewer. The participant said that when they do have to create a PC, they either recreate themselves, which they described as their approach in more relaxed, simulator-type games, or they create “a dude [they] find attractive.” The participant proceeded through character creation relatively quickly; though they glanced at the different textual descriptions accompanying *Inquisition*’s race options, they swiftly chose to play as a male elf whose preset they tweaked only a little. The participant reported that, once in-game, they realized they did not succeed in creating a PC they found attractive. While they had considered taking more time in character creation, they chose to speed through it as they did not have the personal equipment needed to play *Inquisition* outside of character creation. However, they said they enjoyed playing the game and did not find their lack of attraction to the PC a significant detriment to their overall experience. The participant also said that while their attraction to a PC could take the form of physical desire, it could also be a general aesthetic attraction, which they felt this PC fulfilled.

Researcher

I first played *Dragon Age* in junior high school, and I quickly developed an interest in the wider BioWare catalogue; while such an interest could develop anywhere in the world, a large part of my fascination with BioWare came from the fact that they were the only successful AAA game developer located in Edmonton, my hometown. Though I rarely finished games at the time, I nonetheless completed two full playthroughs of *Origins* in quick succession. Its system of socially stratified PC backgrounds was a complete novelty to me, and I felt compelled after my initial self-insert playthrough to go back and see how the gameworld looked from a new perspective. In the seven years that followed, I did not play any *Dragon Age*, and throughout highschool I played very few video games at all. When I finally resumed gaming regularly in

2020 during the COVID-19 lockdowns, *Origins* was one of the first titles that I chose to revisit. I was drawn back in by its promise—which I remembered to be true—that making different decisions within its CCI would produce a different experience each time. Since then, and including playthroughs done specifically for this study, I have done five playthroughs of *Origins*, three playthroughs of *DAL*, one full and one partial playthrough of *Inquisition*, and one partial playthrough of *Veilguard*. I recount this grand history instead of a specific playthrough to show how my gameplay goals and usual approach to character creation have been partly shaped by *Origins*, a game I arrived at through my specific geo-social position. Starting with my second *Origins* playthrough, I have generally tried to create PCs that allow me to access novel or interesting interactions with the simulated social aspects of a singleplayer gameworld. I have employed this approach in other *Dragon Age* games as well as in games outside the series, and it has resulted in PCs of a variety of classes, genders, sexual orientations, and fictive races, for whom I feel varying degrees of identification, interest, and affinity.

Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed the primary and secondary methodologies employed in this research: microethnography and autophenomenography. Microethnography focuses on the meanings and functions of small-scale social interactions; in most cases, this entails audiovisual recording of the interactions in question, though microethnography may also involve the use of interviews and fieldnotes (Bayeck, 2023). My study draws on prior gaming microethnographies that operated according to different degrees of objectivism, constructivism, and formality (Giddings, 2009; McArthur, 2015; Rusk et al., 2024). In this research, I supplement microethnography with autophenomenography, a methodology that draws on the researcher's sensory experiences of the object of study (Allen-Collinson, 2011; Witkowski, 2018). I then

described the details of my study design. Through online advertisements and my personal networks, I recruited eight participants to play the first 90 minutes of a *Dragon Age* game of their choice under observation. These play sessions were complemented with two semi-structured interviews; the first interview took place before the session and covered the participant's usual character creation and gameplay goals, while the second interview took place after the session and went over the participant's impressions of the CCI and the PC they produced. Summaries of each participant's interviews and play session are included above. In the next chapter, I give a detailed discussion of three themes that emerged through analyses and comparisons of each participant's character creation experiences. This is followed by Chapter 5, in which I discuss themes related to the player-PC relationships enacted by participants.

Chapter 4: Themes in Character Creation

This chapter directly addresses the first research question: how do players and CCIs interact to produce player characters (PCs)? Through qualitative coding of each participant's interview and observation data, I identified three themes: participant–CCI interactions were conditioned by their out-of-game context; CCIs supported or challenged a participant's initial approach to character creation; and some participants enjoyed character creation as a process in itself or put it to ends other than the creation of a gameplay agent. Affordances and adaptation figure as keywords across each theme, as participants adapted to novel information coming from the game and the unexpected presence or absence of various customization affordances.

Contextual Conditioning of Participant–CCI Interactions

Some of the most prevalent codes indicated where a participant's character creation experiences were conditioned by their surrounding social and material context.¹ It is important to acknowledge this conditioning and the specific ways in which it occurs for several reasons. First, discussing contextual conditioning ensures character creation is not trapped within 'magic circle-ism,' or a tendency within game studies to treat gameplay as a transcendent escape from the various limitations of everyday life.² Though players may often feel that a game allows them to enter another world or take on a new identity, scholars have noted that separating gameplay from its mundane conditions of possibility obscures how unequal power structures shape what play means and who may access it at a given time or place (Harvey, 2015; Fickle, 2019; Taylor, 2024). Meanwhile, Consalvo (2009) and others (Taylor, 2006; Calleja, 2012) have discussed how players often draw on resources and information from outside the "magic circle" to navigate

¹ I use social here in a more traditional sense than I do elsewhere so I can indicate instances of human-to-human conditioning; material conditioning is also social in the word's truest sense, but it plays out in different ways.

² As Zimmerman (2012) points out, no game studies scholar seriously believes gameplay magically transcends all external context. However, this does not mean contextual factors always receive the consideration they deserve.

and restructure the space within it. As with gameplay itself, character creation is conditioned by factors outside the player's direct interactions with the CCI displayed onscreen—a fact borne out in the data provided by each participant.

In addition to painting a more complete picture of the character creation process, consideration of these ‘external’ factors helps restore the ecological dimension of affordances that Gibson (1979) provides in his initial articulation of the term. The affordances discussed throughout this chapter are more than just functions embedded in CCIs by their designers; they are action possibilities produced by interactions between players and CCIs that are partly constituted by their broader social and material context. Below, I provide three examples that demonstrate how various contextual forces intersected to condition participant–CCI interactions and the affordances realized therein.

“Everyone hates an elf, or whatever.”

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Participant 3 said they generally try to play fantasy RPGs through PCs who have distinct personas grounded in the gameworld's diegesis. Though Participant 3 played *DAII* for this study, they had previously done multiple playthroughs of *Inquisition*. When asked how they made a diegetically-grounded PC on their first playthrough of *Inquisition* given they had not played previous *Dragon Age* games, they replied as follows:

P3: So generally, fantasy worlds have the same background of wizards, mages, uh, elves, and all that stuff, and humans, and everyone hates an elf, or whatever. So I kind of go based off of that. My brother did play *Inquisition*, and he's the one who got me into the game, so I knew some of the story from that, so, I guess that might have also kind of seeped into my character story.

In this one statement, we can see how a confluence of factors outside their interactions with the CCI allowed the participant to achieve their character creation goals in *Inquisition*, despite the fact they had never played the series before. To begin with, the participant mentioned that a social-familial connection was not only a likely influence on how they crafted their PC's story, but also a precondition for their engagement with *Inquisition*: “he’s the one who got me into the game.” This illustrates the fact that, rather than contaminating or obscuring play experiences, these conditioning factors are part of what makes play possible. My focus in this excerpt, however, is less on the participant’s familial connection than their statement that “everyone hates an elf, or whatever.” I include the last part of this sentence, “or whatever,” because it suggests the participant felt they were saying something banal or commonsense that required no elaboration. Incidentally, the participant was right; I knew exactly what they meant.

Depictions of elves in contemporary fantasy media have deviated markedly from the quasi-divine figures of Tolkien’s works; while a Tolkien-like vision of elves has found its way into digital gaming via *Dungeons & Dragons* licensed games, many digital RPGs now depict elves as the despised targets and survivors of human colonial violence. Examples of such depictions can be found in *Divinity: Original Sin II* (Larian, 2017), *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED, 2015), and the *Dragon Age* series. In these games, elves are suggested to have once had heightened longevity and a strong reciprocity with nature before human violence stripped them of sovereignty and diminished these qualities. The participant’s prior experiences with games like these—they mentioned *The Witcher 3* specifically—no doubt provided a kind of “conventional attractor” (Taylor et al., 2015) that helped them choose who they wanted their first PC to be in the new-yet-familiar world of *Inquisition*. Yet I argue that the easy legibility of these narratives of elven dispossession goes beyond media conditioning and into the material world.

Both the participant and I encountered the *Dragon Age* games on Turtle Island Indigenous land that has been scarred by the kind of colonialism which served as a template for depictions of colonization and survivance in *Dragon Age*. David Gaider (2009), the lead writer of *Origins* and a settler who worked with BioWare's Edmonton studio, commented that *Dragon Age's* nomadic elves were initially inspired by the Roma people, and they “evolved [during development] into something more akin to North American Natives.” Just as the geographic location of Gaider and his colleagues seemed to influence their creative process,³ I believe that the location the participant and I occupy in the material world contributed to our ready understanding of this narrative of digital dispossession. This understanding, derived first from the land and the stories of its Indigenous inhabitants, is a kind of Place-Thought as described by Watts (2013). I do not mean to suggest here that elves in *Dragon Age* are a 1-to-1 representation of Turtle Island's diverse Indigenous peoples, or that *Dragon Age* always depicts colonialism with the appropriate gravity and sensitivity. Rather, I want to show how the matter of land affects all stages of the gaming process, from the creation of a game to the creation of a PC.

“It's very heavily supported by the community.”

Several participants mentioned how the support of an online community or communities helps them navigate CCI interactions. These communities may be organized around a specific fandom or have a broader area of commonality. Consider these statements from Participant 4:

P4: I did try to like replicate outfits from anime or cartoons [in *Animal Crossing*], like, um, the *Demon Slayer* outfits. It looks super cool, and people make, like, outfits similar to those outfits online, and they share it for everyone to use.

³ I found the record of Gaider's since-deleted forum post through an essay by Dalishious (2024), who provides excellent *Dragon Age* commentary and critiques from an Indigenous perspective.

P4: I guess it's my habit to create character with a short haircut, white hair. I feel like a lot of—at least what I see online—a lot of Chinese people create characters with funny hair colors like blue, purple, very, um, just hair colors you really don't see in daily life.

Participant 4 identifies two out-of-game online communities that influence their usual approach to CCI interactions: one is a community of players with a shared media affinity, and the other is a community of players with a shared national culture. In both cases, the participant's membership in these communities helps them achieve their usual goal of creating PCs that look “cool” or wear clothing that matches their personal sense of style; these communities may also help the participant define their goals in the first place by shaping what they perceive as cool or desirable.

Participants 1 and 5 mentioned that they often download community-made game mods to augment CCI options. Participant 5 said that they particularly like the *Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011) CCI because “it's very heavily supported by the community, so I [Participant 5] just have mods that make the character creator better. It adds sliders, it adds more options.” When asked if they would download mods for *Inquisition*'s CCI if they were playing it on their own equipment, Participant 5 said they probably would. While it is unfortunate that community designs or mods could not be directly incorporated into the play sessions, their importance to these participants is worth noting. It shows that, even though singleplayer character creation offers unique opportunities for experimentation outside the visibility concerns associated with multiplayer gameworlds (Stenros & Sihvonen, 2020; Smith, 2025), such creation is anything but disconnected from player communities.⁴

⁴ Though research on CCI modding is relatively limited, some studies have examined modding motivations and practices in relation to character creation. See Small (2018) and Siliute (2025) for examples.

"Sorry about the fans."

I frequently apologized to participants for the incredible volume of my computer's fans; though none of the participants said they were distracted by the fans, my recurring apology is emblematic of the various ways my presence and the use of my equipment conditioned participants' experiences. For one thing, *Dragon Age* does not match the usual play preferences of Participants 2, 4, and 8, and they likely would not have encountered the series were it not for our relationships outside the study context. In addition, Participant 4 made the following comment in the second interview that suggested my presence and research needs may have affected their approach to character creation:

P4: I think the character creation process wasn't too bad. Especially like in the beginning you can choose a few, there's a few preset options. I feel like if I'm lazy I could just choose one of them.

The phrasing "not too bad" and the participant's aside that they could have taken one of the presets reveals a general ambivalence towards character creation and suggests that they may not have customized their PC's appearance at all if they encountered a similar CCI outside the study context. While none of the other participants directly commented on differences between their approach to character creation inside versus outside the study context, Participant 7 asked before playing whether I required them to spend a certain amount of time on character creation. Their question suggested that even participants with whom I had no pre-existing relationships may have acted with consideration toward what they perceived as my/the study's needs.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, I encouraged participants to create and play as naturally as possible with assurances that there were no progress requirements or any wrong choices. That being said, some degree of researcher conditioning is inevitable in ethical

qualitative research where participants are aware of their position in relation to the researcher and the study objectives. Further, Simon (2007) notes that even ‘natural’ singleplayer gaming, such as gaming in a domestic space, often takes place under conditions of observation. For my part, I recall acting with some caution as a child when I played *Origins* on a TV screen in the middle of my family home; I was especially nervous when I created a female PC for my second playthrough, wondering what my parents and sister might think of this cross-gender play if they looked at the TV screen as they passed by. I do not recount these childhood memories to argue that the potential effects of my presence as a researcher should be ignored. Rather, I want to show that my participants’ experiences should be compared with play that is conditioned in other ways, rather than with an imagined ideal of play that sets the game and player in a world apart.

Of course, I was not the only in-room actor that conditioned participant experiences; my computer also took on an important role here. For Participant 8, my computer gave them the opportunity to play a game they could not access on their own equipment, which in turn led them to customize as fast as possible so as to experience more of *Inquisition*’s gameplay. To Participants 1 and 4, however, my computer proved less benevolent; it went so far as to take a drastic “nondiegetic machine act” in their sessions (Galloway, 2006) by crashing the game. Thankfully, this happened before Participant 4 even began to customize their PC, yet Participant 1 ended up losing approximately 25 minutes of customization time.⁵ A litany of forum posts show that such crashes are exceedingly common for those who try to run older *Dragon Age* games on newer operating systems (CoolFennec, 2022; chellumin, 2024; Zygalious, 2024), meaning there is a good chance that other players have gone through the same experiences in and

⁵ After both crashes, I reset the timer back to 90 minutes with the participant’s consent.

around character creation. Interestingly, Participant 1 took the crash as an opportunity to modify their approach to the *Origins* CCI, which I discuss in detail in the following section.

Support and Challenge in Participant–CCI Interactions

During the play sessions, participants approached character creation with certain goals in mind for their PC. Some of these goals were specific, such as ‘I want the PC to look like me,’ whereas others were more amorphous, such as ‘I want the PC to fit into the gameworld.’ These goals generally related to a given participant’s preferred mode of engagement. For example, Participant 6 said they prefer to engage with RPGs as self-insert narratives, where the PC serves as a vehicle for their ego and agency within the gameworld. To help them enact this preferred mode of engagement, Participant 6 approached *Veilguard*’s CCI with the goal of creating a high-fidelity self-representation that would facilitate a sense of being embodied in the PC. Participant 6 had one of the more seamless character creation experiences in this study, as they found the *Veilguard* CCI had all the functions needed to build such a PC. Yet even in cases of CCI support like this, participants needed to adapt to the necessarily finite options provided by the CCI to achieve their goals. As McArthur (2018) states:

In the context of character creation, even if users do arrive at these interfaces with customization strategies in mind, the avatar they create is a result of situational circumstances that contributed to the creative process, including co-situated players and interface affordances. (p.86)

In cases where a player finds themselves challenged by a lack of an expected affordance in a CCI, or by the presence of an attractive affordance that does not suit their initial approach, they may adapt by taking on new goals that suit the affordances at hand. This in turn may lead the player to enact a new mode of engagement, as they find the PC they create is better suited to a different

type of play than the one they set out to enact. In this section, I discuss specific instances of support and challenge in the participant–CCI interactions I observed, as well as the adaptive strategies employed by participants.

Hunting and Gathering

During character creation, I observed participants operating in one of two states that I argue correspond to the degree of intentional adaptation at play in any given moment of customization. The first of these states is 'hunting,' where the participant configured a customization parameter to reach a predetermined outcome. The second state is 'gathering,' where the participant played around with a parameter to reach an end state they had not decided on prior to interaction. I determined which state a participant operated in by paying attention to how much time they spent on a particular parameter, whether they looked at all or most of the available options, whether they skipped certain parameters to customize other parameters first, etc. For example, Participant 1 spent approximately one minute flipping between the human and elven race options in *Origins*. I describe this as an instance of gathering, as they determined which race their PC would be in response to the options and information displayed in the CCI. However, when it came to class selection, this participant immediately selected the mage option and only glanced at the warrior and rogue options for approximately two seconds each before confirming their initial selection. I describe this as an instance of hunting, as the participant configured their PC's class to reach a predetermined outcome, irrespective of the information and other options contained within the CCI.

I noted instances of hunting and gathering in handwritten notes taken during gameplay sessions and found additional examples by reviewing the character creation footage. This video review also allowed me to provide accurate details about the time each participant spent on

different parameters. Sometimes, my judgement of where a participant hunted versus where they gathered was informed by the participants' own accounts of their respective character creation process; when I asked Participant 1 about the difference between their approach to the race and class options in their post-play interview, they confirmed that they always make their PCs mages wherever the option is available, but that they needed to gather more information to determine whether they wanted their PC to be an elf or a human.

The time a participant spent in character creation hunting and/or gathering depended on a mix of factors, including CCI depth, participant experience, and the participant's initial goals. For instance, Participant 6 had extensive experience with RPGs, including the first three *Dragon Age* games, and they mostly create PCs that physically resemble them to achieve a sense of avatar-like embodiment within the gameworld. When they entered *Veilguard's* CCI, this participant had a clear goal in mind and the knowledge needed to enact it, so they spent most of their time in the CCI hunting for specific options and parameter states. By contrast, Participant 7 said that they mostly create PCs that facilitate self-expression, a preference that evokes the original meaning of *kharakter* as a stamping instrument (Blom, 2022). They explained that, for them, creating a character/*kharakter* usually entails taking advantage of fantastical CCI options to create a PC that radically differs from themselves. They went into *Veilguard's* CCI with a general goal that necessarily involved gathering information about different options to discover which expressions of fantasy and difference the CCI would allow. The fact that Participants 6 and 7 each hewed towards one side of the hunting-gathering spectrum is evidenced by the difference in the time each one spent in *Veilguard's* CCI: 17 minutes for Participant 6, 45 minutes for Participant 7. It is possible that hunting correlates with a preference for avatars, as the player builds a PC that embodies a sense of self developed prior to their interaction with the

CCI, while gathering may correlate with a preference for characters, as the player searches for options that express a quality or persona at least somewhat outside their sense of self. That being said, the time difference between these two examples may partly stem from the fact that each participant encountered the CCI for the first time; while experimentation and expression require some gathering at first, with experience Participant 7 may have been able to hunt for specific parameter states if they were already familiar with the options laid out before them.

All participants had at least one parameter state that they seemed to hunt for. Of note is how, except for Participant 7, all participants immediately assigned their PC a gender identity that corresponded to their own outward gender presentation without reading about or hovering over other options. Some participants did not need to actively assign their PC their desired gender identity, as each CCI presents the player with a default identity: male in *Origins*, random in subsequent titles. In those cases, I considered acceptance of the default a kind of easy hunting. That most participants hunted for gender presentations that corresponded to their offscreen presentation could be ascribed to a number of factors. For one, most CCIs involve gender selection and structure this choice in the same way: as a simple binary at the beginning of the CCI (McArthur et al., 2015). Therefore, most if not all participants were likely familiar with the structure of this choice and went into the study with an idea of what they were going to select. Further, existing research on character creation suggests that players often gender swap to navigate player-to-player social dynamics (Yee et al., 2011; Jenson et al., 2015; Valkyrie, 2017), which are absent from singleplayer gameworlds. Participant 6 discussed this effect when they mentioned that they eschew self-recreation in multiplayer games to preserve their anonymity online. My presence may also have deterred participants from choosing customization options

that could be seen as ‘deviant’ for one in their subject position, an effect that Jenson et al. (2015) observed in their observations of character creation.

When it came to gathering, there was no single, consistent point at which all or most participants felt the need to play with a parameter to gather information. Instead, gathering occurred wherever a participant chose to seek information within the CCI to guide their vision for their PC. In other words, gathering generally corresponded to deliberate participant adaptation. For some participants, adapting to CCI affordances is part of their usual approach to character creation; these participants thus adapted to the CCI in ways that inherently supported their initial approach. Other participants, however, chose to gather as part of a shift in their approach to character creation. Such shifts were brought on by the lack of an affordance needed to enact their initial approach and/or the presence of an attractive, unexpected affordance that steered them in a new direction. I discuss some of these adaptations below as participants found themselves supported or challenged by the CCI.

Supported Adaptation

It may seem counterintuitive to suggest that one might need to adapt when an environment or system supports their goals; however, even those participants who had the options needed to create the PC they wanted sometimes found themselves building their PC in response to stimuli coming from the CCI and surrounding game space. These stimuli, which Taylor et al. (2015) call "simulated attractors," generally met with some contemplation as participants processed novel information coming from the game and integrated it into a matrix of other attractors that includes knowledge of conventions, lived experiences, and bodily states. Here, I describe how Participants 3 and 7 adapted to simulated attractors in ways that allowed them both to create PCs that supported their preferred modes of engagement.

Participant 3 said that, in fantasy RPGs, they usually create a character who allows them to play a defined role within the gameworld's diegetic social structures. As they customized their PC's appearance, Participant 3 went through *DAII*'s customization parameters from top to bottom in the order they were presented, moving the various sliders back and forth to gather information on all their options before making any selections. In their second interview, the participant said this approach was guided by a pre-customization cutscene, which described their PC as "the Champion." This led them to search for options that expressed what they felt a "Champion" would look like within the world of *Dragon Age*. Participant 3 also spent a significant portion of their time in the CCI contemplating their PC's name, typing and deleting multiple options. When asked in a follow-up email about what informed this process, the participant replied as follows:

P3: I wanted to make a name that not only flowed well with the last name Hawke, but also felt like a good name for a knight or 'champion' in this case to have. I landed on Cassius because the name "Cassian" randomly crossed my mind from *Andor*, and since he was such a memorable figure and staple to his cause in that universe, I wanted a spin on the name that held weight.

As a player who sought to create a diegetically-grounded character, Participant 3 was happy to take cues from the game about the role their PC would occupy in the gameworld. They gathered information about the options within each customization parameter and designed a character that fit their assigned role, tying everything together by drawing on their past experiences of related media. In their post-play interview, Participant 3 said they felt the CCI afforded them the ability to create a PC who fit the role of champion.

Participant 7 said that they enjoy playing singleplayer RPGs for the expressive potential they afford the player, beginning with the ability to create a detailed, personalized character. As this preference for personalization and expression might suggest, the participant was meticulous in experimenting with *Veilguard's* different customization parameters as they sought to create something unique to them. Throughout this process, the participant was largely still, silent, and focused, yet as they tinkered with the colour and intensity of the face tattoo they selected for their PC, they suddenly inhaled and clicked their tongue. In their second interview, they explained that at this moment they realized:

P7: There were some [tattoos] that only showed up on one side of the face or so, and I already picked the haircut that kind of like shielded a part of the face. So, I kind of wanted to like, tell kind of a story where they kind of try to hide the tattoos a bit on the side that's, uh, covered with the hair.

By proceeding through the options in the order presented by the CCI, Participant 7 found their preferred face tattoo obscured by their PC's hair (see Figure 4). They seemed tired out by the number of menus and the possibility of backtracking, evidenced by frequent sighs during the latter stages of character creation and their note that they had "already picked" a hairstyle. Instead of going back through the menus to find a new hairstyle which would leave the tattoo uncovered, the participant accepted this appearance configuration—which the CCI had gently pushed on them—and used it to tell a story about their character. They thus adapted their character creation process in a way that ensured the CCI's options and structure would support a mode of engagement oriented around self-expression.

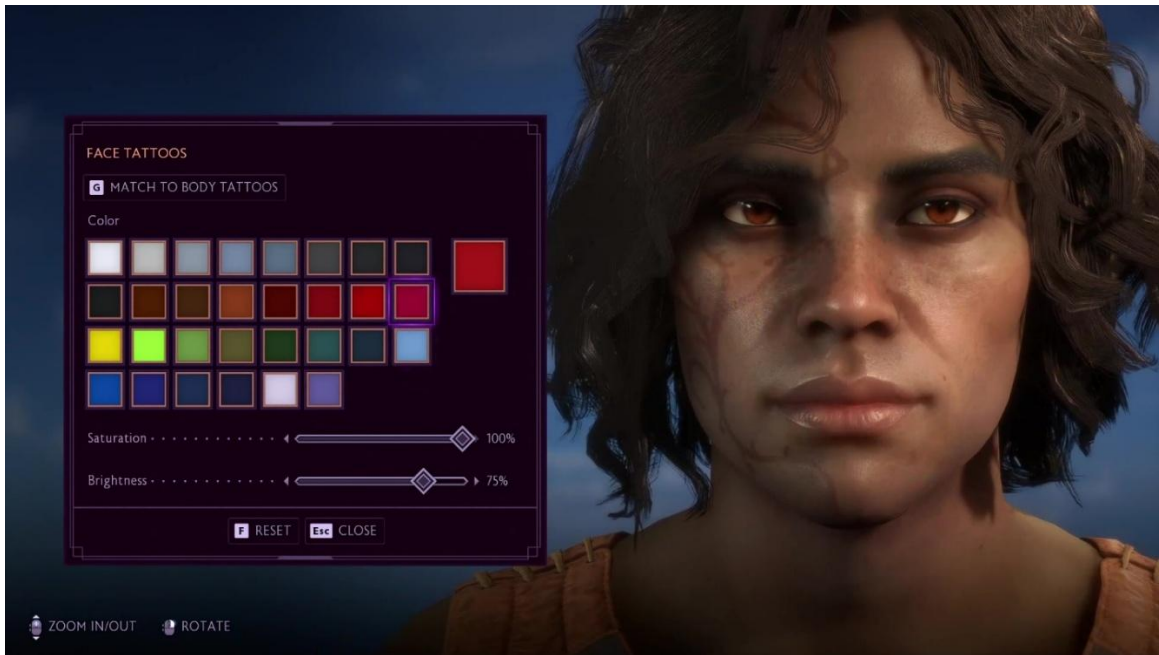


Figure 4. Participant 7 PC in the CCI. Screenshot taken from Participant 7 session recording.

There is a curious parallel in these two instances of adaptation: where Participant 3 constructed an appearance to suit their PC's emerging story, Participant 7 constructed a story to suit their PC's emerging appearance. Despite running in opposite directions, both cases show that a CCI's structure, options, and presentation can act upon a player in two-way interactions that ultimately support the player's initial approach. There were other instances where a participant found the CCI helped them fulfill their initial character creation goals; Participants 5 and 6, for example, succeeded in creating avatars that they felt accurately represented their physical appearance in the gameworld. However, their processes largely consisted of hunting for specific styles, colours, and dimensions that, once found, they quickly moved on from. Though the CCIs still exercised agency by providing these participants with a structured and limited range of options, the experiences of Participants 3 and 7 not only make CCI agency more visible, but they also show how players can be conscious of and receptive to that agency.

Adapting to Challenges

Participants found their approaches to character creation significantly challenged in two key ways: the lack of affordances needed to create the PC they envisioned, and/or the presence of affordances that tempted them towards a different approach. In both cases, this play of affordances involved a mixture of what the CCI was designed to do as well as how the participant perceived and re-imagined those design functions; as Nagy and Neff (2015) state in their re-articulation of affordances, “whether by nature or design, these affordances become the way material things act in social relationships” (p. 4). Here I provide three examples where a CCI acted in ways that made it difficult or impossible for participants to enact their usual goals in character creation. Participants 1 and 2 found their initial approaches challenged by the action possibilities or lack thereof in *Origin*’s CCI. Though their approaches and the nature of the challenges differed, each participant responded with a similar, seemingly successful strategy of adaptation that entailed using the affordances on offer to establish alternate ways of relating to their PC. By contrast, Participant 4 found themselves challenged by the CCI of *DAll* and chose to commit to their initial approach, which led to some frustration in their gameplay experiences.

Participant 1 reported that they began *Origins* with the goal of creating an avatar of themselves tailored to the game's setting and aesthetics. However, they quickly discovered that the CCI did not provide skin tone options as dark as their own nor hairstyles as long as theirs. The frequent erasure or limited representation of Blackness in CCIs has been critiqued in prior character creation research as a form of marginalization that preserves a normative, exclusionary image of the player as white and limits the ability of Black players to see themselves represented in their PCs (Pace, 2008; Kafai et al., 2010). Instead of accepting a diminished sense of identification with the alternate self they initially intended to create, Participant 1 chose to

reimagine the function of one of the CCI's parameters to facilitate a new approach to character creation:

P1: The second time [after the game crashed], I thought, ‘okay, maybe instead of playing games how I usually play them, I want to try and like, play a different way.’ I wanted to make my character, like, you know how you can choose certain voices, like the violent voice? I wanted to make her, like, kind of mean...

As the CCI did not allow them to self-recreate, Participant 1 used the knowledge they gathered in their first journey through the CCI to create a character who would facilitate a mode of engagement oriented around expression rather than embodiment. Interestingly, the participant based this alternate approach on an affordance that, to use Nagy and Neff's (2015) terminology, they “imagined” within the voice selection widget (see Figure 5). The designed function of this widget is to allow the player to select which voice their otherwise silent PC will use in combat interjections. The voices have no mechanical significance and are rarely heard, yet the participant used labels and tones of the different voice types as the foundation for their new, “mean” character. I was able to observe this adaptation in real-time; though the participant longer creating their first PC than their second, they spent twice as much time listening to voice samples on their second attempt as they began crafting a persona from the tone of voice.



Figure 5. View of Origins voice options. Screenshot taken from Participant 1 session recording.

I do not relay Participant 1's experience to suggest that exclusionary CCI design is in any way benign or 'not a big deal.' While affordances are contextual and relational, developers are nonetheless responsible for designing CCIs that can be used equitably by all players who may happen to encounter those systems. That the participant in this encounter was able to say they enjoyed the process of character creation and their subsequent gameplay should be credited to the fact that they imagined an affordance to compensate for the absence of one denied to them by an all-too-common design bias towards white players. If affordances are indeed the "*action possibilities* offered by a tool, environment, or user interface" (McArthur et al., 2015, p. 233), then Participant 1 shows how those possibilities can only be fully realized in dynamic interactions with between systems and users whose imaginations can surpass or circumvent design limitations.

I also observed that a player might adapt their approach to character creation when they find themselves challenged by an abundance of options instead of a lack. Like Participant 1, Participant 2 began *Origins* with the initial goal of self-recreation, which they abandoned when they noticed they could create nonhuman PCs:

P2: I just didn't really want to be a human. I was like, 'you know what? It was either an elf or a dwarf,' and then the dwarf looked pretty cool. I went through all that and I'm like, 'you know, a dwarf, a warrior dwarf, it'd be kind of cool.'

Participant 2 abandoned their initial approach to seize on the novel affordance of playing as a nonhuman PC. The particular way they chose to adapt their approach in response to this affordance seemed to be shaped by a mix of attractors that informed their understanding of what being a nonhuman—in this case, a dwarf or elf—means. Of note is how the participant repeatedly described their PC as a “warrior dwarf,” as in the excerpt above; when I asked them why they chose to play a dwarf over an elf, they said it had to do with their general perception of elves from other fantasy media and asked if the game would have even allowed them to play an elven warrior. The participant’s conventionally based perception of dwarves as more warrior-like than elves was reinforced by the CCI’s presentation of the dwarven PC. Specifically, the participant noted how the dwarven PC comes attired in steel armour that looks more robust than the default armour on other PCs. The participant thus felt that the racial options afforded them the ability to create a “cooler” warrior than the one they would produce through self-recreation—an approach that remained open to them, but that they perceived as less desirable.

Like Participants 1 and 2, Participant 4 found their initial approach to character creation challenged by the CCI of *DAII*. Unlike Participants 1 and 2, however, Participant 4 did not alter their approach or take on new goals in response to this challenge. Participant 4 initially intended to create a kind of stylized version of themselves, similar to the many PCs they had created in the *Animal Crossing* and *Pokémon* series; the participant said they appreciated the cartoonish aesthetics of these games and the variety of clothing options they give the PC. Despite the fact that *DAII* presents a semi-realistic aesthetic and forces the PC to always wear some kind of

armour, Participant 4 committed to their usual approach and tried to create what they described as a soft-masculine, “pop-star” version of themselves in the CCI. This led to a moment of comedy when their PC first appeared next to other characters in an early cutscene, as the participant laughed and exclaimed, “I didn’t realize I made myself look like a middle-aged lesbian!” The participant found this funny in the moment, but they also appeared to feel some frustration with the outcome, saying in their post-play interview, “it [their PC] doesn’t look right.” While the participant may have been more satisfied with their PC had they adapted to the game’s aesthetics, one could also argue that the CCI should more readily afford a wider range of gender expressions. Here, Participant 4 presents an interesting contrast not only with Participants 1 and 2, but also with Participant 8, who was similarly disappointed by an incongruence between how their PC appeared in the CCI of *Inquisition* versus how they appeared in the gameworld. They said their primary goal was to create a PC they found attractive, but that they quickly realized they did not achieve this goal when they saw their PC in the game’s first cutscene. However, this did not seem to detract from Participant 8’s gameplay experience, as they reported in their post-play interview that they felt a general, aesthetic appreciation and affinity for their PC building during the session.

The contrast between Participants 4 and 8 suggests that while players might not always find the affordances required to enact their goals when interacting with CCIs, this may or may not be a significant detriment to their gameplay experiences. Further, the experiences of Participants 1 and 2 show that players can take on alternate character creation goals and even adapt the ways they engage with the game in response to the affordances that emerge in their CCI interactions. A more detailed discussion of how these CCI interactions affected participant gameplay experiences and relationships to their PCs is provided in Chapter 5.

CCIs and Syntagmatic Agency

Thus far, I have focused largely on how participants acted as they responded to the information and affordances they perceived within the various *Dragon Age* CCIs. However, as McArthur (2015) notes, CCIs are active agents in character creation, and they affect player perception in how they order and present their options. This means that PCs are not just reflections of a CCI's technical possibilities or the player's imaginative capabilities; they are also functions of the CCI's syntagm. As Pace (2008) explains, syntagms are "strict orderings or sequences of signs, much like English sentences which have the common order of subject, verb and object" (p. 2496). Out of syntagms emerge paradigms, or sets of specific signs that conform to a syntagmatic structure. An example Pace provides of a common character creation syntagm is "Race/Faction → Sex → Class → Appearance" (p. 2496). While none of the *Dragon Age* CCIs use this exact syntagmatic structure, a paradigm that might slot into this syntagm in the *Dragon Age* universe would be "elf → male → warrior." Additional syntagms are usually embedded within the "appearance" section; earlier, I discussed the impact of the hairstyle → tattoo syntagm on Participant 7's character creation experience. To further illustrate the syntagmatic agency of CCIs, I briefly revisit the experiences of Participants 8, 1, and 3 to show how syntagms shaped the ways they perceived and responded to CCI affordances.

One of the areas in which Participant 8 said their PC failed to attract them was in their body build, which they did not change because *Inquisition* did not give them the option to do so. However, PC body builds differ significantly between the race options, something Participant 8 did not realize because *Inquisition* has a strictly bracketed syntagm of race & gender → class → appearance. The first two options are presented as tarot-like cards which, once selected, send the player through a loading screen that leads to appearance customization (see Figure 6). The

default PC models and potential appearance customization options become visible for the first time in this appearance customization section, but this syntagm's strict order and division through a loading screen did not allow the participant to go back and easily compare the possible PC body types. If this syntagm did not actively discourage backtracking or proceeded in another order, Participant 8 may have ended up with a different paradigm and a PC whom they found more attractive.

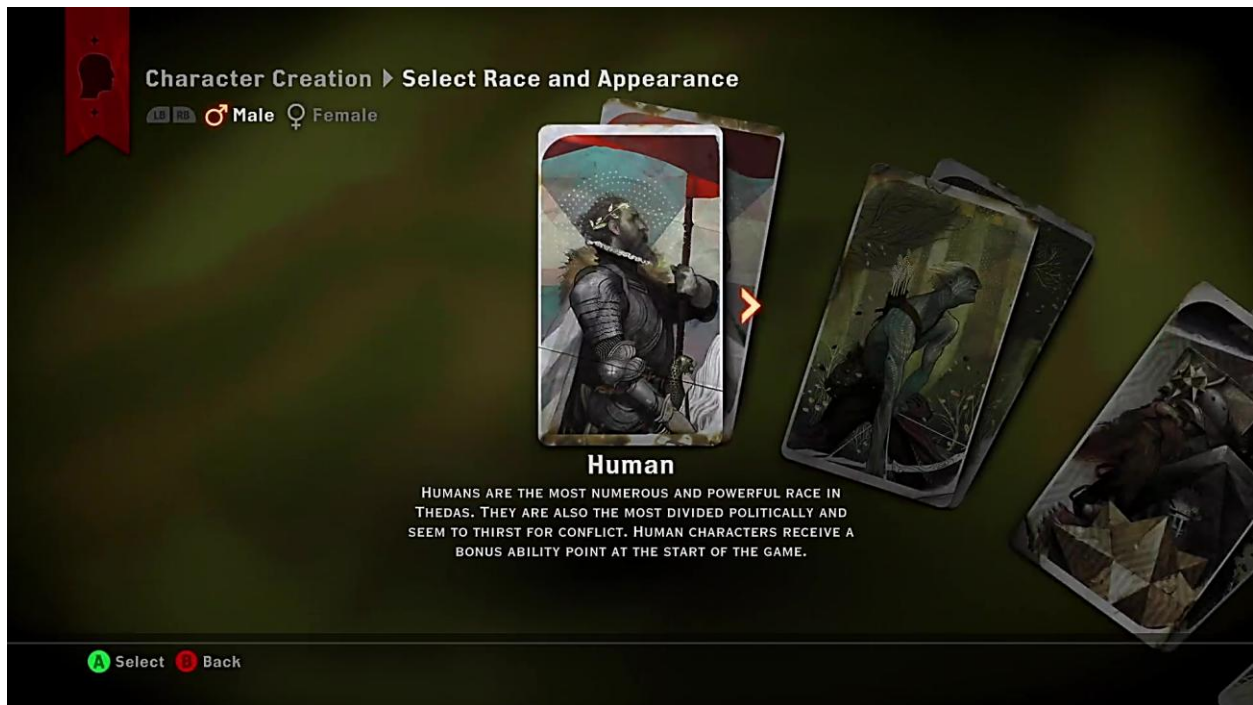


Figure 6. First screen of *Inquisition's* CCI. Screenshot by the author.

Participant 1 was able to enact an approach to character creation based on voice prompts because they had two opportunities to make sense of the syntagmatic structure of *Origins's* CCI. In their first attempt, the participant proceeded through the appearance syntagm in the order presented: skin → hair → eyes → nose → mouth → jaw/cheeks → neck/ears → portrait → voice. By building their first paradigm in this order, the participant was pushed into choosing a voice based on their previous selections instead of making selections to fit their PC's voice. When they built their second paradigm, Participant 1 could do so based on their knowledge of

what lay ahead in the syntagm. Indeed, the participant described selecting darker colours in the first sections of the syntagm to fit their new, violently voiced character.

Participant 3 built an appearance paradigm that matched their perception of what a champion would look like in the *Dragon Age* universe, as their PC was described as “the champion” in a pre-customization cutscene. However, “champion” is not the only role ascribed to the PC of *DIII*, as the PC is also the sibling of an NPC shown in a pre-customization tutorial sequence. This NPC—who is white by default—can appear differently in-game depending on how the player customizes their PC, yet the game neglects to inform the player of this feature. In their post-play interview, Participant 3 asked whether the NPC relatives would appear differently had they strayed farther from the PC’s default appearance, adding that they designed the PC to cohere with their sibling’s initial appearance. I admit it is debatable whether this is a matter of the CCI’s syntagm, given that the pre-customization sequences cannot be filled with a player-determined sign. Still, the fact that the game places these sequences before the player interacts with the CCI affected the way Participant 3 built their paradigm. Further, this ordering and the failure to communicate that the sibling’s appearance is malleable can have a marginalizing effect on players who want to play as a PC who is nonwhite *and* who fits into all their assigned roles.

Alternative Uses for Character Creation

As I discussed in chapter two, existing empirical research on character creation largely takes place in multiplayer contexts and assumes an instrumentalist approach that foregrounds how players create PCs to navigate player-to-player interactions. Such research often begins with a statement that the PC/character/avatar functions as a representation of the player in a virtual environment (Pace, 2008; Ducheneaut et al., 2009; Turkay & Adinolf, 2015; McArthur, 2018). I build off this prior research to employ a more open-ended approach to character creation that

endeavors not to assume anything about the purpose of the PC *except* that the player creates their PC to do something within the gameworld. Yet an emergent theme shows that even this approach may be too prescriptive, as certain statements from participants suggest that players can use character creation for ends other than the creation of a gameplay agent. I provide three examples of such alternative ends here: learning, enjoyment, and drafting. Though players can create a PC for multiple purposes at the same time, for some participants, another end appeared to take priority over the creation of a gameplay agent.

Creating to Learn

Participants 2, 5, 6, and 7 mentioned they read the text descriptions that accompany various CCI options to get a sense of what might await them in the gameworld. This kind of learning was most visible in Participant 2's *Origins* play session. Participant 2 would read the various race and class descriptions on the first screen of the CCI, make a selection, then read the subsequent options that opened up as a result of their initial choices. At that point, they would return to the top of the order and make a different selection to read about other possible race → class → background paradigms, repeating this process for a little over four minutes. This repeated backtracking looked tedious to me, so I was surprised by the following exchange from our post-play interview:

P2: I really like that first part where you had to click, which are you going to be: a dwarf, human or, uh, elf. Then you have to go up and below. I really liked how it switched, what would a human—what thing you clicked.

R: Like the subsequent options?

P2: Yeah, like how you had to—basically, to read them all, I had to keep clicking around and find ‘okay, this is what this does, this what that does.’

R: And you enjoyed that?

P2: I did enjoy that. That was very nice.

By seeing how categories like race, gameplay class, and background affected one another, the participant learnt about what is and is not possible in this unfamiliar gameworld; they learnt that this world had no dwarven mages, for example, nor elven nobles. While this process may help a player make choices in the creation of a PC, they ultimately gain knowledge about the gameworld that goes beyond any one agent.

Creating to Enjoy

Participants 1, 2, and 5 mentioned they enjoy the process of character creation. Of these, Participant 1 placed the highest importance on the character creation process, going so far as to say that, in many cases, they enjoy it more than the gameplay that follows:

P1: What tends to happen is that I spend like eight trillion hours in the character creation, and when I get into the game, I play the game for like two hours, and then I hop off.

They went on to discuss character creation almost as its own game, explaining that even when a CCI might lack certain options, they enjoy overcoming these challenges using the tools at hand. Participant 1 stands out in that they were the only participant to discuss enjoying character creation without an expectation of continuous play afterwards. There are likely many other players who adopt a similar approach to character creation, and still more who enjoy the process of character creation in itself while keeping an eye on how it might affect subsequent gameplay; Participants 2 and 5 fall into this latter category. The fact that certain CCIs have been released separately from their respective game is another piece of evidence for a broad appreciation of character creation (Gould, 2024; Henley, 2024), as it implies many players are willing to spend time creating characters without immediately jumping into gameplay. Despite this, current

scholarship lacks substantive engagement with how and why players enjoy character creation in itself.

Creating to Draft

Participant 4 was unique in that they were the only participant to say that they generally dislike the process of character creation; however, even they mentioned that they had once downloaded a free MMORPG called *Dragon Raja* (Archosaur Games, 2019–Present) to access its in-depth CCI. The reason they gave for this apparently counterintuitive action was that they used *Dragon Raja*'s CCI to visualize characters they were developing for a draft novel. When it comes to this participant's usual play habits, they reported that they prefer games that either feature simple, streamlined CCIs or no character creation at all. Their behaviour in the play session conformed to this preference, as the participant spent only six minutes interacting with the *DAII* CCI. Therefore, it makes sense that they would download a game like *Dragon Raja* not to play it or savour its CCI's depth, but rather to support their out-of-game creative pursuits.

Several disciplinary currents within game studies examine how players might use digital games to "do" things other than achieving in-game objectives. Bogost (2011) articulates just such an ecological approach in *How to do Things with Videogames*, and over the past two decades, scholars have covered such diverse topics as how video games might be used to promote everyday prosocial behaviours (Flanagan, 2021), teach postindustrial labour skills (Golumbia, 2009), or make money through item and account trading (Valkyrie, 2017). Despite this general diversity in work about the functions of gameplay, a similarly healthy ecology in the literature about character creation has yet to emerge. I try to contribute to such an ecology in this research by acknowledging the agency of CCIs, the wide range of possible functions for a custom PC, and the importance of the context in which player–CCI interactions are situated. That being said, my

ability to examine the ends of character creation that sit outside of gameplay was limited by my assumption that, while the PC might fulfill any number of functions within the gameworld, the primary purpose of character creation is always to produce a PC for gameplay. The study design that resulted from this assumption yielded insights about how character creation affects emergent player–PC relationships—which I discuss in-detail in the following chapter—yet it seems that, for some participants, character creation is most strongly connected to matters outside of gameplay. Future research may wish to foreground alternative uses for character creation and situate the process in media ecologies that stretch beyond the gameworld.

Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed three themes that I identified based on my observations and discussions of player–CCI interactions. First, participant–CCI interactions were conditioned by the media, social, and material contexts in which they take place. Far from contaminating participant–CCI interactions, these conditioning factors were what made such interactions possible in the first place. Second, participant–CCI interactions could support or challenge a participant’s initial approach and goals for their PC. Both support and challenge required participants to adapt around the necessarily finite options presented by a CCI. Instances of challenge where a CCI lacked an important affordance or presented an unexpected affordance led certain participants to adapt their PCs to such an extent that it affected their subsequent engagement with the game. While prior research shows that the options and design functions within CCIs exert agency upon the player (McArthur, 2015), the adaptations I observed suggest that players can imagine affordances that go beyond a CCIs technical function or its designer’s intentions. Likewise, some participants found uses for a CCI other than the creation of a PC for gameplay; this final theme emerged from discussions of how participants use CCIs to learn about

gameworlds, how participants enjoy character creation in itself, and how a participant uses CCIs as tools for out-of-game creative pursuits. Taken together, these themes indicate a need for character creation research to adopt an ecological approach that examines the possibilities afforded by player–CCI interactions within and beyond a gameworld. In the following chapter, I focus on the in-world possibilities afforded through character creation as I discuss the different relationships that began to emerge between participants and their PCs.

Chapter 5: Themes in Player–PC Relationships

This chapter addresses the second research question: how do player characters (PCs) affect the ways players engage with and respond to singleplayer gameplay? Through observations and discussions of how each participant used the PC they created, I identified three themes: participants tended to use their custom PCs as instruments of digital embodiment or expression, which can be mapped onto the terms “avatar” and “character,” respectively; the ways participants related to their PCs changed over time to accommodate shifts in their gameplay situation and its surrounding context; and qualities such as race, social class, and gender figured differently into each participant’s relationship with their PC depending on the participant’s positionality and desired experience. In my discussion of each theme, I trace threads of influence from the character creation processes that I examined in the previous chapter.

PCs: What are They Good For?

Newman (2002) establishes that the foundation of the player–PC relationship is its action potentials; wherever there is a PC, the player is trying to use them to *do* something. Though Newman applies a relatively narrow focus on how players use PCs to overcome mechanical obstacles, subsequent scholarship has shown that players can use PCs for a wide range of functions: dramatic performance (Linderoth, 2005; Stenros & Sihvonen, 2020), player-to-player communication (Linderoth, 2005; Kafai et al., 2010; McArthur, 2015), identity exploration (Banks, 2015; Smith, 2025), etc. In this study, I found a similar diversity in the things participants sought to do with the PCs they created. Yet within this diversity, each participant used their PCs for at least one of two broad goals: to achieve a sense of embodiment within the gameworld, or to express something within or outside of the gameworld. I map these distinct

forms of instrumental relation onto the terms “avatar” and “character” and provide examples of various kinds of avatar and character relationships that I observed in this research.

For clarity and convenience, I discuss different forms of participant–PC relationships as discrete objects, similar to how Banks (2015) describes the individual components within her typology of player–avatar relationships. However, in practice each relationship I observed was neither stable nor discrete. Each participant displayed a series of “affiliative states” (Taylor et al, 2015) vis-à-vis their PC that would shift throughout the play session in response to attractors from within the game or the surrounding play context. Though this fluidity was a constant within and between participant sessions, participants often displayed a desire for a specific relationship state and framed their interactions with character creation interfaces (CCIs) as a process of laying the groundwork for one of those states above others. It would therefore be most appropriate to refer to these relationship states as tendencies rather than types or stable objects; participants may have strived to realize a certain state, usually basing this goal on their prior play experiences, yet contextual forces within and outside the game always complicate these tendencies. In the following section, I discuss some of the relationship states that participants tended towards, which are best described through the terms avatar and character. Throughout this discussion, I pay consistent attention to factors that made these relationship states possible or impossible for a participant at a given moment of gameplay.

Avatars: Instruments of Embodiment

De Wildt et al. (2020) provide a detailed overview of how “avatar” came to be a keyword in English-speaking tech culture. The authors begin with the word’s origins in Sanskrit and its theological meanings in Hindu scriptures. They explain that in these scriptures, “an avatar is an object of worship and the manifestation of a divinity that descends on earth” (p. 964). Drawing

on prior genealogical work by Coleman (2011) and Dovey and Kennedy (2006), de Wildt et al. note that the use of "avatar" in the context of digital gaming ironically marks a reversal of its original meaning. Where the avatar of Hindu scripture is the physical manifestation of transcendent divinity, the gaming avatar is a manifestation of the ordinary, corporeal player as they adopt a body in a digital gameworld. Often, this body comes with power that feels almost deific, at least in relation to the NPCs over whom the player exerts their agency. De Wildt et al. argue that the appropriation of "avatar" was an Orientalist process that conveyed two key messages to players: gaming can be an "exotic" escape from the mundane everyday of Western life, and the player agent can be an elevated incarnation of the self instead of a mere tool.

These functions of the avatar—embodiment as duplication and exoticization—are largely absent from Klevjer's (2006; 2012) influential articulation of the avatar as the set of mechanical capabilities the player adopts through their PC. Klevjer sees the avatar less as the player's digital double and more as an actual part of their body-subject; arguing that being is grounded in action rather than mind or matter alone, Klevjer claims that the avatar allows for action such that "[w]hen I am playing, I am actually there, as a composite of flesh and technology, objectively existing in synthetic space" (2012, p. 34). Though this conception of the avatar has been productive for subsequent scholarship that analytically separates mechanical action and narrative content (Vella, 2016; Blom, 2022), my analyses suggest that this separation begins to fray when character creation is at play. Instead of integrating their PCs into a larger body-subject oriented towards mechanical action, several participants approached their PCs as a digital embodiment of themselves to be used for dramatic, visual, *and/or* action-based pleasures. Regardless of the specific flavour of the desired identification, the central premise of this avatar relation is that the player in some way perceives the avatar *as themselves*. When they have the PC take an action or

see something happen to the PC, they frame it as something they did or something that happened to them in another world. The avatar is their digital embodiment, but not necessarily an instrument of “prosthetic telepresence” as Klevjer might describe it (2012).¹ A sensation of telepresence is difficult to achieve in *Dragon Age*, in any case, given that each game uses a third-person camera angle that positions the player outside the body of their custom PC. While it may seem that a sense of embodiment in this third-person arrangement would necessarily entail visual resemblance with the created PC, the examples of different avatar relationships that follow demonstrate that players may seek embodiment within the gameworld in a variety of forms and for a variety of reasons.

The Digital Flesh

Participant 6 established a kind of relationship to their PC that conforms to a straightforward conception of the avatar as “the flesh made virtual” (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, p. 144). In the following exchange, they state their preference for a strong visual resemblance to their PCs and connect this preference to a broader goal of experiencing a narrative that feels personal to them:

R: So you find, like, having the character resemble you visually helps you... I'm just trying to remember what term you used—is it ‘believable’ or—

P6: It just kind of makes it more grounded, that it's just like, ‘this is something that I could do if I was in this situation. If I was sent to the *Dragon Age* world.’ What would someone like me be able to do, or someone like me but like a little bit more unique.

¹ Telepresence refers to “the experience of presence in an environment by means of a communication medium” (Steuer, 1992). It is a sense of “being there,” which does not always come with a sense of identification with an onscreen representation or action. Klevjer (2012) associates telepresence most strongly with first-person avatars.

The use of the PC as an experiential proxy was apparent in how Participant 6 approached customization in *Veilguard*, as they gave the PC their name, close approximations of their physical features, and gameworld-specific qualities that they identified with from their previous *Dragon Age* experiences. Yet even in this case of close resemblance, the participant's incarnation of themselves was imperfect by design—as suggested by their note that they make their avatars like them “but a little more unique.” This connects to the exoticizing function of the avatar described by de Wildt et al. (2020), as the discrepancies between Participant 6 and their PCs seem to result from a desire for embodiment in a fantastical world different from their own. Some of these discrepancies were apparent in the participant's *Veilguard* play session; like every *Dragon Age* player, Participant 6 did not possess the physically impossible capabilities they assigned to their PC as a warrior, mage, or rogue. However, the participant touched on a subtler, more interesting form of difference between themselves and their digital flesh when we discussed their past experiences with *Origins*.

During the first interview, I found out that Participant 6 and I both made our first *Origins* PCs casteless dwarves. Given that the participant had no facial tattoos offscreen, I asked whether, like me, they had initially attempted to create a dwarven PC without one. They replied that they had, and that upon receiving the prompt about the significance of facial brands for casteless dwarves (see Figure 1 on page 24), they gave their avatar a facial tattoo that they made “as small and skin-toned as possible.” Even though Participant 6 prefers PCs that resemble them, they were apparently willing to negotiate aspects of that resemblance to integrate qualities demanded by the gameworld's diegesis. The logic behind these negotiations is sound; if, as the participant said, a primary appeal of RPG play is being able to see themselves act in another world, their avatar must take on whatever qualities they do not have that are needed to be present in that

world. In this way, the digital flesh is necessarily a vehicle of “identity tourism,” or the appropriation of an identity for leisure purposes (Nakamura, 1995). Though the appropriated identity in RPGs often comes with almost deific mechanical capabilities, the appropriation of a socially marginalized identity can also become part of the leisure experience. Indeed, Participant 6 said they appreciated the fact that “because I played as a dwarf [in *Origins*], some of the insults the characters would give were related to dwarves.”

In invoking their appreciation of identity-based insults, I do not mean to critique the playstyle of Participant 6. Critiques of identity tourism as problematic often hinge on premises that I cannot definitively say are true for any one participant, namely that they occupy a position of privilege in relation to the identity they appropriate *and* that they take their touristic experiences as representative of some external reality (Yang, 2017; Fickle & Patterson, 2022; Consalvo & DeJong, 2024). I instead invoke the experiences of Participant 6 to argue that even the most true-to-life attempts at digital embodiment inherently entail a degree of identity tourism. This identity tourism can have problematic implications depending on the position of the player vis-à-vis the PC; for example, a player who had not personally experienced race or class-based oppression might digitally overcome such challenges through the individual efforts of their powerful avatar and erroneously assume similar paths out of oppression are feasible outside the gameworld as well (Kampe, 2022).

The Self-Portrait

Like Participant 6, Participants 1 and 4 discussed their PCs in terms of overt identification, framing character creation as a process of creating another ‘me.’ Yet where Participant 6 sought a “kinaesthetic” (Giddings & Kennedy, 2008) relationship where visual resemblance helped them identify with the actions performed onscreen, Participants 1 and 4

discussed visual identification as largely separate from gameplay action. Both participants said they prefer to create PCs that look like versions of themselves tailored to the gameworld's aesthetics: "what I would want to look like if I was in that world," in the words of Participant 1, and "what I'd want to look like in a different universe" in the words of Participant 4. Yet neither participant connected the usage of the PC as an object of visual identification with its use as a mechanism of action within the gameworld. Participant 1 went so far as to say that they often spend more time creating PCs than they do playing as them, while Participant 4 said they generally prefer games with minimal character creation and that they employ this self-visualization approach only where character creation cannot be avoided entirely. Though they sit at opposite ends of the spectrum when it comes to enjoyment of character creation, there is a similarity in how these participants disentangle their practices of self-recreation from active gameplay. They each identify with their avatars mostly as "reflections" (Rehak, 2003) with little emphasis on their role as prosthetics/proxies (Newman, 2012; Klevjer, 2012). When it came to their interactions with the *Dragon Age* games, the participants were again similar in that neither felt satisfied with the self-portraiture affordances on offer, though this had different effects on their subsequent gameplay experiences.

Participant 1 could not create a stylized version of themselves in the *Origins* CCI due to its marginalization of Blackness—as discussed further in the previous chapter—and they responded by enacting a different kind of player–PC relationship that I highlight in the section on characters. Meanwhile, Participant 4 stayed the course and attempted to create an alternate version of themselves in *DAII* despite the strong aesthetic differences between the game and the series in which they had previously created alternate selves. They assigned their PC features like white hair and a smooth complexion, which matched their stated desire to present a soft, "pop-

star” kind of masculinity. Their dissatisfaction with this PC was immediately and continuously apparent during dialogues and cutscenes, as they laughed at their PC's obvious incongruence with other bodies in the gameworld when they first stepped onscreen. During a later cutscene, they asked whether a different warrior was their PC, displaying a lack of identification with the portrait they created. During combat sequences, the participant did not display a similar dissatisfaction or even a concern for the way their PC appeared. They were silent and their posture—leaning in, moving their gaze between the keyboard, skill bar, and the screen—indicated a primary focus on learning systems and defeating their enemies. In this case, Newman’s (2002) assertion that visual representations diminish in importance when continuous player action is required proved to be true, yet cutscene and dialogue sequences are prevalent enough in *DAII* that the PC’s appearance proved to be a lasting irritant to Participant 4. In addition to their initial expressions of dissatisfaction and confusion, the participant began fidgeting and directing their gaze away from the screen with increasing frequency during the non-combat sequences.² In these sequences, Participant 4 initially seemed ready to see their avatar as a reflection of themselves; finding the reflection unsatisfying, they began to turn away.

The fact that Participants 1 and 4 found their modes of engagement redirected or frustrated by the fact that they could not see themselves in their PCs problematizes Klevjer’s (2012) assertion that the avatar renders the player’s body “irrelevant in its original (non-extended) configuration” (p. 28). Like Klevjer’s approach to avatars more generally, this statement is bound up in an action-adventure context where the PC is often visually immutable

² Multiple factors may have contributed to this disengagement, including reported fatigue from illness and travel. As all gameplay is conditioned by bodily states and other 'external' factors, I would argue that this complements rather than invalidates the apparent connection between the PC's appearance and Participant 4's disengagement.

and/or invisible behind a first-person camera.³ In games that involve character creation—especially dialogue-heavy, third-person RPGs like *Dragon Age*—players who seek a sense of embodiment within their PC cannot help but be aware of their body’s configuration and whether it is possible to configure a similar body onscreen. Admittedly, Participants 1 and 4 were not necessarily seeking the kind of action-based embodiment that Klevjer and others describe as an essential characteristic of the player-avatar relation (Giddings & Kennedy, 2008; Vella, 2016; Blom, 2022). However, the experience of Participant 6 attests to the significance that the avatar’s visible body can have for modes of engagement more oriented towards feelings of existing and acting within the gameworld.

The Protean Self

Before I discuss the character relationships enacted by certain participants, I will examine a relationship Participant 2 established with their PC that bears some similarities to a character relation based on expression, but which ultimately fits within an avatarial frame. Participant 2 began *Origins* with the intention of creating an avatar that would appear and act like them; they said they abandoned this goal when they saw the option to play nonhuman PCs, at which point they had “no idea what I [Participant 2] was doing” other than that they were trying to create a “cool warrior dwarf.” The participant thus did not view their character creation process as one of self-recreation, nor did they seem to view their PC as a representation of themselves in the same way as Participants 4 and 6. Unlike these participants, Participant 2 did not give their PC their exact name or physical features that were recognizable approximations of their own. In this way, they seemed primed to enter a relationship of character performance, wherein they would express themselves through a distinct dramatic persona outside their sense of self. However, the participant

³ Even in its original context, it is worth noting that this statement would not be true for disabled players who may not be able to interface with the avatar through ableist systems design. See Ellis & Kai-Ti (2019) for more.

did something else that foreshadowed the particular kind of avatar relationship they would enact with this PC: they gave them a transformed version of their name—a letter substituted here, one shuffled there—that was nonetheless recognizable as theirs.

During their play session, Participant 2 would often comment on their actions or other onscreen events; in such interjections, their pronoun use indicated they identified with their PC as a vessel of personal transformation.⁴ It should be noted that not *all* pronoun usage is indicative of a unique or close player identification with the PC, as Participant 2 would occasionally say things like “I didn’t mean to do that” or “where do I go?” Such statements conform to Banks’s (2015) observation that most players use “I” when describing their use of the PC’s mechanical capabilities, irrespective of how they identify with their PC in a social, dramatic, or visual frame of reference. The reason I say Participant 2’s pronoun use implies a relationship of transformation is that they used “I” to comment on events outside their direct mechanical input. For example, when they realized their PC had been betrayed by their brother during some courtly intrigues, they exclaimed, “**My** other brother—did he really? What an asshole!” Here the participant did not just claim the PC’s actions as their own, but also the PC’s relationships to other actors within the gameworld’s narrative drama. Had the participant seen their PC as a distinct character in that moment, they might have said, “**His** older brother?” After voicing their personal sense of grievance, the participant took things a step further and chose to kill an unnamed scout who provided false testimony in support of their treacherous sibling.

In their second interview, Participant 2 discussed this betrayal sequence in a way that revealed further nuances regarding their identification with the PC. They justified their decision

⁴ While Banks and Bowman (2016) conducted a quantitative linguistic analysis to validate judgements of player–PC relationships, I chose to adopt a selective, qualitative approach given that most participant statements and pronoun use came from the semi-structured interviews. Their pronoun use in these interviews may have been influenced by the wording of my questions, whereas verbalizations during play came unprompted.

to summarily execute the scout by saying that, even though they wanted to make morally “good” choices, “if someone below me [in social status] lied like that, I would probably kill them” (see Figure 7). In noting the tension between what their own lived experience told them would be morally good—not killing the scout—versus what they “would probably do” in their PC’s position as a ruling class dwarf—kill the scout—the participant appeared to relate to their avatar as a “protean” or transformed self.⁵ Instead of trying to create and play a PC to be like them, as I would argue Participant 6 did, Participant 2 sought to act as if they were the PC they created. Identity tourism is perhaps most pronounced in this form of the avatar, as taking on exotic qualities like a royal lineage becomes less a byproduct of entering the digital world and more a sought-after pleasure that begins at the act of character creation.



Figure 7. Killing of the scout. Screenshot taken from Participant 2 session recording.

⁵ I draw the term “protean” from discourse around the “proteus effect,” or changes to self-perception that occur through avatar play (Fox et al., 2013). I cannot say whether Participant 2’s self-perception was changed beyond the play session, but I call their play “protean” because of its conscious embrace of temporary self-transformation.

Characters: Instruments of Expression

In her definition of “game character,” Blom (2022) locates the origin of the word “character” in the Ancient Greek “*kharakter*,” which first referred to a stamping tool and then to the stamps themselves. Blom traces the evolution of *kharakter* into characters of theatre, novels, films, and most recently, video games. Through this genealogy, Blom claims that a player-character is a “playable figure distinct from the avatar in the sense that it denotes a human-like figure with a personality independent from the player even if the player controls them directly” (2022). While Blom’s emphasis on the independent personality of the character helps distinguish it from the “avatar” and the term’s connotations of prosthetic control and player embodiment, a character that the player creates cannot be said to have a personality that is “independent” of the player. So, what does it mean for a player to create a “character,” and what distinguishes the created character from the created avatar? Here I linger at the beginning of Blom’s genealogy with the *kharakter* stamp and the ends and means of expression. A character may be a fictional being, but they may also be a mark and/or tool of player expression. This is especially true in contexts involving character creation, where a player can engage in expression through the qualities they assign their PCs and the ways they use those qualities in their interactions with the gameworld. Created agents cannot be said to have personalities wholly independent of the player, but they may be something other than the player’s digital flesh. The player’s character may be a *kharakter* in every sense of the word: the player can use their character to express something, and this expression may be represented on the screen as the character themselves. Below, I examine how participants in this study used their characters to engage in and enjoy various forms of expression.

The Dramatic Persona

During the creation and play sessions, I saw Participants 1, 3, and 7 begin to craft distinct histories and personalities for their PCs by taking cues from their diegetic circumstances. The characters they each constructed evoke conventional understandings of what is meant by the term “character” in the other, older forms of narrative media referenced by Blom (2022). These participants conceptualized their PCs almost as if they were characters in a play; they would perform the role their PC represented, and they would even write the role as they played it, yet these participants did not frame this performance as an act of becoming like Participant 2. As an example, I will examine the character performance of Participant 1.

Participant 1 began *Origins* seeking to create an alternate vision of themselves but found a barrier to identification in the game’s whitewashed CCI options. They then seized on labels assigned to the CCI’s various voice options to perform what they described as an aggressive, assertive character, saying, “I wanted to make her, like, kind of mean, but then when I went into the game, I realized that I couldn’t bring myself to be as mean as I wanted to.” Like Participant 2, Participant 1 slips into a kind of functional identification here, using “I” to describe actions they take through their PC. Yet unlike Participant 2, Participant 1 frames their PC as having a separate persona when they say they wanted to “make **her**” mean. In discussing why they found it difficult to make this character mean, the participant used a similar framing: “there were some choices that were misogynistic, and I was like, ‘my character is not racist or misogynistic.’ She’s just had a hard upbringing, you know?” Of note is how the participant says “**my character** is not racist or misogynistic” instead of “**I** am not racist or misogynistic.” To be clear, I am not implying the participant is racist or misogynistic—in fact, it is possible that their lived experiences and personal worldviews contributed to their reluctance to create a character who

expresses such bigotry. The reason I seize on their pronoun usage is that it shows the participant attributes moral values to their character as a separate entity. Further, they connect their PC's demeanour to their circumstances within the gameworld's diegesis; they reference their PC's hard upbringing as a mage confined to a tower and subjected to constant surveillance by religious police, which they learnt about while playing through the prologue sequence specific to mages. The participant navigated this prologue sequence through a character performance, which—while likely informed by various lived attractors—they did not claim as their own lived or even vicarious experience.

If some players create PCs to engage in character performance, then it is fair to ask: for whom do they perform in a singleplayer context? My answer would be that the player performs for themselves, and there is some precedent for this view in the scholarly literature. Owen (2017), for instance, argues that singleplayer gameplay is always a kind of performance wherein the player's inputs are re-presented to them onscreen through the audiovisual displays of their PC. While Owen largely discusses this self-performance in terms of its kinaesthetic affect, I would argue that players may also perform a dramatic persona for their own enjoyment. Stenros and Sihvonon (2020) make a similar claim when they argue that singleplayer RPGs afford rich opportunities for “pretend play,” wherein players act “as if” the PCs they create have personal histories and internal states that can be partially reflected at most through onscreen action. In addition to the pleasure of seeing their dramatic performance unfold onscreen, participants who enacted a performative character relationship seemed to enjoy “playing pretend” with regard to what their PC might be feeling beyond the screen, not unlike how a child might project feelings onto a doll or similar physical toy. In addition to Participant 1's projection of moral values onto their PC, the backstory that Participant 7 constructed to explain the appearance of their PC's

facial tattoo is a good example of pretend play. As an experienced RPG player, the participant knew they would never be asked in dialogue to explain the tattoo they selected, so there was no dramatic or mechanical reason to pretend that their PC “felt shame” such that they covered their facial tattoo with their hair (see Figure 4 on page 60). The simplest explanation as to why they concocted this backstory is that they enjoyed playing pretend and telling themselves a story—an explanation supported by their statement that they play RPGs to indulge the “ability to express myself.” This underscores that, for some players, a primary appeal of the custom PC is that it allows them to play in ways creative and performative.

When it comes to the questions of race, gender, and marginalized experiences that I raised in discussions of avatar relationships through Nakamura’s (1995) concept of identity tourism, it is worth noting that character relationships are not automatically more or less problematic. After all, a player could perform a character that exhibits derogatory racial or gendered stereotypes, just as a player might give a nuanced and sensitive performance of a raced or gendered character. The difference between avatars and characters here is simply that if there are social problems at play in a character relationship, they are not problems of “tourism” wherein the player appropriates the subjectivity of the PC as their own. Those are the pleasures and potential problems of a relation based on embodiment, not expression.

The Prop

Just as a player might use a PC to perform for themselves, they can use PCs to perform or express themselves for other people. This use of singleplayer PCs as communicative tools may seem similar to how PCs often function in networked multiplayer contexts, but there is a key difference: where online PCs generally serve as “self-representations” in the absence of a visible physical body (Pace, 2008, McArthur, 2015; Turkay & Adinolf, 2015), singleplayer PCs may

serve as “props” to support expressions directed at others in a frame of interaction that primarily sits outside the gameworld itself. Linderoth (2005) first articulated such a prop relationship based on his observations of children playing offline multiplayer games in the same room, though my personal experience and study observations suggest this relationship may form in the singleplayer context as well.

Given that I initially encountered *Origins* as a preteen who played digital games in a shared domestic space, I was obliged to consider what the appearances and actions of my PCs might express to members of my family. For context, my parents did not heavily police my leisure activities or closely investigate the content of what I played. However, the fact that my parents held power over my purchases and the use of shared spaces meant I still felt the need to self-manage the outward appearance of my play activities, lest some of that freedom be taken away. This meant that I might not act as Participant 2 did when they had their PC execute the treacherous scout—not because I would not want to, but because over-the-top blood effects in *Origins* could attract a parental intervention. Likewise, I recall feeling some initial anxiety about playing as a female PC in *Origins* as I was not sure how my family members would interpret cross-gender play. While I created a female PC anyway, I also did my best to attire her and my female party members in armours that covered more of the body than those that were obviously tailored to a sexualized, male gaze. Even though I related to her and my other PCs in ways more directly tied to my desired diegetic experiences, these PCs were also props that allowed me to express a less violent, sexual form of play that I felt my family would find age-appropriate.⁶

With regard to my participants, I did not observe or discuss any single event that I would describe as a strong example of the prop relationship, yet this does not mean such a relationship

⁶ Harvey (2015) provides an in-depth analysis of how children navigate and internalize parental regulation of their play activities in the domestic context, with strong consideration of how gender factors into such regulations.

was never at play. As my childhood reminiscences indicate, a character may be used as a prop to substitute potentially inappropriate expressions with ones that are more likely to fly under the radar of those who are co-situated with the single player. It is thus possible that participants used PCs as props in ways that I did not notice. For instance, I would posit that a reason I did not see more deviation between the gender presentations of participants and their PCs is that participants may have used their PCs to express their play through a gendered body they felt was “safe” for observation. In their study of gender-swapping practices in MMORPGs, Jenson et al. (2015) likewise saw lower rates of swapping among participants who were being observed versus those who responded to surveys about the genders of their PCs. I argue that this possible response to observation is one manifestation of a wider practice of using PCs as props. I should also note that the prop relationship is not always brought on by feelings of being surveilled or repressed in one's play. A more lighthearted instance of the prop relationship can be seen in the web series *Monster Factory* (Polygon, 2018), wherein the hosts create characters with implausible, exaggerated physical features to help them crack jokes and present in a comedic fashion to their audience (see Figure 8). In all these cases, the prop relationship appears closer to the meaning of *kharakter* as a tool for expression rather than the expression itself, as the player uses the PC to augment a self-presentation that primarily sits outside the gameworld.

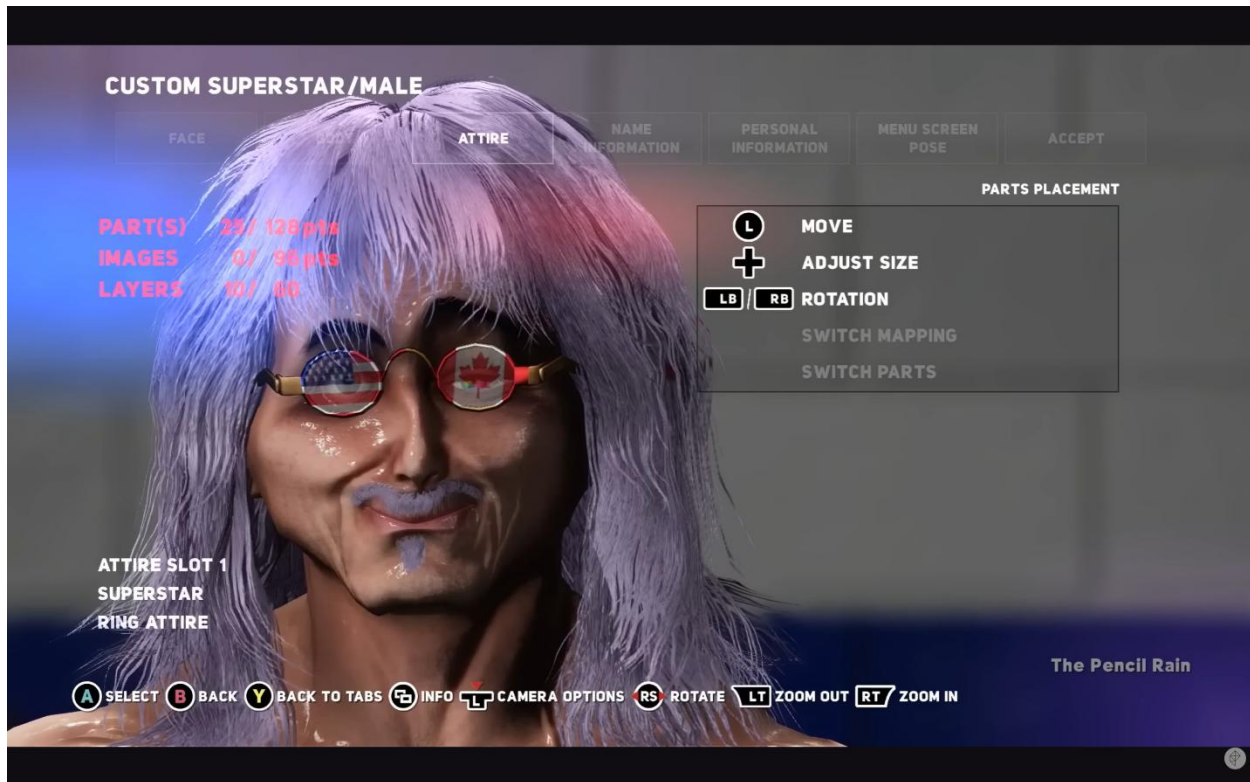


Figure 8. Arby “The Meathead” McDonald. Screenshot from video by Polygon.

The Attraction

Participant 8 was unique in that they discussed their relationship to their PC not in terms of embodiment or performance, but rather in terms of attraction. Specifically, they said that in action-oriented games, they tend to create PCs they find physically attractive. Such forces of attraction or desire are relatively underexamined in scholarly literature on player–PC relationships, with a few notable exceptions. Consalvo (2003) and Voorhees (2014), for example, each argue that queer forms of attraction are central to player–PC relationships. Both scholars draw on Sedgwick’s (1995) concept of the erotic triangle to argue that video games often disguise such queer attraction through heteronormative romance plots that place a differently gendered NPC between the player and the PC, who may be of the same gender. Voorhees further describes the dynamics of attraction between the player and PC through Rich’s (1980/2003) concept of the “lesbian continuum,” which refers to an element of queerness in relationships that

women have with one another outside of heterosexual marriages; this queerness exists on a continuum that flows between the social and the sexual but in any case involves the pleasures of sharing a “rich inner life” (Rich, 1980/2003, p. 27). A similar intimacy seems to be present in gameplay, where the player shares the experiences of a PC and may relate to them as an other whose life they would like to share, at least for a while.⁷ Participant 8 explicitly embraced such social-physical intimacy as the foundation of the player–PC relationship they aimed to enact in *Inquisition*, and it should be noted that the *Dragon Age* games are particularly well-suited to an open embrace of queer intimacy. This is because, in addition to allowing players to create PCs of different physical forms and genders, the *Dragon Age* games do not foist heterosexual romance onto the PC and allow for the creation of erotic triangles of various gender configurations. Players in *Inquisition* can thus express multiple forms of desire, including queer desire, for PCs and NPCs.

Despite their clear goal and *Inquisition*’s relative flexibility in PC appearance/sexual orientation, Participant 8 reported that, once they started playing, they quickly realized they did not feel a strong physical attraction towards the PC. As I mentioned in Chapter 4, the strict separation between the race selection and appearance menus in *Inquisition* may have contributed to this outcome (see Figure 6 on page 67). However, the participant said their initial disappointment with their PC’s appearance quickly faded as they played:

P8: Sometimes it's maybe sexual, but it's more just like I just want you [the PC] to be aesthetically pleasing to me. And in my mind, that can kind of go, I mean, that's pretty subjective. And it's really, like, fluid.

⁷ Attraction may also exist between players and PCs of different genders, alongside dynamics of transgender identification (Kennedy, 2002). I would nonetheless argue that the structure of this attraction is fundamentally queer, as it does not depend on binary gender identities and by nature blurs boundaries between self/other, male/female (Ruberg, 2019).

This excerpt illustrates that a queer continuum may not only describe the range of possible attractions that may exist across different player–PC relationships, but also the shifts that may occur within such relationships. Where Participant 8 initially intended for their PC to express a vision of physical desirability, the relationship they established tended towards a more platonic, aesthetic attraction. Though none of the other participants explicitly discussed seeking or feeling attraction towards their PCs, Participant 8’s overt embrace of such attraction usefully sheds light on implicit dynamics at play in those relationships. For example, Participant 1 said they aim to create PCs that look “pretty” and “serene,” while Participant 2 repeatedly described their *Origins* PC as appearing “strong” and “cool.” The qualities invoked by these participants are conventionally associated with attractive forms of femininity and masculinity, respectively. While I am not arguing that same-sex attraction was an intentionally hidden, totally determining factor in how these participants created their PCs, it seems that they would prefer to enter into relationships with PCs they perceive as attractive, even when they discuss those relationships primarily in terms of performance or protean transformation.

In addition to casting light on this underappreciated dynamic in player–PC relationships, scholarship on player desire for the PC (Consalvo, 2003; Voorhees, 2014) provides a useful figure for representing the character/*kharakter* relation in all its manifestations: the triangle. Where there is an expression (the PC), there is also a party making the expression (the player) and a party receiving it. The recipient may vary depending on the specific kind of character relationship: in a singleplayer dramatic performance, the triangle takes on a temporal element as the player takes an action only to witness the outcome of that action re-presented through their character seconds later. Within different triangles, a player might create and use characters to make a variety of expressions: diegetic drama, extra-diegetic comedy, queer desire, or something

else entirely. The defining feature of the character relation and what separates it from the avatar's tendency towards closeness and embodiment is this triangular structure.

Overlaps and Changes in Participant–PC Relationships

As implied by the fluidity inherent in dynamics of attraction, a player's relationship to a PC can have multiple overlapping and evolving forms. After all, the fact that Participant 1 and 2 discussed their PCs in terms that suggest consideration of attraction does not mean that their relationships were not oriented towards performance or protean transformation; rather, it means that attraction may have been at play within and alongside those orientations. Likewise, the fact that many movie stars appear unrealistically “pretty” or “strong” does not mean that appearance or visual attraction is the entirety of their craft, though it is certainly not irrelevant either. Just as the audience of a film may appreciate onscreen action in different ways at once, players can have overlapping affiliations with their PCs. As Taylor et al. (2015) point out, which state of affiliation is strongest at a given moment depends on a mix of onscreen and offscreen factors. For example, in the play session of Participant 2, there was a moment where several NPCs toasted their PC to celebrate their ascension in the dwarven court. While they watched this unfold, Participant 2 turned away from the screen and raised an imaginary goblet in my direction. Though they were not exactly using their PC as a prop here, Participant 2 displayed an awareness that their play and their relationship to their PC were subject to observation. Their relationship of transformation was relegated to the background in that moment because, by physically commenting on the onscreen events in an offscreen frame of interaction, the participant had to stop pretending to be a dwarven noble and centre their identity as my friend and research participant. There were also long stretches of time during their play session without any interactions between us, and once the timer ran out, Participant 2 commented that at certain

points they had forgotten they were being observed at all. It was likely during these moments that their sense of transformation and onscreen embodiment was at its strongest.

In addition to momentary overlaps and shifts in affiliation, a player's relationship to one PC can be shaped by their relationship to another PC. For example, when I asked Participant 5 how they create diegetically grounded PCs in unfamiliar gameworlds, they replied as follows:

P5: This is gonna sound, maybe a little bit weird, but I make like the '[Participant name] character,' which is just like I make myself in the game, like a short play through the game, will learn about the world and the setting, will make choices I would probably make, and I gain like a lot of knowledge about the story in the world itself. And then I'll go make, like, a character that's centred within the story of that game.

Like Participant 6, Participant 5 created a PC to serve as their digital flesh, yet they presented this initial relationship as a stepping stone to a character-based relationship of dramatic performance. Their approach here evokes Jenson et al.'s (2015) account of MMORPG players who use one PC in a way that supports a different form of play using another PC. The difference here is that where those players juggled PCs to interact with the same instance of a gameworld, Participant 5 used a version of themselves to scout out the gameworld in anticipation of a more performance-oriented engagement with another instance of that gameworld.

When overlaps and shifts in player-PC relationships are taken into account, terms like "avatar" and "character" become hermeneutic categories as much as terms of reference. Rather than describing the entirety of what a PC is, the terms emphasize which aspects of a player-PC relationship a player prioritizes in a given moment or the aspects of the relationship an author will subject to analysis. In this research, I have tried to ensure that these two things are one and the same; I use labels and descriptions to convey what participants appeared or claimed to

prioritize in the PC relationships they enacted during their 90-minute sessions. However, a researcher could also describe a player–PC relationship as an avatar relationship to signal an analytic focus on how a player uses the PC for purposes related to embodiment in the gameworld. The term avatar evokes questions such as “what does the player experience through their PC? Do these experiences have some impactful or critical effect, or do they indulge in the more sensationalist tendencies of identity tourism?” One could describe the very same player–PC relationship in terms of characters to signal a focus on different questions, such as “what is the player expressing through their character? How does the way they have created this character rely on assumptions or desires related to race, gender, and class?” In this way, my distinction between avatars, characters, and the varieties of each is less a typology of players or PCs than it is a typology of questions about them.

Patterns in the Characteristics Assigned to PCs

Race and Social Class

Across my discussions and observations of participants’ relationships with their PCs, it became clear that participants who enact different kinds of relationships may choose similar characteristics for their PCs, while participants who tended towards similar kinds of relationships may construct wildly different PCs. To a certain extent, this is to be expected: what a player feels embodies them will naturally depend on that player’s subjective qualities, while the things a player finds attractive are likewise subjective, so on and so forth. However, these differences sometimes manifested in surprising ways. To demonstrate how participants related to similar characteristics in different and sometimes surprising ways, I compare how Participants 2 and 6 interpreted the dwarveness and class positions of their PCs.

In their statement that the presence of nonhuman race options was what pulled them away from self-recreation, Participant 2 reveals that they feel playing as a nonhuman precludes the possibility of seeing themselves onscreen—or more accurately, it precludes the possibility of seeing themselves *as they are*. Participant 2 framed playing as a dwarf as an experience of protean transformation. By contrast, Participant 6 said it is their practice to visually recreate themselves regardless of their PCs fantasy race, and they proceeded to create a dwarven PC in *Veilguard* who was recognizably “them.” I was initially surprised by this approach. Like Participant 2, I had associated faithful digital self-representation with playing as a human PC. However, this association was likely conditioned by my positionality as a white, cis-male player. Fantasy and sci-fi games often represent humanity as synonymous with whiteness while simultaneously refiguring representations of nonwhite cultures and non-heteronormative bodies into nonhuman races (Pace, 2008; Trammell, 2018; Iantorno & Consalvo, 2023; Smith, 2025).⁸ Without delving into details regarding the personal characteristics of my participants, the level of identification a given player displays towards different fantasy races may be influenced by the coding of various out-of-game cultural representations into those races; not all players would feel themselves to be represented in *Dragon Age* humans to the same extent as I. That being said, Participant 6 also invoked an underexamined facet of gamic identity in explaining why they chose to play as a dwarf: social class.⁹

Participant 6 said that their preference for dwarven PCs grew out of their decision to play as a dwarf in their first *Origins* playthrough, and when I asked whether their first dwarf was a noble or a commoner, they replied: “Commoner. I’m not a noble, so it felt [like] too much to

⁸ For an example of similar coding in *Dragon Age*, see Dalishious’s (2024) discussion of Indigeneity and elveness.

⁹ This is not to be confused with gameplay classes such as warrior, rogue, and mage, which primarily refer to how a PC engages in combat and not how they relate to diegetic social structures. While gameplay class might determine social class or vice versa, most visible in *Dragon Age* with mages, they are decidedly not interchangeable.

jump to.” Of course, the participant is not a dwarf either, but that did not seem to bother them or prompt an explanation as to why they felt that *wasn’t* too much to jump to. Though it is possible that the participant felt some identification with the game’s portrayal of dwarveness, it seems that their identification as a commoner was the more important factor when constructing their *Origins* PC. This inference is supported by the fact that dwarves are the only race in *Origins* with a “commoner” origin. Unless they are a mage, a human PC may only be a noble, a status the participant made clear they did not identify with. Though I previously discussed the play of Participant 6 in terms of identity tourism, it appears that they intentionally constructed their PC to give their play an element of “social realism,” which Galloway (2004) defines as the correspondence between an artistic work and the lived experience of its audience. As games are an action-based medium, Galloway argues that the strongest measure of gamic realism is not visual fidelity, but rather the correspondence between the onscreen and offscreen actions available to the player. Irrespective of how the various fantasy races appear or what they are called, Participant 6 may have felt that acting from the position of a commoner would provide them the most “real” experience and thus the strongest opportunity for embodiment within the gameworld. By contrast, Participant 2 chose to play as a dwarven noble, perhaps to add a class dimension to what they already saw as an experiment in identity tourism.

Gendered Associations and Assumptions

I have already mentioned how most participants selected gender options that aligned with their offscreen gender presentation as I interpreted it in their participation sessions, but statements by certain participants imply that gendered considerations factored into their selections of other PC characteristics, such as race and gameplay class. In this regard, Participants 1 and 2 once again prove instructive: recall that in trying to make a PC that looked

“pretty” and “serene,” Participant 1 spent approximately one minute flipping back and forth between human and elven race models but quickly skipped over the dwarven model. Though PCs of any race can be female, the participant did not feel that dwarves exhibited the conventionally feminine qualities they sought to portray; in all fairness to the participant, beauty and serenity are not commonly attributed to dwarven women in fantasy media, nor are dwarves often depicted as female in the first place. In a mirror image of this calculation, Participant 2 said they played as a dwarf over an elf because of how they associated the former with physical strength, going so far as to ask in their second interview whether it would even be possible to play as an elven warrior. Again, though it *is* possible to play such a warrior, Participant 2 opted for the race that possessed secondary sex characteristics associated with masculinity, such as broad shoulders and beards—qualities that elves cannot have in any *Dragon Age* game.¹⁰

In addition to an obvious resonance with considerations of desirability, Participant 2’s approach in particular conforms to Yee et al.’s (2011) observation that players tend to match mechanical capabilities with gendered stereotypes even when the game itself disentangles gender and mechanical capabilities. In Chapter 2, I argued that the networked nature of the game used in Yee et al.’s study may have contributed to their findings, as gender can function as a communication device; for example, if other players expect healers to present as female, then a player who wants to find a group for their healer might make that PC female so other players can more easily recognize their capabilities. However, my observations suggest that socially constructed associations between gender and mechanical capabilities do not automatically fade away when nobody is watching from the other side of the screen. Without discounting the

¹⁰ While it is true that each race also has small statistical bonuses in *Origins* that may affect their success as a warrior, mage, or rogue, these bonuses rapidly fade in importance as PCs level up and were not mentioned by any participant. Extra abilities and stat bonuses between races are even less significant in *Inquisition* and do not exist in *Veilguard*.

influence of player-to-player dynamics on character creation for multiplayer games, it seems that assumptions about gendered capabilities may figure into character creation as a kind of navigational device. Participant 2, who encountered the option of playing nonhuman races for the first time, used a perceived association between dwarveness, masculinity, and being a warrior to make sense of these novel options. Just as CCIs may be informed by hierarchical assumptions about race and gender, the ways players navigate such interfaces may be informed by similar assumptions even when the CCI does not strictly enforce them.

Despite gender's role in guiding some participants, it was never a totally determining factor, and it should be noted that some participants created PCs that subverted the gendered associations outlined above, including a female dwarf and a male elven warrior. In terms of non-normative gender presentation, the most notable PC was the one created by Participant 7, who assigned their PC gender neutral pronouns and constructed an androgynous gender presentation that differed from their own. While it is possible that identification and/or desire were at play in how Participant 7 crafted this presentation, they framed their choices largely in terms of novelty. Specifically, they said they were interested in how the gameworld would incorporate they/them pronouns, and in how they could combine cosmetic options games conventionally restrict to male *or* female PCs. Their experience with *Veilguard* here suggests that where a CCI actively presents opportunities to subvert conventional identity constructions, it may lead players to seize such opportunities. My own experiences with *Veilguard* support this view, as I created a nonbinary PC for similar reasons as Participant 7 several months before we met to conduct their session. However, the striking similarities between my PC and the one created by Participant 7 also evoke limitations in popular perceptions of what constitutes an androgynous appearance (see Figure 9). The limitations expressed in these characters—both were elven with slight builds and

low-pitched feminine voices—are critiqued in Smith’s (2025) discussion of the experiences of nonbinary players, who often seek more flexible opportunities for self-representation than those that CCIIs allow. *Veilguard* does in fact provide deep flexibility with regard to gender presentation; what the simultaneously experimental and limited creations of Participant 7 and I show is that the extent to which players seize on this flexibility is partially a function of the assumptions they bring with them.



Figure 9. Side-by-side screenshots of my PC [left] and Participant 7’s PC [right].

Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed three themes that I identified through observations and discussions of the relationships participants enacted with their PCs after character creation. First, I found that participants generally related to their PCs for digital embodiment or expression, and I mapped these distinct forms of relation onto the terms “avatar” and “character,” respectively. I then described different kinds of avatar and character relationships that I observed during participants’ play sessions. These relationships are not stable types so much as they are tendencies; participants often reported they had developed preference for a certain kind of

relationship through habitual play, yet momentary shifts in the play context inside and outside the gameworld invariably had an impact on how each participant related to their PC. These shifts led me to articulate the second theme, namely that different participant–PC relationships overlapped and changed over time. The final theme concerned how the social qualities of a PC—specifically race, gender, and class—factored into the participant–PC relationships. Participants displayed varying preferences when it came to fidelity between their race/gender/class and that of their PC, as well as different attitudes when it came to what constituted an important similarity or difference in the first place. Further, gender figured as a kind of navigational device in these identity negotiations, as participants used gendered associations to help them determine which configurations of social and mechanical qualities would be possible or desirable. In the next chapter, I reflect more on these themes and consider how they can support future research on character creation and players’ relationships with their custom PCs.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Through a microethnographic study of eight participants' character creation and gameplay experiences, this thesis took up the following research questions:

- 1) How do players and character creation interfaces (CCIs) interact to produce player characters (PCs)?
- 2) How do these custom PCs affect the ways players engage with and respond to singleplayer gameplay?

In this final chapter, I briefly summarize my exploratory answers to these questions and show how they point to a need for future research to adopt a media-ecological approach to character creation. I then outline specific questions that may interest different actors who co-constitute practices of character creation, including academics, developers, and players.

Answers to the Research Questions

With regard to the first question, the study themes suggest that players and CCIs produce PCs through a combination of what CCIs are designed to do as well as through how players perceive and reimagine various CCI parameters. Here it is worth recalling Nagy and Neff's (2015) definition of affordances as not merely the designed functions of an object, but also "the way material things act in social relationships" (p. 4). Players and CCIs thus produce PCs in a social-material relationship that cannot be reduced to the properties of either party outside their encounter. In other words, a study of players *or* CCIs alone cannot describe all the possible affordances at play in an instance of character creation. This is because, in addition to affordances being inherently relational, the specific dynamics of player–CCI interactions depend on the context around those interactions. Throughout this study, participant–CCI interactions were influenced by their conditions of possibility, such as the equipment at hand, information

provided by family and friends, cultural discourses, etc. The contextually conditioned interactions between participants and the *Dragon Age* CCIs variously supported or challenged participants' initial goals for their PCs. In cases where the challenge was significant, either due to the lack of an expected affordance or the presence of an attractive, unexpected affordance, participants adapted their PCs in ways that in turn affected how they engaged with their chosen *Dragon Age* game.

The custom PCs created in this study allowed participants to enact various changeable modes of engagement with the *Dragon Age* games. Most often, participants would use their PCs to engage in play oriented towards digital embodiment or expression. Participant-PC relationships that were oriented towards embodiment were defined by a close identification between a participant and their PC, wherein the participant treated the PCs actions, identity, and diegetic relationships as their own. These relationships, which I group under the term "avatar," differed from relationships of expression wherein a participant related to their PC as a distinct persona or object. In these other "character" based relationships, participants used their PC to perform drama for themselves, give form to desires, and potentially augment their offscreen self-presentation. Though the outcomes of player-CCI interactions appeared to affect the relationships participants enacted with their PCs, changing circumstances in the gameworld and surrounding play environment in turn affected how participants related to their PCs from moment to moment. Character creation thus did not lock participants into a static relationship with their PC; rather, it established the conditions for constantly shifting, overlapping states of affiliation between the two. Finally, while embodiment and expression describe the relational functions that PCs fulfilled in participants' gameplay sessions, certain participants mentioned that they sometimes create PCs in games with no intention to play them afterwards. The

activities of those participants suggest that sometimes custom PCs do not affect player's gameplay engagement at all because, occasionally, there is no such gameplay.

Given that they rely on a body of detailed qualitative data provided by a small group of participants, my answers to the research questions are not generalizable across a whole population or populations. Further, I would argue that no study of character creation—even one with a much larger participant group—could say with certainty whether a certain type or outcome of player–CCI interaction is generalizable amongst other players. There are two reasons for this. One is that player–CCI interactions are necessarily contingent on factors outside the player and the CCI, which this thesis demonstrates in-detail in Chapter 4. This means that even if a study were to observe the character creation and gameplay of a large number of participants in one social-material context, dynamics of character creation could shift when those same players and CCIs interact in another context. The second reason why definitive findings are elusive in character creation is that the type of game in which a CCI is embedded affects how player–CCI interactions unfold. I discussed this issue in Chapter 2, arguing that the heavy focus on player self-presentation in existing character creation research is partly because such research overwhelmingly utilizes multiplayer games. For this study, I expect that some dynamics of player–CCI interactions will most strongly resonate with singleplayer RPGs that are similar to *Dragon Age*. Here I am specifically talking about dynamics of “pretend play” (Stenros & Sihvonen, 2020) and moments where participants navigated perceived overlaps between the sociodramatic and mechanical aspects of their PC. The more general themes that concern CCI agency, the importance of the play context, and the diversity of possible functions for character creation likely resonate beyond the RPG genre. Indeed, I suggest these themes may help researchers and other actors articulate new questions about character creation.

Directions for Future Research

Prior research has largely assumed that character creation is a practice of multiplayer self-representation (Pace, 2008; Ducheneaut, 2009; Kafai et al., 2010; Yee et al., 2011; McArthur, 2015), while even those studies that do not prescribe a specific purpose for character creation still tend to use online, networked games for their analyses (Isaksson, 2012; Jenson et al., 2015). By contrast, this research shows how character creation may be much more than the production of a surrogate self in a multiplayer, networked gameworld. Considerations of how PCs would appear to other players, which figure so prominently in earlier studies, did not factor into character creation in this research given that the games on offer were singleplayer. Instead, participant interviews and play sessions revealed the importance of considerations such as the PC's imaginary persona, their utility as a vessel of embodiment, and their desirability, among other things. Such considerations may also be significant for certain players in multiplayer contexts, yet they seem to be easier to identify and explore when the player-PC relationship is not subject to the direct involvement of other players. In addition to yielding insight on overlooked aspects of player-PC relationships as they pertain to character creation, this research gestured toward a somewhat neglected diversity in the character creation habits of individual players.¹ Here I think of Participant 6, who remarked that they only make PCs who resemble them in singleplayer gameworlds to protect their anonymity in networked gameworlds. Though my work has begun to examine these gaps in the literature, I believe there is much more room for further character creation research that proceeds through an ecological lens.

¹ A notable exception to research that assumes singular approaches to character creation and player-PC relationships is Jenson et al.'s (2015) study of sex-swapping in online multiplayer games, referenced throughout this thesis.

A Media Ecological Approach

As Fuller (2005) explains, media ecology entails a focus “on dynamic systems in which any one part is always multiply connected, acting by virtue of those connections, and always variable, such that it can be regarded as a pattern rather than simply as an object” (p. 4). To explain how this approach works in analytic practice, one can look to Postman’s (1993) caterpillar analogy: “If you remove the caterpillar from a given habitat, you are not left with the same environment minus caterpillars: you have a new environment” (p. 18). The media ecological approach that Fuller advocates for similarly argues that technologies, their users, and their environments are co-constitutive, meaning that one plus or minus the other is definitionally changed. I could thus flip the caterpillar metaphor on its head and say that if the caterpillar finds a niche in its new environment, then it has become a different caterpillar. Returning to character creation, I would argue that it is a different process in multiplayer versus singleplayer environments; multiplayer and singleplayer character creation are related and may even inform one another, but their place in ecologies of media and play are different. Likewise, character creation likely looks different when a user interacts with a CCI not to facilitate gameplay, but for out-of-game functions—I think here of Participant 4 and their draft novel.² Future studies should simultaneously acknowledge the specific place of their character creation research in media ecologies *and* seek out underappreciated functions that character creation plays within these ecologies. In such research, the theoretical and methodological orientations I draw from here such as Place-Thought (Watts, 2013) and microethnography (Giddings, 2009) may be extremely useful, as they are by definition attentive to the situated, co-constitutive encounters between human and nonhuman actors.

² See pp. 70–72

In addressing the range of possible functions for character creation, it is critical that scholars use diverse sets of games that include singleplayer and multiplayer titles. I say this partly because of the differences in design and culture around both types of games, but also because studies of multiplayer character creation often frame their findings in terms of what they mean for game designers or other business interests (Pace, 2008; Isaksson, 2012; McArthur, 2015). While there is nothing inherently wrong with such framing—and indeed, there should be dialogue between scholars and designers—an overemphasis on research for design can limit the kinds of questions that get asked about character creation.³ For example, Turkey and Adinolf (2015) compared two groups of MMORPG players to assess how control over PC customizability increased might affect motivation for continuous play over long periods of time; Turkey and Adinolf note how such motivation is important for MMO developers as it provides them with a stable source of subscription-based revenue. How character creation can motivate continuous play would therefore be a more interesting question for an MMO developer than, say, how someone like Participant 4 was able to download an MMO for free, use its CCI to visualize characters for their novel, then uninstall the game without paying a dime. Of course, the utility of the *Dragon Age* games in exploring that particular question was also limited, but my point is that gaining a more comprehensive picture of character creation than what is currently reflected in the literature requires researchers to extend their focus beyond a single actor or play context.

Like the choice of games, the choice of terminology used in future character creation research will have an impact on which questions such research will be best equipped to explore. Proceeding from my distinction between avatars and characters, “how do players and CCIs

³ To reiterate, I do not mean to imply this diminishes the broad relevance or scholarly integrity of this research. In fact, these appeals to designers are often made on behalf of players. McArthur (2015) is perhaps the best example of this, as her dissertation concludes with recommendations to developers on how to design socially inclusive CCIs.

interact to produce characters” and “how do players and CCIs interact to produce avatars” become different questions. Indeed, an interesting follow-up question may include “do some kinds of CCI designs encourage players to establish an avatar *or* character relation with their PC?” The matter of terminology also goes beyond the different words used to refer to the PC; the term “player” carries with it the implication that the person interacting with the CCI does so to play a game. However well-grounded, this is still an assumption that does not apply to every instance of character creation that takes place through a digital game. As this thesis shows, scholarly understandings of character creation would benefit from greater diversity in the contexts and concepts used to study it.

Future Research Questions

In the spirit of the ecological approach to character creation I am proposing, I conclude by outlining three questions for the various human actors who operate in and around character creation encounters. These questions take up threads of enquiry I began to trace in this thesis, but which could not be explored comprehensively under this study design; they may interest scholars from game studies and other disciplines that focus on media and culture, game developers, and/or players.

- 1) How do players’ relationships with their custom PCs develop over periods of sustained engagement, i.e. weeks, months, or years? Several participants in this study described changes to how they perceived their PC based on information they obtained during play. For the most part, it seemed that participants could easily reconcile this information with the qualities they had imagined or assigned for their PC in character creation. However, whether participants would maintain a satisfying relationship with their custom PC over more than one play session is an open question that the option for gameplay logging was

unfortunately unable to answer. A similar study with a longer timeframe and incentives for continuous participation may yield more fruitful data in this area.

- 2) In what ways do users enjoy the character creation process in itself? This line of enquiry may be of interest to scholars and developers alike; for scholars of media and culture, it may lead to insights on the aspects of identity and body that users particularly like to experiment with, while developers may learn how to improve an experience that is increasingly used to garner interest in the game product. With regard to this question, Participant 1 discussed seeking out games to experiment with their CCIs, but this habit seems to be overlooked in the academic literature and, to an extent, in the games industry itself—this latter point coming as a surprise to commentators who have recommended developers work on “Character Creator: The Game” (Tassi, 2015; King, 2024).
- 3) How can users leverage CCIs to support their creative pursuits? CCIs in many modern digital games provide relatively accessible tools for the visualization of human and human-like bodies; while Participant 4 was the only example of a user in this study who mentioned harnessing these tools for an out-of-game creative output, there are likely other users who have leveraged CCIs in similar ways. Discussing how such users do so could be helpful for researchers exploring connections between game studies and other fields, such as visual arts, and for creatives seeking easy to learn body visualization tools.

There is a bonus question I wish to include here: how do CCIs and the ways players navigate them reflect, reinforce, or critique ideological beliefs about what it is possible or desirable for a person to be? Throughout this research, I was able to examine this question in more depth than the three above, and indeed, scholars have grappled with variations of this question well before my work here (Pace, 2008; Kafai et al., 2010; McArthur, 2015). Nonetheless, I repeat the

question here because as social norms change, so too do the configurations that become possible in CCIs. Whether a player approaches their PC as a representation of themselves, a distinct persona, a lump of pixels, or something else entirely, player–CCI interactions involve negotiating configurations of personal characteristics; which configurations are possible and which are not is tied to real-world beliefs about society and identity. In 2014, for example, *Inquisition* sorted secondary sex characteristics into a rigid gender binary, whereas its 2024 successor, *Veilguard*, allows players to mix and match such characteristics as they please. This change likely came about for many reasons, but it is worth noting here that the designed flexibility around gender in *Veilguard* was precipitated by ongoing player efforts to queer gender through their approaches to more restrictive CCIs, including those in earlier *Dragon Age* installments like *Inquisition* (Smith, 2025). One can see here how the relationship between character creation and ideology is not a matter for scholars, designers, or players alone. Each of these actors has the power to critically interrogate character creation in ways that advance socially inclusive play. Of course, questions of influence between character creation and ideology will vary between contexts as well as between actors; therefore, these questions must continue to be asked.

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Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Advertisement Posted to Discord Servers

Are You Interested in a Research Trip to Thedas?

WHO?

Hi there! My name is Joel White. I'm a master's student in the Joint Graduate Program in Communication and Culture at York University and Toronto Metropolitan University.

I'm looking for participants for a study of character creation.

WHAT?

I'm researching **how character creation influences the ways players experience and engage with digital games**. For this research, participants will **play the first 90 minutes of a Dragon Age game while I observe**, beginning from character creation. I will also conduct **semi-structured interviews** with participants before and after observation to discuss gameplay experiences and player to player-character relationships.

WHEN?

At a time and date of the participant's choice **between July 15th and September 15th**, subject to the operating and booking schedules of campus facilities.

WHERE?

On the **York University (Keele) campus** or **Toronto Metropolitan University campus**. Participants will indicate which campus they prefer and I will book an AV-equipped room available at a time of their choice.

WHY?

Character creation and its relationship to gameplay is an under-observed and under-theorized area of game studies; participants will play a valuable role in helping fill these gaps.

Participants will also receive a digital download of the Dragon Age game they play under observation and will have the option to submit **brief written gameplay logs** should they wish to continue their playthrough.

INTERESTED?

If you're interested in becoming a participant, please send an email to **jaw24@yorku.ca** under the subject line "Character Creation Research." In this email, please indicate:

- Your preferred name
- Whether you have played Dragon Age before (if so, which games)
- Whether you have played other singleplayer roleplaying games before.

Everyone is eligible to participate, though I will seek to recruit participants with different prior playing experiences. If you're selected, I will reply to your email to set up interview and observation times.

Questions about this study? Contact me at jaw24@yorku.ca and I'll be happy to answer!

Appendix B: Copy of “Information for Potential Participants” Google Doc

Information for Potential Participants

Thanks for your interest in participating in the study “Here be... Dragons? A Microethnography of Character Creation in the *Dragon Age* Games!” This document expands on the information in the research poster and outlines what is required for you to be considered a potential participant in this study.

Researcher Information

Joel White, Principal Investigator
Master’s Student, Joint Graduate Program in Communication and Culture
jaw24@yorku.ca

Dr. Nicholas Taylor, Thesis Supervisor
Associate Professor, Department of Communication & Media Studies, York University
ntt@yorku.ca

What is this Research About?

This research focuses on how the character creation process influences the ways that players approach and experience digital gameplay. It incorporates three ethnographic methods: semi-structured interviews, observations of participants as they play a *Dragon Age* game, and participant journaling in the form of gameplay logs. This work aims to address the current scarcity of empirical research on possible relationships between character creation and gameplay.

Results from this research will be incorporated into a master’s thesis published by York University. Content from this thesis may also be presented at academic conferences or incorporated into articles published by academic journals.

Participant Activities

The information below outlines the activities you would engage in if you respond to the recruitment questionnaire and are selected to participate.

Participation in this research involves a recruitment questionnaire, two audio-recorded semi-structured interviews, and a video recorded gameplay observation session. You will also have the option of submitting written gameplay logs. Your response to the recruitment questionnaire will be kept in the researcher’s email archive until the conclusion of participant research or until you revoke your consent to participate, at which point it will be permanently deleted.

The total time commitment for interviews and observations is between 2 hours and 2 and a half hours. The interviews may be conducted immediately before and after

observation. However, if you prefer, the second interview may be conducted remotely up to a week after the observation session.

Interviews

The first interview will take approximately 10-20 minutes and discuss how you ordinarily approach digital gameplay and relationships with player-characters. The second interview will discuss your experiences during the gameplay session and take approximately 20-40 minutes. Scripted questions for your interviews will be shared ahead of time. As these would be semi-structured interviews, the researcher may ask follow-up questions to clarify or expand on your answers. However, you may skip over any scripted or follow-up questions that you may not wish to answer. These interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. All transcripts will be shared with you for corrections, redactions, and approval prior to their use in any research outputs. The purpose of this recording and transcription is to aid in the written analysis of how you experience interactions with the character creation system and what the effects of those interactions are on your engagement with the game. Recordings will not be directly reproduced in research outputs and only brief written excerpts may be reproduced from the transcripts.

Observation Session

For the gameplay observation session, you will play 90 minutes of a *Dragon Age* game beginning from the character creation stage. A screen recording program will capture footage of your gameplay. Your physical behaviour during gameplay will be recorded through an in-room camera and observer notes. The primary purpose of this video recording is to help the primary investigator conduct a written analysis of your interactions with and responses to the game. If any images from the recordings are reproduced in research outputs, your face and any identifying features will be either cropped out of frame or blurred.

You will be able to choose which *Dragon Age* you play, though a minimum of two participants must play each game; for example, two participants before you chose to play *Dragon Age Inquisition*, you will only be able to choose between the other three games unless each one has also been played at least twice. The gameplay session will occur at a time and date of your choice between August 26th, 2025, and October 15th, 2025. Sessions will take place either at the York University Keele Campus or the Toronto Metropolitan University Campus, depending on the participant's preference.

Gameplay Logs

As an inducement, you will receive a digital download of the *Dragon Age* game you play in the observation session. The download will be sent to an account on the platform of your choice (ex. Steam, the Epic Games Store, the Microsoft Store, etc.). If you wish to continue playing the game outside observation, you will have the option of submitting gameplay logs via email that track how your relationships with the game and your player

character develop across gameplay sessions. You will be provided with a template for these logs, which would be submitted at a frequency of your choice. Each log would take 10-20 minutes to complete. Please note that you will receive the game once you begin the study regardless of whether you elect to participate in the gameplay logs. Further, if you do elect to participate in gameplay logging, you may choose to stop sending logs at any time.

Potential Risks and Discomforts

Discussing your gameplay activities and being observed during gameplay may result in feelings of discomfort. To ensure you feel as comfortable as possible participating in this study, questions will be shared with you in advance of your interview, and you may choose not to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable. If information is nonetheless discussed during the interview that makes you uncomfortable or that you otherwise do not wish to be included in discussions of the research results, then you will have the opportunity to redact that information from the written records resulting from your interview. You will likewise have an opportunity to redact and/or correct information in the observation notes taken during your gameplay session. Finally, if you choose to participate in gameplay logging and feel uncomfortable with any information you may have shared in a log, you may send the principal investigator an alternative version of the same log with that information removed; the principal investigator will delete the initial log and only use the new version. Further, if you would like a particular log deleted entirely, you may also contact the primary investigator and they will delete it.

A list of support services/resources for emotional distress is provided below:

For students: Keep.meSAFE Student Support Program offers 24/7 real time support via live chat and phone (1-844- 451-9700 (Canada & USA)

For all participants: Wellness Together Canada offers free and confidential 24/7 support accessed by calling 1-866-585-0445 or texting WELLNESS to 686868 for youth or 741741 for adults.

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You:

By participating in this research, you will help close gaps in current research on relationships between character creation and digital gameplay.

Participating in this research may also expand your understanding of the relationships between how you play and how you create player characters. In addition, you will have the opportunity to gain experience in different methods employed in qualitative research from the participant's point of view.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to volunteer, to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions will not influence the nature of the ongoing relationship you may have with the researchers or study staff, or the nature of your relationship with York University either now, or in the future.

If you decide to stop participating, you may withdraw without penalty, financial or otherwise, and you will still receive the promised inducement (the *Dragon Age* game download). In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible. Should you wish to withdraw after the study, you will have the option to also withdraw your data up until the analysis is complete.

Confidentiality:

All information you supply during the research will be held in confidence unless you choose to revoke your consent to participate, in which case your data will be immediately destroyed. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. Observation sessions will be recorded through screen recording, room recording, and written notes. Gameplay logs will be written. All transcripts, notes, recordings, and logs that result from your participation in this study will be stored as digital files on a password-protected hard drive, and only the principal investigator will have access to this drive. Should any paper copy data result from your participation in this study, it will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the thesis supervisor's office, where only the thesis supervisor and the primary investigator will have access to it. Prior to its use in any discussion or presentation of the research findings, your data will be shared with you, and you will have the opportunity to make corrections or redact any information that you do not wish to be incorporated in discussions or presentations of the research findings. The data will be de-identified and referred to using numeric identifiers (ex. Participant 1) in any presentations or discussions of the research findings.

Data will be stored according to the procedures described above until August 1st, 2027, after which it will be destroyed through hard drive formatting or cross-cut shredding as necessary. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

Questions About the Research?

If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact the primary investigator at jaw24@yorku.ca or the thesis supervisor, Dr. Nicholas Taylor, at ntt@yorku.ca. You may also contact the Joint Graduate Program in Communication and Culture at cmctgpa@yorku.ca and/or 416-736-5392.

This research has received ethics review and approval by the Delegated Ethics Review Committee, which is delegated authority to review research ethics protocols by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board, and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the Sr. Manager & Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, Kaneff Tower, York University (telephone 416-736-5914 or e-mail ore@yorku.ca).

How to Become a Participant

If you'd like to participate in this study, please send an email to jaw24@yorku.ca under the subject line "Study Participation." In this email, please provide your preferred name and answers to the following questions:

- 1) Have you played any games from the *Dragon Age* series? If so, which ones?
- 2) Have you played three or more roleplaying games that use character creation?

Your answers to these questions are relevant for participant selection, as I am seeking a balance between participants who have experience with *Dragon Age*, participants who have experience with roleplaying games but not *Dragon Age*, and participants who have little to no experience with character creation in roleplaying games. If you are selected to participate, I will reply to your email to set up the location and timing of your first interview and observation session, where you will be given an informed consent form. Once I have completed participant research, I will delete all recruitment emails that contain the information discussed above.

If you have any questions, please email me at jaw24@yorku.ca under the subject line "Study Question." Thank you for your interest!

Appendix C: Interview Scripts

Interview 1

For participants who have played a *Dragon Age* game before

1. What kind of experiences do you usually look for when you play a single-player roleplaying game? What are your goals when you play?
2. Do you have any usual goals when you create a custom character? What are they?
3. What do you remember about your experiences playing other *Dragon Age* games? How did you play them?
4. What do you remember about your previous *Dragon Age* characters?
5. Have you heard about this game [the *Dragon Age* game selected by the participant] before? If so, where/what about it?

For participants who have played several single-player roleplaying games, but not *Dragon Age*

1. What kind of experiences do you usually look for when you play a single-player roleplaying game? What are your goals when you play?
2. Do you have any usual goals when you create a custom character? What are they?
3. What are some of your favourite singleplayer roleplaying games?
4. Have you created any player characters that you find particularly memorable or that you feel strongly about?
5. Have you heard about this game before? If so, where/what about it?

For participants who have played few or no single-player roleplaying games

1. What kind of experiences do you usually look for when you play a video game? What are your goals when you play?
2. What are some of your favourite video games?

3. Are there any video game protagonists you find particularly memorable, or that you feel strongly about?
4. Have you heard about this game? If so, where/what about it?

Interview 2

All participants

1. How would you describe your character?
2. Did you enjoy playing and/or creating your character? Why or why not?
3. Did you have any goals for your character in mind before you began creating them in the interface? If so, were you able to achieve those goals?
4. Did you take on any new goals for your character as you worked your way through the character creation system?
5. Did you find any aspects of the creation system challenging or frustrating? If so, why/in what ways?
6. Did you find any aspects of the character creation system surprising or particularly interesting?
7. Did you feel the way your character appeared and acted in-game matched how you envisioned them during character creation?
8. Did the way you feel about your character change at all as you played? If so, how?

Appendix D: Copy of Gameplay Log Template Sent to Participants

Gameplay Log Template

Name:

Date:

What did you do in the game since your last log (or since observation if this is your first log)?

What goals have you been trying to achieve in the game? “Goals” may include narrative progress, gameplay or relationship objectives, or personal objectives like just having fun.

How would you say your character is doing? You may interpret this question how ever you wish (are they performing to your expectations, are they getting along with companions, etc.)

How do you feel when you are playing this game? This may be one consistent emotion or several emotions that arise during play.

Other (if there’s anything you’d like to add, feel free to write it below!)