Aesthetic Choices and Player Motivation in *Baldur's Gate 3*

A Thesis submitted to the University of Kent for the Degree of Master of Science by Research in Digital Art

Division of Computing, Engineering and Mathematical Sciences

2025

Page count: 135

Word count: 41,493 words

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25005608

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank Byron, Pandora, and Demeter. Byron in particular, for encouraging me to take the leap, and the cats for their constant comfort and cuddles throughout the process.

My deepest thanks go to Dr. Rocio von Jungenfeld and Dr. Alexandra Covaci for their invaluable guidance, support, and supervision during this project. Their insights and encouragement helped shape this thesis.

I am also incredibly grateful to Lucy, Mum & John, Dad & Sara, Yvonne & David for their ongoing encouragement, patience, and belief in me throughout this journey.

Finally, thank you to all the participants who generously shared their time, experiences, and perspectives. This research would not have been possible without their openness and enthusiasm.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how players engage with avatar creation in *Baldur's Gate 3*, focusing on the motivations behind character design and the interplay between identity, narrative immersion, and gameplay strategy. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study draws on pre-game surveys, recorded character creation sessions, first-hour gameplay observations, and post-game interviews to explore how players balance aesthetic and mechanical choices, and how avatars function as tools for expression, experimentation, and performance.

Findings reveal that players approach avatar creation with diverse intentions, including self-representation, role-play, and strategic optimization. While some enter with a clear gameplay goal, others make intuitive choices shaped by narrative context or emotional resonance. Popular selections of fantasy races and mechanically advantageous builds illustrate how identity expression often coexists with functional decision-making. Many players demonstrated partial awareness of their own motivations, reflecting a fluid relationship between player type, avatar behaviour, and in-game choices.

The analysis is grounded in theories of digital identity, player motivation, and avatar embodiment, drawing on the work of Turkle, Bowman, Klevjer, Vasalou, Juul, Bartle, and others. The study concludes that avatar creation in narrative-rich RPGs is a complex and adaptive process, shaped by personal, ludic, and narrative factors. Avatars serve not only as visual representations, but as dynamic interfaces through which players negotiate identity, strategy, and immersion.

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Terminology

RPG – Role Playing Game

MMO – Massively Multiplayer Online

DnD – Dungeons and Dragons

NPC = Non-Player Character

OC – Origin Characters

BG3 – Baldur's Gate 3

AI – Artificial Intelligence

TTRPG – Table Top Role Play Game

SDT – Self Determination Theory

CRPG – Computer Role Play Game

Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview

1.1: Introduction

Character creation plays a pivotal role in many role-playing games (RPGs), offering players the opportunity to shape Avatars that reflect their preferences, motivations, and playstyles. In this study, the focus lies on *Baldur's Gate 3,* a game renowned for its advanced character creation tools and immersive storytelling (Chalk, 2024). The purpose of this research is to explore the dynamic relationship between player motivation and Avatar design within this modern RPG context. By delving into how players engage with these tools and examining the alignment between their character choices and intrinsic motivations, the study aims to uncover patterns that inform player behaviour and preferences.

Specifically, this research investigates whether players create Avatars that align with their gaming playstyle goals and evaluates the extent to which the game's customization options support this alignment. The study further assesses the relevance of established frameworks, such as Bartle's Taxonomy of Player Types in the context of contemporary RPGs like *Baldur's Gate 3*. This approach not only seeks to determine the enduring applicability of these categorizations but also aims to reveal deeper insights into the motivations and behaviours of today's players.

Through observations of player interactions during character creation and initial gameplay phases, this study aims to bridge the gap between player psychology, motivation theory, and practical game design. By doing so, it contributes to a better understanding of how developers can design character-creation tools that cater to diverse player motivations, enhancing player satisfaction and engagement while offering fresh perspectives on the evolving role of Avatars in digital gaming.

1.2: Significance of the Study

This study is positioned at the intersection of player motivation, Avatar creation, and game design, with a specific focus on *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian, 2023), a role-playing game (RPG) that showcases modern character creation technology. While much research has explored independent aspects of player motivation, Avatar creation, and ludology, this study aims to bridge these domains. By examining a modern, technology-driven game with a complex character creation system, the research seeks to uncover new insights into how these elements intersect and influence player engagement in a contemporary gaming context.

The findings of this study may also have practical implications for game developers, particularly those involved in Role-Playing Game (RPG) design. Understanding how different player motivations influence character creation may help game developers design more inclusive and customisable character creation tools.

By identifying the links between player motivation and character creation, this research could inform designers on ways to attempt to enhance the overall player experience.

Understanding these dynamics can also help in designing games that cater to a broader audience by providing character-creation options that could resonate with different types of players.

Lastly, by examining the Avatars that players choose to create and the motivations behind those choices, this research serves as a potential foundation for broader, future studies. At the further research level, this work could be expanded to encompass a wider array of RPGs or investigate trends in future RPGs as game design and technology evolve. By incorporating more diverse games and platforms, such research could explore how advancements in character creation tools influence player engagement, motivation, and identity expression across genres and contexts.

1.3: Scope

Several vital objectives define the scope of this study. First, it seeks to understand the factors driving character customisation choices in *Baldur's Gate 3 (BG3)*. This includes analysing how players prioritise customisation options for gameplay-related choices. The study also explores the influence of the game's lore and narrative on character creation. It investigates how players balance the desire to create Avatars that reflect their identities to immerse themselves in the game's world.

Second, the study explores the relationship between character creation and player motivations. It examines the primary reasons why players engage with the character creation system, the impact of the level of customisation available on player engagement, and whether players tend to create characters that align with their personalities and preferences or if they experiment with different personas. The research also considers how character creation contributes to players' sense of ownership and investment toward their in-game Avatars and whether specific customisation choices correlate with subsequent gameplay behaviours.

Finally, the study investigates the influence of player motivations on Avatar selection and customisation. This involves understanding the motivations behind players' choices of Avatars, how gameplay preferences and goals influence these choices, and whether players prioritise creating Avatars optimal for specific gameplay styles or those that resonate with Players thematically. The study also assesses the extent to which social and role-playing considerations impact Avatar selection and customisation and whether differences exist between players who prioritise immersion in the game's narrative and those who prioritise gameplay mechanics.

1.4: Limitations of the Study

While the study is designed to provide meaningful insights into the relationship between player motivation and character creation, several inherent limitations must be acknowledged, as they affect the scope and outcomes of this research.

A significant limitation is the sample size, which consists of 26 participants who completed all three phases of the study. While hundreds of individuals initially expressed interest in participating, many did not complete the required stages, resulting

in a smaller-than-anticipated dataset. Although this number provides enough data to generate relevant insights and allow for meaningful analysis, the attrition rate potentially limits the generalised conclusions of the findings. The decision to proceed with the available sample size was influenced by practical constraints, including balancing data collection with the time required for in-depth analysis.

The study's focus on participants with prior experience playing *BG3* further narrowed the sample. This criterion ensured that participants were familiar with the game mechanics, allowing them to concentrate on the character creation process without the distraction of learning a new game. However, this restriction means that the findings may not apply to new players or those unfamiliar with the game, potentially skewing results toward the behaviours and motivations of experienced RPG players.

Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data through pre-game surveys and post-game interviews introduces the possibility of biases. Participants may have provided responses influenced by social desirability or their assumptions about the researcher's expectations. To mitigate this, observational data was also collected during gameplay; however, the influence of self-reporting biases cannot be eliminated.

Access to external data sources also posed a challenge. Initially, contact was made with Larian Studios, the developers of *BG3*, to explore the possibility of accessing detailed internal gameplay metrics or character creation data. While there were initial discussions about providing more comprehensive data, only publicly available statistics were ultimately accessible for use in this study. Unfortunately, due to delays in communication and the time constraints associated with anonymizing and preparing such data for research purposes, it was not feasible to integrate this information before the study's conclusion. The lack of access to these richer datasets limited the ability to conduct a broader analysis of character creation trends across a larger player base.

The study's focus on a single game, *BG3*, while providing depth, inherently limits the scope of its findings. The conclusions are specific to this game's character creation system and may not generalize to other RPGs with different mechanics or customization options. Furthermore, the time constraint of one year imposed by the study restricted the breadth of the literature review, the complexity of the experimental design, and the time available for extensive gameplay observation and participant interaction. These constraints may have affected the depth and richness of the qualitative data collected.

1.5: Research Aims

This research explores the complex relationship between player motivations and character creation within the immersive environment of *BG3*. By investigating how players' underlying motivations influence their decisions during the character-creation process, this study investigates psychological and behavioural patterns that inform these choices.

By examining prior studies on player motivation and Avatar creation, as well as considering the unique features of *BG3* such as its advanced customization tools and narrative depth the study identified three core objectives. These objectives were designed to align with gaps in the literature and the need for a focused exploration of player behaviour in a modern RPG context.

The first objective emerged from the recognition that player motivations are a key driver in character creation. Specifically, the study aims to investigate how different motivations influence the choices players make during this process. This includes analysing the psychological and emotional factors that shape these decisions and identifying patterns that reveal how players' underlying goals manifest in their Avatar design.

The second objective was shaped by the observation that customisation levels significantly impact player engagement. To address this, the study examines the primary reasons players engage with the character-creation process, whether for self-expression, strategic gameplay, or narrative immersion. Additionally, it seeks to determine whether players create Avatars that align with their real-world personalities and preferences or use the process as a way to experiment with alternative personas.

The third objective emerged from a broader interest in how players understand and reflect on their own motivations during avatar creation. This part of the research explored whether players are consciously aware of the factors that influence their design decisions, or whether these choices stem from unconscious preferences and habits. It also examined the order in which players made their decisions—whether they entered the game with a clear vision for the type of experience they wanted, or if their intentions evolved throughout character creation. Additionally, this section evaluated whether Bartle's Taxonomy still offers a useful framework for identifying player motivations in complex, narrative-driven RPGs like *Baldur's Gate 3*. It asked whether players could categorise themselves within such models and whether they recognised overlaps or grey areas between traditional player types.

These objectives directly informed the development of the research questions, which were crafted to provide a structured framework for exploring the identified themes. By connecting the study's goals to its specific inquiries, the research ensures a cohesive approach to analysing the relationship between player motivations and Avatar creation, while also laying the groundwork for meaningful contributions to the broader understanding of player behaviour in digital gaming environments.

1.6: Research Questions

To achieve these research aims, the study is guided by a core set of question which are designed to delve into the nuances of character customisation and player motivations in *BG3*. These questions are critical in structuring the investigation and ensuring the research objectives are comprehensively addressed. The research questions have been thematically split into three sub-sections to allow for a larger range of answers that

potentially tie into one another; this allows for a clearer overall view of the motivation of the participants as it will cover broader themes that tie into motivation.

The first area of inquiry builds directly on the discussion of *BG3* as a platform for exploring the intersection of player motivations and game design, as established in earlier sections. This set of questions investigates the factors driving character customization choices, specifically focusing on how the game's aesthetic options align with player motivations for self-expression, creativity, and gameplay immersion.

By examining the range and variety of visual customization options available such as character appearance, attire, and thematic elements the study seeks to uncover how these features allow players to shape Avatars that reflect their individuality and align with their personal goals. This analysis goes beyond merely cataloguing the available options; instead, it evaluates whether the customization process provided by *BG3* facilitate meaningful engagement by enabling players to balance creativity, identity expression, and gameplay objectives.

This enquiry ties closely to the broader study objectives by addressing how design choices in advanced RPGs cater to diverse player needs, ensuring the exploration of customization options is firmly connected to the study's focus on aligning player motivations with game mechanics. Further, the research questions how players prioritise aesthetic and gameplay-related customisation options, probing the decision-making processes underlying these choices. This involves an exploration of the trade-offs players face between creating visually appealing Avatars and optimising their characters for gameplay performance. In this context, the study also examines the influence of the game's lore and narrative on these decisions, investigating how the game's backstory, world-building, and narrative elements guide or constrain players' customisation choices.

The research also delves into how players balance creating characters that reflect their identities versus those that align with the game's world. This line of inquiry concerns the interplay between self-expression and role-playing, seeking to understand whether players design Avatars that mirror their real-world identities or prefer to immerse themselves fully in the fantasy environment by creating characters distinct from themselves and allowing them to achieve role-play. Additionally, the study investigates whether specific in-game benefits or advantages are associated with certain customisation choices and how players weigh these factors during character creation.

The second set of research questions focuses on the relationship between character creation and player motivations. These questions aim to identify the primary motivations behind players' engagement with the character creation system in *BG3*. The study explores how the available customisation level influences player engagement, examining whether more extensive customisation options led to greater satisfaction and investment in the Avatar creation process. Furthermore, the research questions whether players tend to create characters that reflect their real-world personalities and

preferences or use the character creation process to explore alternative personas, thereby gaining insight into the psychological drivers behind Avatar selection.

The final set of research questions addresses the influence of player motivations on Avatar selection and customisation. This aspect of the study investigates how players' gameplay preferences and goals shape their choices during Avatar creation, particularly whether players prioritise creating Avatars optimal for specific gameplay styles or those that resonate with thematically. The research also examines the extent to which social and role-playing considerations influence Avatar selection and customisation, seeking to understand how these factors interact with players' broader gameplay strategies. Finally, the study explores whether there are discernible differences in Avatar selection and customisation patterns between players who prioritise immersion in the game's narrative and those who are more focused on gameplay mechanics.

1.7: Research Questions and their relevance to this study

The following table organizes the key research questions that guide this study, categorizing them into three primary areas of focus: factors driving character customization choices, the relationship between character creation and player motivations, and the influence of player motivations on Avatar selection and customization. Each question is designed to delve deeper into the interplay between player preferences, motivations, and the customization options provided in *BG3*. This structured approach ensures a comprehensive exploration of how players interact with the game's advanced character creation tools and how these interactions reflect their psychological and behavioural patterns.

1.8: Factors Driving Character Customization Choices

Research Question	Purpose
What aesthetic customization options are available for characters in *Baldur's Gate 3*?	Explores the range of visual options, including appearance, attire, and other aesthetic features, and evaluates player satisfaction with these offerings.
How do players prioritize between aesthetic and gameplay-related customization options?	Investigates trade-offs between visual appeal and gameplay optimization, examining the factors that influence players' decisions.
How do the game's lore and narrative influence character customization choices?	Examines how the game's backstory, world-building, and narrative context guide players' decisions in designing their Avatars.
How do players balance creating characters that reflect their identities versus immersing in the game?	Investigates whether players design Avatars that mirror real-world identities or prefer creating characters suited to the game's fantasy setting.

1.9: Relationship Between Character Creation and Player Motivations

Research Question	Description
What are the primary motivations for players to engage in character creation in *Baldur's Gate 3*?	Explores why players invest effort in character creation, focusing on factors like self-expression, role-playing, or gameplay strategy.
How does the level of customization available influence player engagement with character creation?	Examines whether a broader range of customization options increases player investment in the process.
Do players create characters that align with their personalities or experiment with new personas?	Investigates whether players design Avatars that reflect their real-world identities or use character creation to explore alternatives.
How much does character creation contribute to the sense of ownership and investment in Avatars?	Looks at whether customizing Avatars increases emotional attachment and player investment in the game.
Are there correlations between specific character choices and gameplay behaviours or preferences?	Examines whether Avatar creation decisions influence gameplay style, decision-making, or player interactions in the game.

1.10: Bartles Taxonomy

Research Question	Description
To what extent are players consciously aware of the motivations behind their avatar design choices?	Explores whether players can clearly articulate the reasons behind their aesthetic and narrative choices or whether these are guided by implicit preferences and habits.
Are players already decided on the type of gameplay experience they want before designing their avatar?	Examines the sequencing of player decisions, determining whether character creation is shaped by predefined playstyle goals or if intentions evolve during or after customization.
Does Bartle's Taxonomy still offer useful insight into broad player motivations in narrative-rich RPGs like Baldur's Gate 3?	Evaluates the continued relevance of Bartle's player types in understanding identity-driven customization and whether players still fit into these traditional categories.

Research Question	Description
Are players aware of their own player behaviour, and can they categorise themselves within player typologies like Bartle's?	Are players aware of their own player behaviour, and can they categorise themselves within player typologies like Bartle's?
Does Bartle's Taxonomy still offer meaningful insight into player motivation, or is there a grey area between types?	Does Bartle's Taxonomy still offer meaningful insight into player motivation, or do players recognise a grey area between types?

1.11: The Questions' Significance to the Research

The research questions and objectives outlined in this study are important because, both within the context of digital game studies and the broader fields of digital art and interactive media. This research aims to contribute substantially to understanding player psychology and behaviour, particularly in how these aspects intersect with game design and player engagement.

One of the key contributions of this study is its potential to advance knowledge in the field of Player Psychology and Game Design. By exploring the relationship between player motivations and character creation, the research provides new insights into the cognitive and emotional processes that underlie player interaction with digital games. This understanding is crucial for game designers and developers who seek to create more engaging and personalised gaming experiences. By identifying the factors that drive players' customisation choices, the study offers valuable guidance on designing character-creation systems that resonate with diverse player motivations.

The research holds significant relevance within digital art and interactive media studies by examining how advanced character creation systems, like those in *BG3*, bridge artistry and technology. These tools transform traditional digital art into interactive, participatory experiences, allowing players to personalize their Avatars while engaging with complex design systems. Insights from this study extend beyond gaming, informing broader applications in virtual reality, metaverse platforms, and digital storytelling. By highlighting the intersection of art, identity representation, and user engagement, the research contributes to creating more inclusive, immersive, and innovative digital environments.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The evolution of digital gaming and virtual environments has led to the creation of immersive worlds where players can interact, explore, and engage in activities beyond the constraints of the physical world. Central to this experience are Avatars, the digital representations of players within these virtual spaces. These Avatars serve as the primary medium through which players experience the game, enabling interaction with both the environment and other players. However, Avatars are more than just tools for navigation and gameplay; they are extensions of the self, powerful symbols of identity, self-expression, and agency.

This literature review aims to explore the multifaceted role of Avatars in digital environments, focusing on their psychological, social, and cultural impact on players. As Avatars have become increasingly customizable and integrated into game mechanics, they have gained prominence as crucial components of player motivation, narrative engagement, and identity exploration. This review examines the various dimensions of Avatar design and customization, including how players create Avatars that reflect their real-world identities, aspirations, and cultural values. It also explores how Avatars shape gameplay and influence player behaviour through mechanisms such as the Proteus Effect (Yee and Bailenson, 2007) and SDT (Deci and Ryan, 1985) as explained in subsections 2.1 and 2.2.

Furthermore, the review delves into the broader implications of Avatars in multiplayer games, considering their role in shaping social interactions, community building, and cultural representation. Avatars are not merely digital proxies for players but are integral to the experience of virtual worlds, influencing how individuals relate to each other and the game itself. By synthesizing key studies on Avatar representation, functionality, and emotional engagement, this literature review provides a nuanced understanding of Avatars as both functional gameplay tools and vehicles for social and psychological exploration.

As the field of digital gaming continues to expand, the insights presented in this review offer valuable implications for game developers, virtual world creators, and researchers interested in the intersections of technology, identity, and human-computer interaction. Through this exploration of Avatars, the review highlights their transformative role in shaping player experiences and their broader impact on the cultural and psychological landscape of digital gaming.

2.1: Avatar Design and Customisation

Avatars are more than just digital representations, they are vicarious bodies that serve as prosthetic extensions of players, enabling embodied interaction and deep engagement within virtual environments (Klevjer, 2006). Positioned at the crossroads of technology, psychology, and human-computer interaction, Avatars function as the primary conduit for navigating and experiencing these immersive digital realms, shaping player interactions, motivations, and even their sense of self (Turkle, 1984). As the

gaming industry and virtual environments continue to evolve, understanding the complex interplay between Avatars and player motivation has never been more critical for advancing game design, enhancing user experiences, and optimizing virtual spaces.

This inquiry into Avatars takes place amidst the rise of Ludology a field dedicated to the study of games and play which has grown in tandem with the increasing prominence of digital culture. Scholars such as Johan Huizinga (Homo Ludens, 1939) and Edward Castronova (Synthetic Worlds, 2005) have underscored the importance of studying the ways players engage with digital environments. Meanwhile, the evolution of game studies has highlighted Avatars as a focal point for exploring issues of identity, agency, and interactivity. The convergence of technology and narrative in gaming has positioned Avatars as not just tools for gameplay but as transformative mediums through which players inhabit and reshape digital worlds.

Rune Klevjer (2022) likens Avatars to prosthetic extensions of the player embodying their presence and agency within a game world. The evolution from 2D to 3D Avatars has given the player something to represent them on screen but also in advancements like navigable cameras deepen player engagement by blending spatial realism with cinematic storytelling. This view elevates Avatars beyond mere playable characters, framing them as central to understanding embodiment, interaction, and narrative in digital media. Unlike simple tools or cursors, modern Avatars merge physical interaction with narrative immersion, positioning players as both agents and participants in the game’s fiction.

Digital environments, particularly ones navigated through Avatars, serve as powerful tools for self-representation and identity exploration (Turkle 1984). Avatars are not mere digital facades but extensions of the self, enabling individuals to experiment with and project facets of their identity in virtual spaces. Turkle highlights how the malleability of Avatars allows users to navigate complex aspects of identity such as gender, personality, and social roles within safe, controlled environments. This process fosters self-reflection and can lead to a deeper understanding of one's personal and social identity. Her work underscores the profound psychological and sociocultural impact of Avatars, framing them as pivotal in the evolving relationship between humans and technology.

Avatars resembling the self foster a greater sense of engagement and self-perception. Vasalou et al. (2012) used experimental methods to show that when players identified with their Avatars through physical resemblance or alignment with personal traits their attention to their own behaviours and motivations within the game increased, promoting deeper self-reflection and a heightened connection to the virtual environment.

Avatars function as dynamic tools for self-expression, allowing individuals to craft digital representations that balance both their real and aspirational identities. Rather than simple replicas, Avatars are often shaped by strategic choices that reflect a blend of physical, demographic, and personality traits, helping users explore versions of

themselves that align with their personal goals and social aspirations. Zimmermann et al. (2022) found that across various digital spaces, users consistently design Avatars that embody an interplay between authenticity and idealisation. This process highlights the adaptability of self-representation in virtual environments, where individuals tailor their digital personas to suit different social and interactive contexts. By navigating these shifting identities, players engage in a deeper exploration of selfhood, shaping their sense of agency and belonging within digital communities.

Expanding on the concept of Avatar resemblance, Yee and Bailenson (2007) examined how digital self-representation influences user behaviour. Players' behaviours in virtual environments often align with the traits or characteristics of their Avatars, demonstrating the psychological impact of appearance on actions and self-perception. Visual characteristics of Avatars can lead players to adopt behaviours they believe consistent with the digital representation.

Avatar customization significantly enhances player identification, fostering deeper emotional and cognitive connections between players and their digital counterparts. Research suggests that the ability to personalize an Avatar strengthens a player's sense of attachment, increasing both engagement and empathy toward their in-game persona (Turkay and Kinzer, 2014). When players see aspects of themselves reflected in their Avatars, they experience a heightened sense of agency and investment in the game world. This connection not only enhances motivation and immersion but also shapes player behaviour, reinforcing the idea that digital self-representation can influence emotions, decision-making, and overall gaming experiences.

In addition, the expressive potential of Avatars aligns with broader theories of participatory culture and convergence. Players do not merely consume game content, they actively co-create it, shaping their narratives through Avatar design and in-game decisions. This reflects the notion that digital games are sites of participatory engagement, where user creativity contributes to the evolving meaning of the experience (Jenkins, 2004).

The importance of Avatar customization is underscored by its ability to enhance player immersion, agency, and emotional connection to the game world. By allowing players to tailor their Avatars, customization fosters a deeper sense of personal investment and identification within the virtual environment, enriching gameplay experiences. Cultural differences significantly shape Avatar preferences and motivations in virtual spaces, revealing cultural nuances in how Avatars are customised (Kim et al. 2018).

2.2: Avatar Representation and Identity

Avatars are not only tools for gameplay but also serve as potent symbols for self-expression and identity exploration. The concept of Avatars as extensions of the self is central to the way they function in both single-player and multiplayer gaming environment (Turkle 1984). These Avatars, as extensions of the self, offer a safe and controlled environment for exploring gender, personality, social roles, and even power dynamics that might not be possible or acceptable in the real world. This exploration

and representation of identity help facilitate a deeper understanding of the self and, in some cases, may lead to psychological transformations.

In the realm of multiplayer games, Avatars are often designed to project not just the real aspects of the player's identity but also the aspirational qualities they wish to express (Zimmermann et al. 2022). For example, Avatars may reflect a player's real-world appearance but emphasize characteristics they would like to amplify, such as physical strength, attractiveness, or intelligence. This idealization process allows players to navigate the complex relationship between their real and aspirational selves. In competitive gaming environments, where Avatars may be seen as symbolic of players' status or expertise, these idealized versions of the self-play a particularly significant role in shaping social interactions and player behaviour.

Avatars that closely reflect a player's physical appearance or personality traits can deepen self-awareness and strengthen emotional connections within a game. Research indicates that when players design Avatars that resemble themselves, they experience greater engagement and a heightened sense of presence in the virtual world (Vasalou et al., 2012). This effect is particularly evident in environments that encourage self-reflection, where players become more immersed in their digital experiences by aligning their in-game actions with their real-world identities. As a result, Avatar resemblance plays a key role in shaping not only immersion but also the psychological relationship between players and their virtual environments.

The process of Avatar customization, therefore, serves as a powerful tool for identity exploration and expression. As Turkle (1984), Yee and Bailenson (2007) suggest, the malleability of Avatars allows players to experiment with different versions of themselves, exploring roles that they might not feel comfortable taking on in the real world. This phenomenon aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985), which posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fundamental psychological needs that drive behaviour and engagement. Avatar customization helps meet the need for autonomy by giving players the freedom to choose how they represent themselves in digital spaces. Moreover, it fosters competence by allowing players to experiment with different skill sets and abilities, enhancing their sense of mastery within the game.

Turkle's research, particularly in her later works *Life on the Screen* (1995) and *Communities in Cyberspace* (2005), explores how the digital environment offers a venue for individuals to perform multiple identities. In her analysis, she asserts that Avatars are more than tools for entertainment they act as vehicles for personal growth, self-reflection, and social experimentation. By embodying a variety of identities through Avatars, players can understand different facets of their character and experiment with behaviours that might be unfeasible or unacceptable in real-life contexts. This process facilitates social learning, empathy, and cognitive development.

The interplay between avatar customization and identity is further explored through gender representation. This study analysed how gender and personality traits influence

the way players approach avatar design. Female participants often prioritised intellectual or nurturing qualities, while male participants were more likely to focus on physical attractiveness or strength. These patterns reflect broader societal norms and expectations surrounding gender, as video game avatars are frequently constructed in ways that reinforce stereotypical representations. Avatar creation therefore emerges as a complex process shaped by both personal identity and cultural pressures Fokides (2021).

Da Silva et al. (2019), in their study *Character Creation and Customisation for Massively Multiplayer Online Games*, discuss how Avatars also serve as platforms for racial diversity and inclusion in digital environments. They argue that Avatar customization in MMORPGs offers players the opportunity to express their cultural identity, challenging the stereotypical representations often found in media and games. By allowing players to create Avatars that reflect their racial background, game designers promote inclusivity, which in turn can enhance player satisfaction and community-building within the game.

These studies underscore the significant role Avatars play in shaping digital identities and influencing how players interact with virtual worlds. Whether through the customization of physical traits, social roles, or cultural identities, Avatars serve as a crucial mechanism through which players project themselves into the digital realm. The ability to design Avatars that reflect both real and idealized aspects of the self not only increases player engagement but also empowers players to explore different facets of their personality, gender, race, and social role. Through these Avatars, players navigate complex issues of self-expression, identity, and social belonging.

2.3: Motivation Theories

Motivation theories represent a cornerstone in our exploration of player behaviour and engagement within the dynamic realm of video games. With a spotlight on Avatar-related factors, these theories provide a lens through which we can dissect the intricate mechanisms driving player motivation.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan in the 1980s, offers a comprehensive framework for understanding human motivation and personality. Rooted in the premise that individuals are inherently driven to seek growth and fulfilment, SDT posits that meeting three core psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness is essential for fostering well-being, personal development, and optimal functioning. In gaming contexts, SDT underscores how elements like Avatar customization allowing players to choose appearance, attire, and abilities can create more immersive and personalized experiences. By fulfilling the need for autonomy and enhancing a sense of control, such features amplify intrinsic motivation, encouraging deeper engagement and enjoyment in gameplay

In gaming, autonomy is supported through customizable Avatars, branching storylines, and open-world designs, allowing players to make meaningful choices and shape their experiences. Competence is nurtured by providing clear goals, challenges that match

the player's skill level, and systems of feedback and progression, such as levelling up or unlocking achievements. Lastly, relatedness is facilitated in multiplayer environments or narrative-driven games where players form social connections with others or emotionally engage with in-game characters. These elements align closely with SDT's principles, demonstrating how thoughtful game design can promote intrinsic motivation, resulting in greater enjoyment, prolonged engagement, and a sense of fulfilment for players. Games that successfully integrate these psychological needs not only enhance the player experience but also cultivate a lasting sense of satisfaction and loyalty to the game.

Achievement Motivation Theory, originally developed by David McClelland (2020), focuses on the psychological drivers that influence goal setting and achievement-oriented behaviours. Within gaming, this theory highlights how progression systems, in-game goals, and reward structures appeal to players' intrinsic need for competence and accomplishment. By offering Avatar-related objectives such as levelling up or acquiring new abilities games can effectively stimulate players' motivation to persist and succeed, reinforcing the satisfaction derived from mastering challenges. This approach not only enhances engagement but aligns with McClelland's emphasis on achievement as a central human drive.

Flow Theory provides critical insights into the immersive experiences that video games can facilitate, especially through Avatar interactions. When players achieve a state of flow characterized by deep concentration, enjoyment, and effortless engagement they are more likely to remain motivated to continue playing. Csikszentmihalyi's nine dimensions of flow, such as the balance between challenge and skill, immediate feedback, and clear goals, are particularly relevant to game design. These principles guide the creation of engaging gameplay mechanics that enable players to merge action and awareness seamlessly (Csikszentmihalyi, 2016).

In gaming, Avatars serve as the primary vehicle for player interaction within the game world. They embody the player's agency, allowing them to perform actions, make decisions, and overcome challenges, which are key factors in entering a state of flow. Research on Avatars conducted by games theorists such as Rune Klevjer, and Nick Yee and Jeremy Bailenson suggests that well-designed Avatars, especially those customizable to align with player preferences, significantly enhance immersion by fostering a stronger connection between the player and the game environment. This connection not only supports the flow state but also amplifies the enjoyment and satisfaction derived from gameplay

Andrew Przybylski and Netta Weinstein's (2012) research built on the principles of SDT by emphasizing the role of autonomy-supportive environments in promoting intrinsic motivation within gaming contexts. Their work highlights the importance of creating game mechanics that enhance autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as these factors significantly influence player engagement and enjoyment. For instance, providing players with meaningful choices and opportunities to control their Avatars can foster a deeper sense of personal investment and satisfaction, aligning with the

foundational components of SDT. This research underscores the broader implications of autonomy in enhancing not only gaming experiences but also well-being and motivation in digital interactions.

The act of adopting and embodying a fictional persona in role-playing games (RPGs) is deeply intertwined with human psychology, particularly through the processes of mimicry, identity exploration and intrinsic motivation. Role-playing allows individuals to inhabit alternate identities, facilitating perspective-taking and offering a safe space to explore new roles and behaviours (Bowman, 2010). This aligns again with SDT, which suggest that autonomy, competence and relatedness are key psychological drivers of engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985). By stepping into the role of the Avatar, players gain autonomy over their digital self-representation, competence through skill-building in the game world, and relatedness by forming social connections, with Non-Player Characters (NPCs) or with other players.

This process is closely tied to the way Avatars function as extensions of the self, enabling players to engage with aspects of identity that may be constrained by real-world social and cultural expectations. As Klevjer (2006) argues, Avatars act as prosthetic extensions of the player, allowing for embodied interaction within virtual spaces. Turkle (2005) further highlights how digital environments serve as powerful tools for self-representation, enabling individuals to experiment with different aspects of identity, including race, gender, and social roles. By customising and controlling Avatars, players not only shape their in-game experiences but also engage with broader cultural narratives, reinforcing or subverting existing representations of identity within digital spaces.

Cognitive engagement in RPG's extends beyond personal expression into problem-solving strategic thinking and emotional immersion. Lieberoth, Wellnitz, & Aagaard (2015) highlight the cognitive engagement inherent in RPGs, noting that such experiences often involve a blend of narrative immersion and strategic problem-solving, which can foster empathy and self-awareness. This duality maintaining an awareness of self while embodying another identity creates a dynamic psychological space for experimentation and reflection. The concept of mimicry, central to role-play studies, further underscores this process. Burn (2025) describes how participants temporarily shed their everyday personas to engage with alternative realities, a process central to both personal growth and social adaptability. By navigating this balance, players can confront challenges and experiment with behaviours that may be constrained in real-life contexts, promoting both self-insight and community connection.

2.4: Motivational and Psychological Aspects of Avatars

The design and customization of Avatars have direct implications for player motivation, influencing both intrinsic and extrinsic forms of motivation. Avatar customization plays a pivotal role in fulfilling these needs, enhancing the player's experience of self-determination and intrinsic motivation within the game. By providing players with control over how they design and interact with their Avatars, game developers allow

players to feel a greater sense of autonomy, as they have the freedom to craft characters that reflect their personal preferences, aspirations, and goals (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

As Rehak (2003) argues, the avatar operates as a specular entity, one that players both identify with and misrecognize. This dynamic helps explain the emotional investment where players often projected personal values or aspirations onto their avatars while simultaneously engaging in role-play as alternative selves. The duality of ownership and detachment observed in player responses aligns with Rehak's suggestion that avatarial embodiment is a site of psychological negotiation, not simply narrative or mechanical engagement.

Avatar customization also satisfies the need for competence, as players have the ability to create and modify Avatars that align with specific gameplay objectives or challenges. In RPGs or other skill-based games, Avatars often gain new abilities, upgrade skills, and level up, providing players with constant feedback on their progression. This sense of competence is crucial for maintaining player motivation, as players seek to improve their Avatars' capabilities and, by extension, their own gameplay performance.

The need for relatedness is fulfilled when players feel that their Avatars can connect them to others in meaningful ways, whether through social interactions or cooperative gameplay. Avatars function as bridges between the player and other community members, and when players design Avatars that represent shared values or collaborative goals, they are more likely to form lasting social bonds and experience a sense of community (Baker, 2023). Multiplayer games, in particular, rely heavily on Avatars as a tool for building relationships and fostering social cohesion within virtual spaces.

Research on Avatar customization highlights its significant impact on player motivation, particularly by enhancing engagement and immersion (Kim et al. 2015). Exploring the effects of in-game customization on game enjoyment found that the sense of autonomy and control, driven by SDT, plays a more critical role in game satisfaction than attachment alone. This finding underscores the importance of providing players with customization options that allow them to shape their in-game Avatars according to personal preferences. By offering such choices, games can foster a stronger emotional connection, increasing players' sense of agency and enhancing their overall enjoyment and investment in the game.

The Proteus Effect (Yee and Bailenson, 2007) tells us that player motivations are deeply influenced by their psychological connection to their Avatars. When players customize Avatars with traits they find appealing or desirable, it boosts their self-confidence, making them more likely to engage in social interactions and challenging gameplay. This emotional investment in the Avatar increases intrinsic motivation, as players are more likely to pursue goals and challenges tied to the Avatar's progression. Essentially, the more players identify with or aspire to their Avatar's traits, the more driven they become to enhance their Avatar's success, which aligns with Achievement Motivation Theory.

This suggests that Avatars can serve as powerful tools for increasing engagement and motivation in games by influencing players' emotional states and sense of self.

Additionally, Cuthbert et al. (2020), explored the psychological impact of Avatar customization in immersive virtual environments (VR). Their findings emphasized that when players have the freedom to design Avatars that fit their personal preferences, it leads to greater emotional investment in the game and a more immersive experience. In VR, where the player is physically and emotionally engaged with the virtual world, Avatar customization enhances their sense of presence, making the game feel more real and motivating them to continue playing.

The flow experience, as described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), is another psychological state that is deeply influenced by Avatar design and customization. When Avatars are tailored to match player preferences or skill levels, they enhance the player's immersion in the game and their ability to experience flow. As Soutter and Hitchens (2016) demonstrated, Avatar identification and customization are linked to the flow state in gaming, where players experience a heightened sense of focus, enjoyment, and mastery. By fostering deeper connections with their Avatars, players are more likely to enter this highly motivating state.

In conclusion, Avatars play a critical role in shaping player motivation and psychological engagement. By offering players the opportunity to customize their Avatars, games can cater to the intrinsic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which drive motivation and satisfaction. Additionally, Avatars can influence player behaviour and emotional engagement, leading to deeper immersion and connection to the virtual world. Through Avatar customization, players are empowered to shape their identities, engage in self-reflection, and experience a sense of accomplishment and mastery that sustains motivation throughout the gameplay experience. Moreover, player motivation can also shape how Avatars are chosen and used; players may select or modify Avatars based on their psychological desires or goals, further strengthening their emotional investment in the game. In this way, Avatars become not only representations of the player but also powerful catalysts for ongoing motivation, enhancing both the gameplay experience and the emotional connection to the virtual world.

2.5: Player Motivation: Bartle's Taxonomy of Player Types

Bartle's Taxonomy of Player Types, developed by Richard Bartle in 1996, categorizes players into four distinct types based on their motivations and engagement with games: Achievers, Explorers, Socialisers, and Killers. This framework is foundational in game studies and provides a way to understand player behaviour in multiplayer online games.

Achievers are primarily motivated by goals, rewards, and status within the game. They focus on completing objectives and earning in-game accolades. Explorers, on the other hand, are driven by a desire to discover new areas, uncover hidden secrets, and learn about the mechanics of the game world. Socialisers value interaction and collaboration, prioritizing connections with other players and enjoying cooperative

gameplay. Killers, by contrast, thrive on competition and conflict, enjoying dominance over other players and testing their skills in player-versus-player (PvP) environments.

Bartle's Taxonomy offers valuable insights into player motivation, helping developers understand the diverse ways players engage with games and the types of experiences they seek. By identifying the primary motivations that drive different player types, game designers can better cater to a range of preferences, ensuring that their games provide meaningful experiences for various audiences. For example, Achievers may appreciate reward systems and progression mechanics, while Explorers are likely to be drawn to expansive worlds and discovery elements. Socialisers would value multiplayer features that emphasize collaboration, while Killers might enjoy competitive mechanics and PvP-focused gameplay.

Understanding these motivations also enables designers to create games that balance different player needs and enhance overall engagement. Additionally, it highlights how player behaviour can shape in-game interactions and influence social dynamics within virtual worlds. The taxonomy's relevance extends beyond game design by considering how these player types interact with each other, we can learn more about the complex social structures that emerge in multiplayer environments and the ways in which game design can foster or challenge these dynamics.

2.6: Drawing Parallels Between Motivation Theories and Bartle's Taxonomy

Players are human, and if motivation theories are to be trusted, we seek power, socialization, achievement, and autonomy in both real and virtual spaces. Bartle's Taxonomy, which categorizes players into four types *(*Achievers, Explorers, Socializers, and Killers) aligns closely with psychological theories such as SDT, Achievement Motivation Theory, and Flow Theory, offering a robust framework to understand player behaviour and preferences.

Achievers prioritize goals, rewards, and measurable success, closely mirroring McClelland's Achievement Motivation Theory (1961). For Achievers, game elements like progression systems, levelling up, and unlocking abilities provide the structured objectives that satisfy their intrinsic need for competence. These players thrive on mastery and accomplishment, embodying the human drive for success that McClelland identified as central to motivation. By incorporating systems that track and reward achievement, games can cater to this player type while sustaining their engagement.

Explorers, who seek autonomy and discovery, align naturally with SDT's emphasis on autonomy. Open-world designs, branching narratives, and Avatar customization give Explorers the freedom to make meaningful choices and craft unique experiences. This player type embodies the intrinsic joy of discovery and curiosity, Wang, Sun & Zheng (2018) examine multifaceted human motivations in gaming, highlighting how open-world designs and autonomy-supportive environments cater to players who seek exploration and discovery.

Socializers find fulfilment in relatedness, a core tenet of SDT. Multiplayer environments, cooperative quests, and in-game social tools create opportunities for meaningful connections, echoing the principles of both SDT and Bartle's Taxonomy. Socializers are drawn to games that facilitate collaboration and communication, using Avatars to navigate and strengthen social bonds. These players exemplify the human need for connection and emotional engagement, as supported by research in SDT and role-playing studies (Bowman, 2010).

Killers, while often associated with competition and dominance, align with the human desire for power and control. For these players, games provide a safe outlet to explore aggressive or assertive behaviours, often within a structured framework that mitigates real-world consequences. The dual consciousness described by Lieberoth and Bowman (2018), where players maintain awareness of themselves while embodying another identity, allows Killers to navigate and rationalize their actions within the game context. This aligns with Flow Theory's balance of challenge and skill (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), as Killers seek mastery over their environment and opponents.

Together, Bartle's Taxonomy and psychological motivation theories reveal a complementary relationship. Each player archetype taps into fundamental human drives achievement, autonomy, relatedness, and power creating a diverse and engaging gaming landscape. By designing experiences that address these intrinsic needs, game developers can foster deeper engagement, enhance player satisfaction, and create spaces where individuals not only play but also grow and connect.

2.7: Avatar Functionality and Engagement

Avatars are pivotal conduits through which players engage with and navigate the virtual worlds they inhabit. They play a fundamental role in gameplay mechanics, facilitating not just movement and combat, but also social interaction and emotional engagement. As functional extensions of the player's body within the game, Avatars act as the medium through which actions are performed, puzzles are solved, and levels are advanced. The design and capabilities of Avatars directly influence the dynamics of gameplay. Cuthbert et al. (2019) in their study *The Effects of Customisation on Player Experiences and Motivation in a Virtual Reality Game* highlighted that Avatars' customizability can significantly impact gameplay dynamics, including combat skills, agility, and problem-solving capabilities. This customization enhances players' emotional connection to the game world by promoting a sense of agency and control. It enables players to express their personal aspirations and identity through their Avatars, which makes them far more than mere functional objects they become extensions of the player's self within the game.

Moreover, the degree of customization in Avatars influences players' willingness to engage with the game. Cuthbert et al.'s study (2019) found that the ability to personalize Avatars enhanced players' motivation, particularly in contexts like virtual reality (VR) gaming, where Avatars play an essential role in fostering a connection with the virtual world. For example, in VR games used for physical rehabilitation, Avatars were crucial

for helping players feel invested in the gameplay and motivated to continue progressing through challenges.

Some theorists hold that Avatars are not expressions of player identity but serve as tools for interacting with the game world, a concept described as "vehicular embodiment" (Newman, 2002). Newman emphasizes that players often select Avatars based on their functionality rather than personal identification. For example, in *Super Mario Bros. 2*, players might choose the Princess not for her character traits but for her floating ability, demonstrating that Avatar selection is driven by practical gameplay needs. This perspective highlights the significant role Avatars play in shaping gameplay strategies and mechanics.

Video games uniquely blend structured, rule-based systems with the imaginative freedom of fictional worlds, creating experiences that are both intellectually stimulating and emotionally engaging. Players navigate explicit challenges while immersing themselves in narrative-rich environments, and this dual engagement lies at the heart of gaming's appeal. Avatars serve as a vital conduit in this dynamic, enabling players to interact with both the mechanical and narrative dimensions of the game. Through their avatars, players engage with rules, pursue objectives, and simultaneously explore emotional and thematic storylines (Juul, 2005).

Beyond the individual gameplay mechanics, Avatars play a critical role in multiplayer games, acting as the primary medium through which players communicate, cooperate, and compete. In games like *World of Warcraft*, *Fortnite*, and *League of Legends*, Avatars are not only vehicles for interaction but also essential tools for socialization. Bonnie Nardi (2005), in her ethnographic study of *World of Warcraft* players, argues that Avatars serve as powerful symbols of identity within these digital communities. They facilitate connection, teamwork, and competition, encouraging social engagement. The appearance and actions of Avatars in these spaces can profoundly affect the nature of social interactions. For instance, highly customized Avatars, which often reflect idealized or aspirational versions of players, can enhance group cohesion. Players may feel a stronger personal investment in their Avatars, which increases their likelihood of participating in social activities, thus reinforcing the Avatar's dual function: as both a tool for gameplay and a facilitator of social interaction.

The functionality of Avatars is also critical when it comes to the narrative aspects of games. Rather than serving only as passive vessels for interaction, Avatars play active roles in the unfolding of a game's story. Many games, particularly those with branching storylines or character-driven plots, feature Avatars whose development directly reflects the player's choices. Klevjer (2009) explored the concept of the "Avatarial camera," which refers to how the first-person perspective provided by Avatars can immerse players more deeply in the narrative. This immersive perspective allows players to feel as though they are present in the game world, creating a sense of physical involvement in the story. As Avatars evolve in response to player decisions, they act as key agents in the progression of the narrative, making the player's journey and decisions feel integral to the story.

Additionally, Avatars contribute significantly to the dynamics of competitive and cooperative gameplay by defining specific roles within the game. In multiplayer settings, players often select Avatars that complement their desired role, whether it be a tank, healer, or damage dealer in an RPG or a sniper, support, or medic in a first-person shooter (FPS). These functional roles are central to gameplay strategy, as they directly impact the player's ability to collaborate and succeed. The availability of customization options whether related to appearance, skills, or traits gives players the freedom to define their strategic choices. In games like *Apex Legends* and *Overwatch*, Avatars with specific skill sets are essential for crafting a gameplay style that aligns with the player's preferences. The customization options available ensure that Avatars are not merely cosmetic choices; instead, they are tightly linked to how players engage with the game's mechanics and social environment.

Avatars also play an essential role in social comparison and identity formation in competitive games. Players frequently customize their Avatars to either reflect their true selves or project an idealized image, often in an effort to stand out in the community. Zimmermann et al. (2022) found that Avatars often combine elements of both the actual and aspirational selves of players. In competitive gaming, Avatars may highlight certain traits, such as strength, intelligence, or attractiveness, to help players project success. Soutter and Hitchens (2016) also explored this dynamic in their study *The Relationship Between Character Identification and Flow State Within Video Games*, showing that players who deeply identify with their Avatars are more likely to experience "flow," a psychological state of focused concentration. This link between Avatar customization and flow state suggests that Avatars help enhance players' emotional and cognitive engagement, thus improving both their overall satisfaction and performance within the game.

The dual role of Avatars as both tools for gameplay and as extensions of the player's identity reinforces their importance in the design of modern games. As Eddo Stern (2000) explains, Avatars blend the roles of functional objects within the game and representations of the player's personal identity. Players project their values, goals, and even idealized versions of themselves onto their Avatars, while the Avatars simultaneously perform the actions necessary to advance in the game. This fusion of identity and functionality enhances players' engagement and investment in the game, making Avatars central to both the narrative and mechanical elements of gameplay. Avatars do not merely reflect the player's identity; they actively shape how players experience the game, both mechanically and socially.

Furthermore, Avatars often serve as symbolic representations of a player's progress and accomplishments within the game. Through customization and development, players are able to express their individuality and experience a heightened sense of agency, which drives them to persist and excel in the virtual world. The process of customizing Avatars allows players to tailor their experiences to their own desires, fostering a deeper connection with the game. Avatars thus serve as both functional instruments for navigating the virtual world and as psychological catalysts that influence how players

approach challenges, communicate with others, and express their desired traits. This dynamic not only fosters greater satisfaction and engagement but also creates a more immersive experience that reflects the Avatar's development and the player's emotional journey within the game.

In conclusion, Avatars are far more than digital representations of players within a game; they are functional entities that influence every aspect of the player's interaction with the virtual world. Whether facilitating navigation, solving puzzles, enhancing social connections, or embodying personal identity, Avatars are integral to crafting immersive, engaging, and motivational gameplay experiences. The customization, progression, and social functions of Avatars make them essential for shaping the gaming experience, both from a mechanical and narrative perspective.

2.8: Cultural and Social Contexts in Avatar Creation

Avatars are not merely tools for gameplay; they are deeply embedded in the cultural and social contexts of the players who create them. Reflecting cultural norms, gender expectations, and individual experiences, Avatars become more than just digital representations they function as symbols of personal identity within virtual worlds. Kim et al. (2018) conducted a comparative study on Avatar customization preferences between American and South Korean players, revealing that cultural differences strongly influence the choices players make when designing their Avatars. South Korean players tend to place a high value on group cohesion and collective identity, which is reflected in the Avatars they create. Their Avatars often emphasise collaboration, cooperation, and shared goals, mirroring the importance of social harmony in Korean culture. In contrast, American players, who tend to value individualism and personal achievement, often opt for Avatars that reflect personal power, independence, and unique traits. These cultural preferences illustrate how Avatars serve as cultural markers within digital environments, offering insights into players' views on identity and their roles within virtual communities.

The importance of inclusive Avatar design is further demonstrated by Da Silva et al. (2019), who highlighted how Avatars contribute to players' sense of belonging and representation. Their research emphasizes that diverse Avatars, reflecting a broad spectrum of cultural, racial, and gender identities, foster immersion and inclusivity in gaming. By offering options for customization ranging from skin colour and hairstyles to clothing and body types Avatars can be designed to represent the unique backgrounds and identities of players. This variety not only validates players' experiences but also promotes a sense of belonging, as players feel their cultural and social identity is respected. Inclusive Avatar design helps create more welcoming and diverse virtual environments, where individuals from different cultural backgrounds can feel both represented and accepted, leading to deeper engagement with the game world.

Cultural representations within Avatar design extend beyond just race and gender, encompassing broader issues such as body image and social roles. Vasalou and Joinson (2009), in their study *Me, Myself, and I: The Role of Interactional Context on Self-*

Presentation through Avatars, explored how Avatars often reflect not just a player's real-world appearance, but also an idealized version of the self. Some players choose to create Avatars that closely resemble themselves, while others may opt for Avatars that embody their aspirations whether in terms of physical appearance, strength, or success. This idealization is influenced by societal pressures and norms, particularly those surrounding body image and attractiveness. In games that reward Avatars for their physical prowess or accomplishments, players may be encouraged to create Avatars that reflect narrow beauty standards, which can affect their self-esteem and body image. These pressures highlight the complexity of Avatar creation, where players navigate both personal identity and societal expectations.

The growing popularity of virtual worlds transformed Avatars into more than just functional gameplay elements they have become social identities in their own right (Turkle, 1995). In these spaces, Avatars interact with other players, form communities, and participate in social activities that go beyond in-game objectives. Players use their Avatars to create friendships, join alliances, and engage in shared experiences such as virtual parties, fashion shows, and storytelling. These social activities reflect the cultural dynamics of the real world, where identity, social status, and relationships significantly shape behaviour. The Avatar becomes a key symbol of these social roles, influencing how players interact with each other and the broader gaming community.

Avatars also play a vital role in representing gender within virtual worlds. As Fokides (2020) found in his study on Avatar design, gender stereotypes can deeply influence how players create and customize their Avatars. Female players often prioritise traits such as intelligence, emotional connection, and nurturing qualities, while male players tend to focus on physical strength and attractiveness. These gendered choices reflect societal expectations of beauty, strength, and emotional labour, with female Avatars typically designed to embody grace and care, while male Avatars align more with ideals of power and aggression. This process highlights how Avatar creation is not only about personal expression but also about reinforcing or challenging cultural norms.

In addition to reflecting gender roles, Avatars allow players to explore and express their gender identity in ways that may not always be possible in the real world. For example, gender-swapping Avatars where players take on Avatars of the opposite gender are common in games like *World of Warcraft*, where the Avatar's design is less constrained by traditional gender norms. Turkle (1995) discussed this concept of identity play, where players use Avatars to test and experiment with different roles, including those related to gender. The fluidity of Avatar design allows players to explore gender identities that challenge stereotypes, broadening the scope of gender expression within virtual spaces and providing players with an opportunity to explore facets of their identity that may be restricted in offline contexts.

Finally, Avatar creation serves as a reflection of broader social norms and expectations. As Da Silva et al. (2019) emphasized, Avatar design not only influences how players interact within the game world but also shapes how they form their identities. The ability to customize Avatars empowers players to engage in acts of personal and collective

identity formation, enabling them to reflect, reinforce, or challenge dominant cultural narratives surrounding race, gender, and beauty. Inclusive Avatar customization, including options for racial diversity and non-conforming gender expressions, contributes to the creation of a more inclusive and expansive virtual community. This inclusivity leads to richer social interactions and enhances the overall gaming experience by fostering a welcoming environment where all players can express their identities freely.

2.9: Psychological, Emotional, and Cognitive Impact of Avatars

Avatars, as digital representations of players within virtual spaces, have a profound influence on players' emotional, psychological, and cognitive experiences. The connection between players and their Avatars goes beyond gameplay mechanics, reaching into players' sense of identity, self-perception, and emotional engagement. As previously discussed, Avatar customization significantly enhances players' emotional investment in the game world, fostering a sense of agency and ownership. The deeper the identification players have with their Avatars, the stronger their emotional connection to the virtual world, which, in turn, intensifies their gameplay experiences.

Yee and Bailenson (2007) explored how Avatars' visual and behavioural traits impact player interactions with their environments, introducing the concept of the Proteus Effect. This phenomenon occurs when players' behaviours shift to align with the characteristics of their Avatars. For instance, players controlling taller or more physically attractive Avatars tend to exhibit more confident and assertive behaviours, while those with Avatars that reflect idealized versions of themselves are more likely to engage socially, thus boosting their social presence. The Proteus Effect highlights the psychological influence of Avatars, illustrating that these digital representations can shape both in-game actions and real-world behaviours by altering how players perceive themselves and interact with others.

Research of the transformative potential of games, particularly through Avatar interactions, in fostering resilience, collaboration, and self-improvement among players shows us that games are not merely escapist activities but are structured experiences that can fulfil core human psychological needs, such as competence, autonomy, and relatedness (McGonigal, 2011). By allowing players to engage with Avatars, games provide a platform for achieving personal growth and social connection, which enhances emotional engagement and cognitive development. This aligns with the idea that Avatars, as extensions of the self, can facilitate deeper connections to the virtual world and contribute to personal development, making them essential for both emotional and psychological engagement in games.

Beyond emotional engagement, Avatars also serve as valuable tools for self-reflection and self-discovery. Vasalou and Joinson (2009), found that Avatars allow players to explore various facets of their identity. Players can project different aspects of themselves onto their Avatars, experimenting with various personalities and roles in a safe and controlled environment. This process of self-exploration can foster increased

self-awareness and contribute to personal growth, as players reflect on how their Avatars interact with the virtual world and make decisions within it.

Avatar aesthetics have been shown to influence social behaviour in virtual environments like *Second Life*. Features such as clothing, posture, and facial expressions can significantly enhance users' success in social interactions, shaping both individual behaviour and wider social dynamics. This underscores the psychological impact of avatar appearance on user engagement and highlights the emotional and social outcomes that can result from customization choices (Banakou, Chorianopoulos, & Anagnostou, 2009).

Avatar representation can influence health behaviours by addressing self-discrepancy, particularly when avatars resemble either a player's actual or idealised self. Customising avatars in this way can activate self-regulatory systems that are either promotion focused or prevention focused. This can increase self-awareness and improve body perceptions. Such customisation may counteract the negative effects of unattainable media standards and promote healthier lifestyle choices. These findings highlight the psychological and emotional potential of avatars in supporting well-being (Kim & Sundar, 2012).

Avatars are also crucial for cognitive development, as players engage in activities such as problem-solving, strategic thinking, and decision-making when interacting with their Avatars. These activities promote cognitive growth, particularly in role-playing and simulation games where Avatars are tied to specific skills or abilities that evolve over time. Cuthbert et al. (2020) noted that Avatar customization has a significant impact on how players engage cognitively with the game. By customizing Avatars to reflect their skills and preferences, players are more inclined to experiment and take risks within the game, thereby stimulating both intellectual and emotional growth. The process of engaging with Avatars fosters a deeper connection to the game, encouraging learning and personal development, making Avatars essential tools not only for gameplay but for fostering cognitive development.

Lastly, Avatars can have notable psychological effects on body image and self-esteem. Fokides (2020) explored how Avatar design often mirrors players' idealized self-images, potentially reinforcing or challenging societal standards of beauty, strength, and gender. Players may create Avatars that reflect their desired body image, which can either boost self-esteem or exacerbate negative feelings, particularly if the Avatars diverge significantly from players' real-world appearances. This dynamic underscores the importance of Avatar design in influencing players' emotional experiences within the game. Designers must consider how Avatars affect self-perception and body image, ensuring that customization options empower players rather than perpetuate harmful stereotypes or unrealistic beauty standards.

In conclusion, Avatars are more than just gameplay tools, they are integral to players' psychological, emotional, and cognitive engagement within the digital world. From facilitating self-reflection and identity exploration to influencing behaviour and social

interactions, Avatars shape the overall gaming experience. They are essential for enhancing emotional engagement, promoting self-expression, and supporting cognitive growth, making them indispensable in modern game design. Through their customization and emotional depth, Avatars contribute to a richer, more immersive gaming environment that fosters both personal and social development.

2.10: Functionality and Gameplay

Avatars are indispensable tools that allow players to engage with and navigate the virtual landscapes of digital worlds. They play a crucial role in the core gameplay mechanics, facilitating actions such as navigation, combat, and puzzle-solving, while also enhancing emotional engagement and social interactions. In essence, Avatars act as functional extensions of a player's body within the game world, enabling them to perform tasks, advance through levels, and interact with the environment in meaningful ways. As Cuthbert et al. (2019) highlighted Avatars' design and capabilities significantly shape the dynamics of gameplay. Customizable Avatars allow players to express their identity within the game, promoting a stronger sense of control and engagement. The study demonstrated that Avatars with customizable features not only enhance player immersion but also serve a motivating function in environments like virtual reality (VR) games for physical rehabilitation, where Avatars help players feel more connected to the challenges of the game.

Beyond their functional role in gameplay mechanics, Avatars often symbolize a player's progression and accomplishments. By customizing their Avatars, players can express individuality and experience a heightened sense of agency, which further drives their motivation to continue progressing within the game. The Proteus Effect (Yee & Bailenson, 2007) demonstrates how Avatars' visual traits can influence player behaviour. For example, players controlling Avatars with traits like height or attractiveness often exhibit more confident behaviour in virtual environments. The ability to align Avatar traits with personal identity results in behaviours that reflect those traits, enriching the gameplay experience and increasing overall satisfaction.

In narrative-driven games, Avatars also serve as active participants in the unfolding story. The way Avatars are designed can deeply affect how players engage with the game's narrative elements. Klevjer (2009) proposed the concept of the "Avatarial camera," where the first-person perspective provided by Avatars enhances immersion, allowing players to experience the story from a more direct and personal standpoint. As Avatars evolve in response to player choices, they become key agents of narrative progression. Whether through skill upgrades, character arcs, or shifting story outcomes, Avatars embody the player's journey and decisions, creating a deeper emotional connection to the game's narrative.

The functionality of Avatars extends beyond individual gameplay mechanics and is integral to the dynamics of social interactions in multiplayer settings. In popular multiplayer games such as *World of Warcraft*, *Fortnite*, and *League of Legends*, Avatars

serve as the primary medium through which players communicate, cooperate, and compete.

Moreover, Avatars define specific roles within the context of both competitive and cooperative gameplay. In multiplayer games, players select Avatars that complement the role they wish to take on whether it is a tank, healer, or damage dealer RPGs or a sniper, medic, or support in First Person Shooters. The functional attributes of these Avatars are central to gameplay strategy, influencing a player's ability to cooperate with others and achieve objectives. For example, in *Apex Legends* and *Overwatch*, players select Avatars whose specific skill sets align with their desired gameplay style, making Avatar selection a critical component of game strategy. This customization ensures that Avatars are not merely aesthetic choices but are inherently tied to the way players engage with the game's mechanics and social structures.

The dual purpose of Avatars acting as tools for gameplay and as extensions of the player's identity emphasizes their importance in game design. As Stern (2000s) notes, Avatars blend functional roles within the game and represent players' personal identities. This fusion of identity and functionality enhances player engagement, making Avatars central to both the narrative and mechanical aspects of the game. Players project their personal values, aspirations, and even idealized versions of themselves onto their Avatars, while the Avatars themselves perform the necessary tasks within the game world. This interconnection of identity and functionality highlights why Avatars are more than superficial design elements they are essential to the immersive gameplay experience.

In conclusion, Avatars are far more than digital representations of players in a game. They are functional entities that shape how players interact with, progress through, and experience virtual worlds. Whether facilitating navigation and problem-solving, enhancing social connections, or embodying the player's identity, Avatars are integral to creating a deeply immersive, engaging, and motivational gameplay experience. Their role in both mechanical and narrative aspects of games makes them essential for fostering player immersion, satisfaction, and motivation. Through their customization, progression, and social interaction, Avatars help define how players relate to the game and to one another, shaping the entire gaming experience.

2.11: Narrative and Agency through Avatars

Avatars are instrumental in shaping the narrative experiences within digital games, especially in genres like RPGs and MMORPGs. They function not only as interactive tools but also as the primary agents driving the narrative. Even when no character is present on the screen and the player sees the world through an "Avatarial camera," this allows players to feel as though they are deeply embedded in the unfolding narrative of the game (Klevjer 2009). In such cases, the camera itself becomes the Avatar, as the player's choices still influence the game world, and the game responds dynamically to their actions, reinforcing immersion. This immersion, facilitated by the Avatar's actions

and responses, enriches the player's connection to the game world and shapes how they perceive their role in the narrative.

On the other hand, in many RPG games the Avatars themselves are linked to the progression of the story. As players advance, their Avatars evolve based on the decisions they make. These choices frequently have significant consequences for how the narrative unfolds, reinforcing the idea that Avatars are not passive participants but active players within the story. This dynamic relationship between Avatar development and storyline progression empowers players, making them feel directly involved in the game world. In narrative-driven games, Avatars act not only as the player's representation but as key agents through which they can influence the story, granting the player the agency to drive the plot in personal directions.

The relationship between the player and their Avatar plays a central role in shaping how players experience and influence the narrative. Avatars in role-playing games allow players to explore multiple personas and roles within the game world (Turkle 1995). By customizing Avatars to reflect personal choices or idealized identities, players can project themselves into various narrative scenarios, crafting unique storylines based on their interactions. These customizations offer players the opportunity to see the consequences of their moral and strategic decisions, allowing them to experience facets of the story that would otherwise be inaccessible.

Avatars also function as vessels for self-representation in the context of digital storytelling (Zimmermann et al. 2022). Zimmerman et al. found that Avatars often reflect both a player's actual self and an aspirational version, impacting how players engage with the game's narrative. When players identify closely with their Avatars, the game evolves from a simple interactive experience to a personalized story in which they feel like the protagonist shaping their destiny. Avatars, thus, serve as conduits for players to project their identities into the game world, influencing the narrative as they go.

Avatar creation and interaction within role-playing games represent a form of narrative agency, where players' choices directly shape the course of the story. This empowerment through decision-making is a fundamental aspect of the player's experience. In RPGs like *The Witcher 3*, *Mass Effect*, and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, Avatars are not merely vessels for action but active agents capable of changing the world around them. Through their decisions whether moral, strategic, or narrative-based players influence the outcomes of quests, the relationships with non-playable characters (NPCs), and even the direction of the overall story.

In this sense, Avatars serve as both interactive and narrative vessels, through which players experience and influence the plot. By making choices, players determine the trajectory of the narrative, shaping outcomes that align with their preferred playstyle. Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of Flow Theory suggests that the feeling of deep immersion in a game is often linked to a player's sense of agency. When players identify

with their Avatars and witness their decisions impact the story, this creates a heightened sense of involvement and personal connection to the game world.

Moreover, in *Avatars and computer-mediated communication: A review of the definitions, uses, and effects of digital representations,* Kristine L. Nowak and Jesse Fox (2018) have extensively explored the role of Avatars as digital representations in computer-mediated environments, highlighting their impact on communication processes, identity expression, and behaviour. Their work emphasizes the importance of consistent definitions for Avatars, viewing them as tools that enable interaction with other users or environments. Avatars in this context are not only visual representations but also key elements in the communication and self-presentation processes. By embodying specific traits, Avatars help users project aspects of their identity, influencing how they engage emotionally and cognitively with virtual spaces. This aligns with the understanding that Avatars can shape how individuals express themselves, navigate social dynamics, and respond to various in-game experiences.

Moreover, Avatars provide a platform for emotional engagement within the narrative. As players guide their Avatars through the game's journey, they form emotional connections with these digital characters. As Avatars grow, evolve, and change based on the player's actions, these bonds deepen, enhancing the emotional richness of the game experience. Yee and Bailenson (2007) found that players' relationships with their Avatars whether through appearance, behaviour, or personality directly influence their emotional investment in the narrative. When Avatars mirror aspects of a player's personal identity, it fosters a deeper emotional connection to their journey, enriching the overall gaming experience.

The agency afforded by Avatars is also crucial in exploring the consequences of player choice in narrative-driven games. Stern (2000) discussed the vital role Avatars play in facilitating interaction with the game's world, highlighting how Avatars bridge the player's intentions and the game's narrative. By embodying their Avatars, players are empowered to explore multiple scenarios, test different choices, and experience alternative realities. This capacity for decision-making within the game world fosters a sense of narrative agency, where players experience stories that are shaped by their own actions.

Lastly, Avatar-based narratives often involve moral dilemmas that force players to confront ethical decisions. Many narrative-driven games incorporate Avatars as moral agents who face choices with far-reaching consequences. For example, whether to help or harm a character, destroy an object, or sacrifice an ally these decisions are often mirrored by Avatar behaviour and have a lasting impact on the game's storyline. These moral choices not only affect the outcome of the game but also shape the player's perception of their Avatar's morality, prompting players to reflect on their decisions both within and outside the game world.

In conclusion, Avatars are central to the concept of narrative agency within digital games. They act as the medium through which players engage with the story, make

decisions, and experience the consequences of their actions. Through Avatars, players are granted the power to shape the course of the narrative, resulting in a deeply personalized and immersive experience. As Avatars reflect the player's identity, emotions, and choices, they become integral to both gameplay and narrative progression, enriching the overall gaming experience.

2.12: Cultural and Social Contexts

Avatars serve as powerful symbols of identity, extending beyond their role as interactive tools in the game world to embody the cultural, social, and personal values of the players who create them. As previously discussed, Avatars are influenced by various cultural norms, gender expectations, and individual experiences, which shape how players engage with digital environments and other players. Kim et al. (2018) explored cultural differences in Avatar preferences, revealing that Avatars are not only personal expressions but also cultural markers within multiplayer gaming spaces. These findings demonstrate that Avatars are not just digital representations but are deeply entwined with the social and cultural contexts of the players creating them.

The intersection of contemporary avatar use and 19th-century sentimental literature reveals how cultural assumptions about gender and identification continue to shape media consumption across time. This connection is explored through the embodied experience of avatars, which resonates with historical notions of readerly empathy and selfhood. Such an approach challenges traditional gender conceptualisations often found in quantitative avatar studies and calls for more expansive methods of inquiry in game scholarship. By highlighting the emotional depth and complexity of avatar engagement, this perspective enriches our understanding of gender identity and self-expression in modern digital environments (Mendelman et al., 2019).

Cultural influences on Avatar customization extend beyond regional or national boundaries and are evident in the global gaming community. Avatars in games like *Second Life* often represent more than just the player's individual identity; they also reflect broader societal, political, and cultural narratives. Da Silva et al. (2019) underscored the importance of inclusive design in Avatar customization, particularly in fostering racial and cultural diversity. Their research shows how customization options such as skin tone, facial features, clothing, and body types can either reinforce or challenge societal stereotypes. Inclusive and culturally representative Avatar designs not only validate the players' identities but also create a stronger sense of belonging, enhancing the immersive experience within the game world. For example, providing options that accurately reflect a player's racial or ethnic background fosters positive social interactions and makes the virtual world feel more inclusive.

Beyond personal identity, Avatars are essential in facilitating social interactions within digital environments. In games like *Second Life*, *World of Warcraft*, and *League of Legends*, Avatars are not just functional representations for gameplay they are central to the social experiences players have in these virtual spaces. In multiplayer settings, Avatars act as intermediaries for communication, both verbal and non-verbal, through

in-game chats, gestures, and facial expressions. For instance, in cooperative games like *Overwatch*, Avatars contribute to fostering teamwork and camaraderie, while in competitive games like *Fortnite*, Avatars play a role in enhancing the competitive dynamics and driving social interactions.

The article *Avatars Versus Agents: A Meta-Analysis Quantifying the Effect of Agency on Social Influence* by Jesse Fox et al (2015) contributes to our understanding of human-computer interaction by systematically comparing the social influence exerted by Avatars (human-controlled virtual representations) versus agents (computer-controlled representations). Through a rigorous meta-analysis of 32 studies, the authors identify significant differences in the ways these entities impact user behaviour and perceptions, emphasizing the stronger influence of Avatars due to their perceived human agency. This finding underscores the psychological power Avatars have in shaping user interactions and social dynamics within virtual environments, as their human-like qualities enhance their social influence.

These Avatars also shape how players are perceived by others, influencing their social interactions and status within the game. Reeves and Nass (1996) explored the psychological effects of Avatar design in media psychology and human-computer interaction, noting that Avatars whether they represent the player's real self or an idealized, stereotypical version can shape how players are perceived in digital spaces. In competitive games, the appearance of an Avatar can communicate status, skill level, or role within the game, influencing how others treat the player. As digital communities evolve, the social norms surrounding Avatar appearance also change, with players using Avatars to challenge or reinforce societal expectations. Some players may use their Avatars to promote diversity, inclusivity, and equity, reflecting broader cultural movements in the virtual space.

Lastly a concept that will be re-visited again in this literature review, Avatars bridge the real world and the virtual, blurring the lines between the two. The concept of the "magic circle," introduced by Johan Huizinga (1938) and later expanded by Salen and Zimmerman (2003), suggests that games exist within a bounded space where the rules of play supersede those of the outside world. However, Avatars often create a porous boundary, allowing elements of the real world such as personal values, cultural identities, and social norms to permeate the game world. Castronova (2005) argued that Avatars enable players to project aspects of their real-world identities, thus fostering a deeper connection between the virtual world and the physical world. Through Avatars, players can bring their personal beliefs, values, and cultural identities into the game, enriching the gaming experience while maintaining a link to the social dynamics of the real world.

In conclusion, Avatars are much more than digital representations; they are social and cultural instruments that carry deep personal and collective meanings. The customization of Avatars reflects not only personal preferences but also broader cultural values, societal norms, and identity performances. From influencing gender and racial representation to shaping social interactions and promoting inclusivity,

Avatar design plays a crucial role in the development of digital communities and the player's experience. By embracing diversity and inclusivity, game developers can create more meaningful and immersive virtual worlds that resonate with players across the globe.

2.13: Cross-Cultural Avatar Design and Global Gaming Communities

As digital games continue to expand globally, the role of Avatars has grown increasingly significant as cultural symbols. In the context of international gaming communities, Avatars are not simply personal representations of players but also cultural artifacts that embody the diverse identities, values, and social norms of players from various backgrounds. Understanding how Avatars are designed, interpreted, and used across different cultures is essential for creating inclusive and culturally sensitive virtual environments.

Inclusive Avatar design plays a vital role in fostering global gaming communities, ensuring that players from various cultural backgrounds can engage in shared experiences. As Da Silva et al. (2019) emphasize, racial and gender diversity in Avatar customization is an essential aspect of inclusive game design. Allowing players to customize Avatars with a broad range of physical features such as skin tone, facial characteristics, body types, and clothing styles can significantly enhance players' sense of representation and inclusion within the game world. Furthermore, offering gender-neutral options and supporting non-binary expressions through Avatars are fundamental for creating spaces where all players can express themselves authentically, without being constrained by binary gender norms.

In many instances, Avatars are seen not only as personal representations but also as cultural markers that reflect the social and political climate of the virtual spaces they inhabit. Cultural appropriation and stereotyping in Avatar design pose significant concerns in game development, as these issues can perpetuate harmful narratives and alienate marginalized communities. Existing research Marissa Baker (2023); Da Silva et al. (2019); Kim et al. (2018) advocates for Avatar designs that are culturally sensitive, avoiding the reinforcement of negative stereotypes while promoting diversity and representation. By doing so, they can create inclusive gaming environments that welcome players from all backgrounds, fostering a more positive and respectful virtual community.

The global nature of online gaming further complicates Avatar design, as players from a range of cultural contexts interact within the same virtual spaces. As previously mentioned in sections 2.7 and 2.11, cultural norms, as around body image, gender expression, and social behaviour can vary significantly across regions, and Avatars often serve as the primary means of navigating these differences. For example, in some cultures, modesty in appearance is highly valued, while in others, Avatars are designed to emphasize boldness or power. By incorporating cultural customization options such as choices for clothing, physical features, and accessories game developers can

accommodate these cultural preferences, allowing players to create Avatars that align with their values and cultural norms.

Ultimately, cross-cultural Avatar design is a vital aspect of inclusive game development, ensuring that players from around the world feel represented, respected, and included in the digital spaces they engage with. By embracing diversity and cultural sensitivity in Avatar creation, developers can craft more immersive, engaging, and welcoming virtual worlds where players from all walks of life can connect, collaborate, and enjoy shared experiences.

2.14: The Magic Circle and the Real-World Impact of Avatars

The concept of the "magic circle," introduced by Huizinga (1938) and later expanded by Salen and Zimmerman (2003), represents the boundary that separates the game world from the real world. Within this "circle," the rules of play take precedence over the norms of everyday life, enabling players to engage in activities that might otherwise be impossible or socially unacceptable. In the context of Avatar creation, however, this boundary becomes fluid, with Avatars acting not only as extensions of a player's identity but also as bridges between the virtual world and alternate realities.

Castronova (2005) further developed the magic circle concept by describing it as a porous boundary. He suggested that the real and virtual worlds are deeply interconnected, influencing each other in dynamic ways. Avatars, as representations of players in digital spaces, function as conduits between these realms. They allow players to project their real-world values, behaviours, and emotions into the game world. Castronova argued that players often bring aspects of their identity such as their values, strategies, and even social dynamics into the game, using Avatars to adapt and navigate the challenges of the virtual world. This interaction helps blur the line between the artificial rules of the game and the lived experience of the player, deepening the connection between the player and the digital environment.

In Bowman's chapter (2019), *Immersion and Shared Imagination in Role-Playing Games*, she highlights the multifaceted nature of immersion in games, noting that players often describe it as "losing oneself in the game" or feeling that "the character took over."; This is referred to as being in a "flow state". Although widely used, the term immersion is debated due to the different experiences it represents for different players. Bowman categorises these immersive experiences into six major types: activity, game, environment, narrative, character, and community, building on earlier work by Gordon Calleja (2011). These forms of immersion help define how players interact with role-playing games on various cognitive, emotional, and social levels. The role of Avatars in fostering character immersion is especially notable, as players identify with and assume the roles of their Avatars, which deepens their emotional and cognitive engagement. By referencing flow theory, transportation theory, and concepts like presence and dissociation, Bowman's work provides a detailed framework for understanding the psychological engagement of players. These insights are critical for

examining how Avatars contribute to immersion and how players' connections to their Avatars can enhance their gaming experience.

As players invest more deeply in their Avatars, the permeability of the Magic Circle becomes increasingly evident, blurring the lines between digital play and personal identity. This raises critical questions about the extent to which virtual experiences remain confined to the game world and how they might inform broader social and psychological development.

2.15: Conclusions

The Magic Circle and its porous boundaries highlight the critical role Avatars play in shaping identity and behaviour. Through Avatars, players develop a dynamic relationship between their in-game selves and their real-world identities, allowing for both personal growth and experimentation. As Avatars continue to evolve as extensions of players' identities, they challenge traditional ideas of selfhood and redefine how players interact with both virtual and real environments. This interplay between the two worlds offers profound opportunities for self-exploration, reflection, and transformation.

Avatars play a central role in the gaming experience, serving as dynamic extensions of the player within virtual worlds. They influence not only gameplay mechanics but also psychological and emotional engagement, offering a platform for self-expression, identity exploration, and social interaction. The customization of Avatars allows players to project both real and idealized versions of themselves into the game, deepening their connection to the narrative and enhancing their sense of agency. The research conducted in this area has explored various dimensions of Avatar design, from aesthetic choices to functional roles, highlighting the significant impact Avatars have on player satisfaction, motivation, and immersion.

However, while the existing body of research provides valuable insights, several gaps remain, especially in the context of how specific factors influence character customization choices within particular game settings. The exploration of these gaps is essential for advancing both academic understanding and practical applications in game design. One such gap is the influence of in-game narrative and lore on customization decisions. In RPGs, where the story and world-building are deeply woven into gameplay, it remains unclear how these narrative elements guide or constrain players' choices when designing their Avatars.

Additionally, research has not fully addressed how players prioritize between aesthetic and gameplay-related customization. While many studies have shown that Avatar customization is an essential part of the player experience, it remains to be explored how players weigh the trade-offs between visual appeal and gameplay optimization; where both aesthetic and strategic customization options are available.

Furthermore, the psychological aspects of Avatar design, such as the relationship between identity representation and gameplay preferences, remain underexplored in

the context of complex role-playing games. For instance, how do players balance creating Avatars that reflect their real-world identities versus immersing themselves in the game's fantasy setting?

Finally, the concept of in-game benefits linked to specific customization choices presents another area that requires further research. Where customization options may confer gameplay advantages, how do players navigate these options? Understanding this aspect is crucial for game designers aiming to balance player satisfaction and the effectiveness of customization systems within the game.

In conclusion, while existing research on Avatar design and customization has provided valuable insights into player motivations and behaviours, there remains a need to explore how narrative context, aesthetic choices, and gameplay optimization interact within specific games. By addressing these gaps, the research presented in this thesis along with future studies can deepen our understanding of the intricate relationship between Avatar customization and player engagement, providing valuable insights that could inform game design and enhance the overall player experience. Through these research explorations, we will better understand how players interact with and invest in their Avatars, offering a richer perspective on the psychological and social functions of digital representations in gaming.

Chapter 3: D&D, RPG's and Baldur's Gate

Character creation is a fundamental aspect of both tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) like *Dungeons & Dragons* (Wizards of the Coast, 1997) and computer role-playing games (CRPGs) like *BG3* (Larian Studios, 2023). While both formats involve selecting race, class, background, and abilities, the key distinction lies in how these choices are enacted: D&D offers an open-ended, imagination-driven process facilitated by collaborative storytelling, whereas *BG3* structures these decisions within a visual, rule-bound digital environment. This section explores the translation of D&D's character-building mechanics into *BG3*'s format, and how technical constraints and design affordances shape that process. Understanding this translation is essential to this study, as it reveals how player identity and motivation are expressed or limited through the structure of digital character creation systems.

3.1: Character Creation across Mediums

In D&D, players begin with a character concept and gradually flesh out race, class, and background, choices that inform both gameplay potential and narrative depth. These mechanics are highly flexible, encouraging experimentation with archetypes or the subversion of genre expectations. Progression through experience points further reinforces investment, allowing players to evolve their characters in dynamic, story-driven ways.

BG3 interprets this system through a structured, visual interface, retaining the core elements while introducing digital constraints and opportunities. While character choices remain rooted in D&D's logic, the digital translation imposes fixed visual models and pre-scripted responses. Customisation is vivid but not limitless; players select from predefined racial appearances and class-based skills, with limited alteration beyond preset parameters. However, *BG3* enriches player immersion through features uniquely possible in CRPGs; such as branching dialogues, cinematic storytelling, and environmental reactivity, transforming static choices into ongoing narrative consequences.

This structured design does not simply constrain creativity but redirects it. Where tabletop players describe and perform their Avatars freely, *BG3* players interact with a curated system that mirrors and expands upon D&D's logic. Notably, the inclusion of reactive NPCs, reputation mechanics, and race-specific dialogue options demonstrates how digital design can integrate identity into gameplay loops. These features serve the motivations explored in Chapter 2, particularly the desire for feedback and immersive world-building (Turkle, 1984; Yee, 2007).

3.2: Technical Challenges in RPG's

The complexity of Avatar design in CRPGs introduces several technical constraints. High-resolution character models, diverse animation sets, and dynamic storytelling systems all require significant processing power and development resources. As developers work to support visual fidelity and narrative reactivity, trade-offs often

emerge. For example, extensive customisation may be curtailed to avoid clipping issues or animation errors, while deeply branching dialogue paths demand rigorous scripting and testing.

These constraints impact not just what players can create, but how they experience the game. Customisation systems, when well-executed, enhance immersion and fulfil psychological needs like autonomy and competence, aligning with SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985). However, limited options or superficial systems may disrupt this experience, especially for players who, as identified by Bartle's taxonomy, value expressive or exploratory play.

Thus, technical limitations are not simply backend concerns; they shape the expressive potential of the player-Avatar relationship. As noted in the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, Avatars serve as proxies for identity, performance, and social navigation (Turkle, 1995; Zimmerman et al., 2022). When constrained, this potential is likewise narrowed, highlighting the need for design practices that balance performance with personalisation.

This chapter sets the stage for the recommendations in Chapter 7, which explores how future character creation tools might better serve diverse player motivations. By examining the intersection of narrative design, technological feasibility, and player psychology, developers can refine systems that foster deeper immersion and more authentic digital self-representation.

3.3: The Legacy and Modernisation of the Baldur's Gate Series

The Baldur's Gate series has long served as a bridge between analogue and digital role-playing experiences. Originating in the late 1990s with BioWare's adaptation of the 2nd Edition D&D ruleset, the series pioneered efforts to digitally replicate the strategic depth and narrative freedom of tabletop RPGs. Its branching narratives and moral dilemmas helped define the CRPG genre, culminating in the critically acclaimed *BG3* (Larian Studios, 2023).

As a transmedia extension of D&D (Robles-Bastida & Victoria-Uribe, 2024), *BG3* builds on this legacy by combining rich customisation systems with cinematic storytelling and rule-based mechanics derived from D&D 5e. The game presents a unique opportunity to study identity construction in digital play spaces—offering players immersive tools to express, challenge, or experiment with identity within a highly responsive narrative structure.

For this study, *BG3* was selected as a case study not only for its fidelity to D&D but because it exemplifies the convergence of technological advancement, narrative complexity, and Avatar customisation. These qualities allow for a focused investigation into how player motivation and identity intersect within the constraints of scripted digital frameworks.

3.4: Technological Advancements and Its Impact on Player Experience

The evolution of the Baldur's Gate series reflects broader trends in CRPG development, where technological innovation has expanded the boundaries of player engagement. From the isometric, real-time-with-pause mechanics of Baldur's Gate (1998) to the fully voiced, motion-captured, choice-driven immersion of *BG3*, each instalment has offered new affordances for role-play, character development, and narrative agency (Mason, 2018).

With *BG3*, these advancements are most apparent in its seamless integration of tactical combat, dialogue reactivity, and narrative branching. The use of cinematic presentation and high-fidelity Avatar customisation strengthens the psychological bond between player and character, aligning closely with motivation frameworks like SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and the Proteus Effect (Yee & Bailenson, 2007).

These technologies don't just improve aesthetics—they reshape how players experience identity, autonomy, and social interaction in digital worlds. *BG3*'s design offers an optimal platform to investigate how players navigate, construct, and perform identity within increasingly immersive virtual spaces.

3.5: Capacity for Representation and Exploration in D&D

Character creation in D&D has long been celebrated for its potential to support broad representation and self-expression (Wilson, 2007, p.36). As a TTRPG, D&D offers a flexible, imagination-driven system that enables players to build characters aligned with their personal values, identities, or entirely fantastical constructs. Through its modular structure, including race, class, background, and alignment, D&D invites players to explore identities that engage with both traditional fantasy archetypes and real-world social categories. This flexibility positions D&D as not only a form of entertainment but a powerful tool for reflecting on identity, ethics, and personal narrative within an imaginative framework.

These role-playing experiences are not limited to escapism. They can serve as powerful tools for self-reflection, emotional processing, and personal growth. Players often use character embodiment to explore facets of identity, rehearse alternative versions of the self, or confront real-life challenges through fictional scenarios. The act of repeatedly engaging with a character over time fosters a deeper connection between player and persona, allowing for the development of meaningful narrative arcs that mirror aspects of lived experience. Such processes have been shown to support identity exploration, and in some cases, psychological healing (Crigger, 2021).

This dynamic is central to ongoing academic discussions around narrative engagement, where role-play is seen as both performance and authorship. In this light, D&D becomes more than a game. It functions as a participatory cultural artefact that empowers players to either affirm or subvert dominant narratives surrounding identity and power.

The character creation system supports nuanced representation through its range of races and classes, each carrying distinct aesthetic, cultural, and mechanical implications. From traditional fantasy archetypes like Elves and Dwarves to more unconventional choices such as Tieflings and Dragonborn, the options offer both familiarity and innovation. When combined with classes such as Fighter, Wizard, or Cleric, along with personalised traits like ideals and flaws, the system encourages the creation of complex and layered characters. Players may build Avatars that reflect aspects of their own identity, explore imagined alter egos, or engage in aspirational role-play. This reinforces D&D's role as a tool for self-expression and experimentation.

The evolution of D&D over the past four decades reflects wider cultural shifts and growing awareness of the importance of inclusion and representation. The choices available to players, particularly in terms of race, class, and alignment, mirror broader conversations about identity, morality, and social dynamics. Garcia (2017) argues that the D&D system itself functions as a site of cultural production, shaping how players experience, embody, and negotiate complex cultural narratives.

This is particularly significant given the unique narrative structure of tabletop RPGs. Unlike traditional games, which often rely on static rules and measurable outcomes, D&D prioritises emergent storytelling and collaborative meaning-making. As Matz (2024) observes, RPGs resist easy categorisation. They occupy a hybrid space between game, narrative, and performance, with no single, authoritative story. This fluidity positions RPGs as complex social constructs that blend personal, cultural, and ludic elements into shared narrative experiences.

The alignment system, which categorises characters by moral and ethical orientation such as lawful good or chaotic neutral, further enhances opportunities for philosophical exploration. By adopting perspectives different from their own, players are invited to test alternative value systems, experiment with moral dilemmas, and explore ethical ambiguity in a low stakes setting. This mechanism supports not only individual identity work but also broader engagement with cultural and ethical diversity.

Importantly, D&D's collaborative format fosters a social space for shared narrative construction. Players interact not just with the game world but with one another, negotiating decisions, developing interpersonal dynamics, and contributing to a collective story. This social immersion supports engagement with diverse perspectives and encourages players to reflect on their own values, assumptions, and roles within a group. The open-ended nature of the TTRPG format makes D&D particularly conducive to exploring complex social, cultural, and personal themes. It also positions it as an essential framework for understanding Avatar creation and player identity in digital games such as *BG3*.

3.6: Representation and Exploration in *Baldur's Gate 3*

As previously discussed, *BG3* builds on D&D's foundational character-building system, offering players a familiar structure of race, class, and background selection. What distinguishes *BG3*, however, is how it expands this system through high-fidelity Avatar

customisation, cinematic storytelling, and dynamic world-building. These enhancements allow for deeper immersion and greater personal investment in the player's digital identity.

While D&D relies on imagination and social negotiation around the table, *BG3* uses its technological affordances to make identity experimentation more immediate and embodied. Visual customisation, voice selection, and narrative responsiveness combine to let players not only design an Avatar but also inhabit it in rich, performative ways. These features allow players to project aspects of themselves, experiment with aspirational or unfamiliar identities, or explore cultural and personal themes in a more intimate and sensory-driven medium.

Importantly, identity in *BG3* is not just defined at the point of character creation. The game's interactive structure allows players to evolve their characters through moral choices, social interactions, and faction alignments, enabling a recursive exploration of values and identity over time. This performative loop, where in-game decisions reflect, reinforce, or challenge aspects of the player's self - supports ongoing narrative engagement and personal expression within the bounds of a digital system.

The emotional and psychological implications of this identity play are significant. Crigger (2021) has demonstrated that tabletop role-playing, particularly through long-term character embodiment, can offer a space for self-reflection and even healing. *BG3* mirrors these dynamics through its combination of narrative agency and Avatar control, suggesting that digital games, too, can serve as sites for introspection, identity processing, and emotional catharsis. The visual and narrative feedback provided by the game reinforces a player's investment, making the emotional weight of decisions feel tangible and consequential.

Within the context of the 'magic circle' of play, *BG3* blurs the boundaries between the virtual and the real. Players engage with the world through Avatars that act both as fictional constructs and extensions of the self. This fluidity opens up a liminal space where players can explore perspectives and possibilities that might be inaccessible or constrained in their everyday lives. Unlike many traditional games with fixed narratives or predetermined roles, *BG3* offers players the freedom to define their Avatar's path, morality, and relationships, thus enabling a kind of self-authorship within the game world.

These affordances have broader implications for understanding player engagement and identity in digital role-play. The ability to explore, affirm, or experiment with identity within a safe, immersive environment suggests that CRPGs like *BG3* are not only entertainment systems but also potential tools for understanding human motivation, self-perception, and social interaction. As games continue to evolve in complexity and emotional range, the relationship between players and their Avatars may offer new insights into how identity is shaped, negotiated, and expressed in virtual spaces.

3.7: Representation and Identity in *BG3*

The relationship between player identity and Avatar gender in RPGs remains a complex and nuanced area of study, particularly in the context of gender-switching. When players craft and enact identities in digital worlds, the alignment between their offline gender and the gender of their Avatars does not always follow clear or predictable patterns. Drawing on social role and feminist theories, research suggests that while gender differences in in-game behaviours such as communication, movement, and appearance often mirror real-world social norms, the motivations behind gender-switching are not necessarily aimed at masking one's offline identity (Martey et al., 2014).

Huh and Williams (2009) suggest that men who use female Avatars may not try to "pass" as women through their behaviour, but they often reinforce idealized notions of femininity through the appearance and communication style of their Avatars. Interestingly, movement patterns, a key component of Avatar behaviour, show little variation between men who switch genders and those who do not. This suggests that Avatar gender selection might be less about expressing a player's identity and more about strategically utilising the available codes of the digital environment to enhance gameplay. Thus, gender-switching in RPGs becomes a multifaceted phenomenon, shaped both by the performative aspects of gender roles and by the practical affordances of the game space itself. Male players are more likely to adopt female Avatars than the reverse. The reasons for these choices may vary, ranging from strategic decisions based on in-game advantages to more complex explorations of identity and social roles in the digital space (Wang et al., 2011).

In a study of Romanian CRPG players, Abrudan et. al (2021) demonstrated that player preferences and behaviours showed that gender-switching in Avatar creation is largely motivated by strategic considerations rather than stereotypical or aesthetic reasons. Contrary to the belief that male players opt for female Avatars primarily for visual appeal, the findings suggest that game success depends on factors like skill, effort, and strategy. Players did not view choosing a female Avatar as a way to gain an advantage but rather as a tactical decision influenced by gameplay needs. This challenges traditional views of gender roles in gaming and points to a more nuanced relationship between Avatar gender and player performance (Abrudan et al., 2021).

3.8: Race in *BG3* & DnD

The concept of race in D&D and its digital counterpart *BG3* mirrors the evolution of societal norms and reflects the persistent influence of stereotypical portrayals. Garcia (2017) discusses how early editions of D&D established racial traits and alignments as rigid categories, with each race tied to specific stereotypes and roles. These early iterations depicted non-human races, such as orcs, elves, and dwarves, with simplified traits and often predetermined moral alignments that shaped how players interacted with these races in the game world (Garcia, 2017). For example, half-orcs were often

characterised as "savage" and threatening, embodying characteristics that aligned with real-world racial stigmatisation. This approach not only dictated the role these races played in the game but also mirrored societal biases at the time, reinforcing a narrow view of racial identity.

Garcia's cultural-historical perspective on D&D highlights that these racial constructs are not just game mechanics, but cultural artefacts shaped by the biases of the game's creators. He notes that the early editions of D&D were heavily influenced by a Westernised worldview, which frequently portrayed non-human races as exotic or dangerous, echoing broader racial dynamics of "otherness" (ibid). While subsequent versions of D&D have sought to evolve and promote inclusivity, such as the shift towards Pathfinder's more individualised approach to racial traits, the influence of these original racial systems can still be seen in contemporary games like *BG3*. Even as the game pushes for more diverse portrayals, the racial systems within *BG3* retain echoes of these outdated conventions, often reinforcing stereotypical traits.

As D&D evolved, its racial boundaries became more flexible, particularly in later editions that emphasise inclusivity and sensitivity in portraying different identities (ibid). However, even in *BG3*, race continues to be a key factor in shaping player interactions and perceptions. Characters in the game carry the weight of their racial histories, which not only affect how other characters respond to them but also influence gameplay. While *BG3* strives for a more nuanced portrayal of race, it often perpetuates the legacy of early D&D conventions, framing certain races within predefined stereotypes. This creates a dual dynamic: on one hand, offering diverse portrayals, and on the other, continuing to rely on inherited racial narratives.

The treatment of race in both D&D and *BG3* underscores the challenge of reconciling evolving cultural sensibilities with established game mechanics. Both games aim to offer immersive, complex worlds that reflect diverse societies. However, the racial systems underpinning these worlds often reflect outdated or one-dimensional views of race, making it difficult to fully escape from the cultural biases that were initially embedded in these systems. This tension highlights the ongoing challenge in the gaming industry: balancing tradition with progress and addressing deeply ingrained biases within long-standing game structures.

Fantasy literature and role-playing games often face similar challenges when it comes to race and identity, sometimes perpetuating harmful stereotypes. While the fantasy genre offers expansive creative possibilities, it has a history of reinforcing outdated racial narratives, assigning fixed traits or moral alignments to specific races. Recent discussions within the field suggest that these racial constructs, rather than being used to reinforce stereotypes, could instead be repurposed to critique social bias and explore racial dynamics (Rumsby, 2017). Baker (2023) adds that RPGs, including *BG3*, provide a unique space where players are not only able to reflect their real-world identities but also challenge and reimagine these identities within a fictional setting. By altering or subverting these racial roles, players can engage with complex social and cultural issues, using fantasy worlds as a lens to critically examine real-world biases.

This approach requires a reimagining of the racial systems in games like *BG3*. Rather than relying on rigid traits that define race and behaviour, game developers can offer players the ability to explore more complex, individualised identities. Just as fantasy literature can challenge traditional racial narratives by offering counter-narratives that dismantle oppressive systems, role-playing games can evolve to allow players greater freedom in defining their characters outside of fixed stereotypes. By doing so, *BG3* and other games in the genre can move beyond merely reflecting the biases of their origins and instead serve as platforms for exploring and challenging real-world prejudices.

The character creation system in *BG3* plays a crucial role in allowing players to shape unique Avatars, offering vast customisation options for race, class, background, and feats. This flexibility enhances the depth and individuality of gameplay, supporting both traditional and innovative character designs. Players can create characters that align with classic fantasy archetypes—such as a high elf wizard or a half-orc barbarian—but they are also encouraged to explore unconventional combinations that challenge the genre's typical racial stereotypes. This system provides a powerful tool for exploring complex identities and narratives that reflect a wide range of experiences, helping players create characters that are not bound by traditional expectations. Through this process, *BG3* fosters a more inclusive and dynamic approach to fantasy role-playing, encouraging richer, more diverse storytelling and deeper engagement with character identity.

3.9: Limitations

While *BG3* offered a rich environment for studying Avatar customisation and player motivation, its suitability as a research tool also came with certain limitations. These arose from its genre constraints, technical framework, and embedded legacy within high-fantasy traditions.

The game operates within a clearly defined fantasy world, and while its character creator includes numerous options, these are still bounded by visual and narrative archetypes inherited from D&D. For example, players can choose between different races such as elves, tieflings, or dwarves, but each race is visually coded with limited variation in body shape, facial features, and skin tone. These constraints help maintain consistency in the game's world-building but can limit aesthetic experimentation and diverse representation.

Moreover, *BG3*'s reliance on long-standing fantasy tropes may encourage players to adopt familiar archetypes rather than explore unexpected or unconventional designs. Players who are experienced in D&D may gravitate toward stereotypical builds, such as an elven wizard or a dwarven fighter, based more on cultural expectation than personal motivation. This can blur the line between genre-informed choice and authentic self-expression, which complicates the interpretation of player intent in Avatar design.

There are also technical considerations. Despite the game's sophistication, it lacks certain features found in more open-ended customisation systems. Body diversity is limited, and options for altering height, build, or other physical features are fixed within

race-specific templates. This restricts how far players can push beyond normative standards of beauty or explore physical representation in more varied ways.

These limitations were important to acknowledge, particularly given the focus on studying representation, identity, and motivation in Avatar creation. *BG3* provides a rich but structured environment, meaning that while it enables substantial customisation, it does so within the boundaries of an established aesthetic and mechanical system. As such, the study's findings should be understood within this context: as a reflection of identity negotiation within a constrained but immersive digital world, rather than as a test of complete customisation freedom.

3.10: Justification for use

BG3 was selected as the primary case study for this research due to its current cultural relevance, technical sophistication, and its deep roots in the *D&D* 5th Edition ruleset (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; Larian Studios, 2023). As one of the most prominent and widely played modern CRPGs (Obedkov, 2024), *BG3* presents an accessible and immersive environment in which players create characters and make narrative decisions. This made it an ideal choice for exploring how aesthetic choices in Avatar customisation reflect player motivations, identity preferences, and engagement with genre conventions.

Importantly, *BG3* also serves as a fitting site for reflecting on Bartle's Taxonomy (Bartle, 1996), a framework originally developed through observations of Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) players; precursors to the modern CRPG. This alignment provides a meaningful lens for applying and re-examining Bartle's typology in a modern context, particularly in relation to how different players engage with narrative, aesthetic, and strategic aspects of Avatar creation. While future studies might explore different genres or gameplay types, the high-fantasy RPG context remains especially relevant to this taxonomy.

BG3's character creation system supports a wide range of traditional and non-traditional archetypes. Players may build familiar characters, as previously mentioned in the limitations section, such as an elven wizard or a dwarven fighter, or they opt to subvert expectations through unconventional builds, such as a half-orc bard or a scholarly barbarian. This balance between genre fidelity and expressive freedom provides a valuable opportunity to study how players either embrace or resist fantasy tropes. In doing so, the game becomes a site for negotiating identity, where design choices reflect not just gameplay strategy, but personal values, self-concept, and aesthetic preference.

The widespread popularity of *BG3* and strong critical reception made it a practical and strategic choice for this project. Its accessibility meant that many participants were already familiar with the gameplay structure, ruleset, and narrative expectations, which reduced onboarding time and allowed for deeper participant engagement. This was particularly advantageous within the timeframe of a year-long study, where consistent access to an engaging and technically stable platform was essential.

In summary, *BG3* was chosen not only for its mechanical and narrative richness but also for its relevance to long-standing frameworks in games research. Its fantasy setting, links to D&D, and alignment with foundational theories like Bartle's Taxonomy make it an effective case study for understanding how Avatar customisation reflects and shapes player motivation. While the game's limitations are addressed separately, its balance of structure and player agency makes it an ideal platform for examining identity performance and aesthetic decision-making in narrative-driven digital play.

3.11: Larian Studios Public Data

Larian Studios' publicly released player data offers a valuable large-scale snapshot of Avatar customisation trends in *BG3*. While the data lacks the depth necessary for rigorous academic analysis, offering percentages without demographic breakdowns or behavioural context; it provides a meaningful benchmark. Its scale, drawn from millions of player choices, allows for comparison with this study's smaller, more focused sample, highlighting potential points of alignment or divergence. Importantly, these statistics represent actual in-game behaviour, rather than self-reported preferences, lending them a particular relevance when examining player motivation and engagement.

Figure 1 Infographic by Larian Studios, 1 year anniversary statistics on Avatar choices (2024)

On the game's one-year anniversary, Larian released a series of infographics visualising player preferences across race, class, and customisation choices. Notably, over 93% of

players opted to create custom Avatars rather than choosing from the predefined Origin characters. This overwhelming preference reflects a broader desire for individualised expression; consistent with the literature that positions Avatars as vehicles for self-representation and identity exploration (Turkle, 1995; Klevjer, 2006; Zimmermann et al., 2022). These findings align with research suggesting that players seek autonomy and personalisation in Avatar design, especially within immersive, narrative-driven environments.

Among custom characters, certain race and class combinations appeared more frequently than others. Paladins and Sorcerers were especially popular among Half-Elves and Dragonborn, while Gnomes and Halflings often favoured Rogues and Bards. Elves and Half-Elves were the most frequently selected races overall, suggesting a continued appeal of familiar fantasy archetypes. These trends appear to reflect how players engage not only with the aesthetic possibilities of Avatar design but also with perceived gameplay advantages and narrative resonance. For example, races like Elves offer increased movement speed and dark vision, which make them a natural fit for stealth-oriented classes such as Rogues. Dwarves, known for their resilience and strength, were often paired with roles like Fighter or Paladin. These patterns suggest that players may be guided by both narrative coherence and mechanical optimisation when designing Avatars.

Figure 2 Infographic by Larian Studios, 1 year anniversary statistics on Class choices (2024)

Such behaviour is consistent with existing research that shows players often gravitate toward choices that maximise their perceived effectiveness or align with genre expectations (Yee, 2006). It also reflects the influence of Dungeons & Dragons' long-standing racial and class templates, which have become ingrained in fantasy gaming culture (Garcia, 2017; Baker, 2022).

Larian's data thus provides more than just numerical trends. It represents a cultural snapshot of how players interpret and engage with the fantasy genre in one of the most widely played CRPGs in recent years. This makes it particularly relevant when comparing broader trends with the motivations uncovered in this study. By examining whether a smaller, demographically varied group replicates or subverts these patterns, the research can shed light on how genre conventions shape player behaviour and how individual motivations may challenge or reinforce these norms.

Figure 3 Infographic by Larian Studios, Opening Weekend Statistics (2023)

Earlier data released during *BG3*'s launch weekend as seen in Figure 3-3. further reinforces the significance of Avatar customisation. According to Larian, players collectively spent the equivalent of 88 years in the character creation interface. Nearly 10 percent spent over an hour on this process. These figures indicate that for many players, character creation is not merely a functional task but an essential and immersive part of the game. This observation aligns with theories that view Avatar creation as a form of digital embodiment and narrative authorship (Turkle, 1995; Yee and Bailenson, 2007).

Across all three infographics, a consistent narrative emerges. Players are deeply engaged in the process of customisation and self-representation. Larian's data reveals widespread enthusiasm for custom characters and offers a useful benchmark against which this study's findings can be contextualised. By comparing individual motivations and design choices with aggregated trends, it becomes possible to identify whether players are conforming to widely accepted fantasy norms or using the system to explore more personal and unique forms of digital identity.

Chapter 4: Method

4.1: Methods Explained

This study was designed to explore how players express motivation and identity through Avatar customisation in *BG3*. A mixed-methods approach was employed to gather both qualitative and quantitative data, allowing for a multifaceted understanding of how players construct, interpret, and inhabit customised Avatars in a high-fantasy CRPG setting. By combining surveys, gameplay observation, and interviews, the study triangulated data sources to better understand how individual preferences map onto broader behavioural patterns and identity performances.

Participants were recruited to capture diversity across age, gender, and gaming experience, with the aim of highlighting how these variables might influence Avatar design and gameplay preferences. Before gameplay began, participants completed a pre-experiment questionnaire that gathered demographic information and assessed motivations for playing RPGs, character customisation preferences, and prior experience with *BG3*. These responses served as a contextual baseline for interpreting participants' later choices.

Participants then completed a character creation task using *BG3*'s full customisation system. During this process, they were asked to verbalise their thoughts using the think-aloud method, a cognitive research technique rooted in the protocol analysis framework developed by Ericsson and Simon (1984). This method is widely used in psychological research and human-computer interaction to reveal real-time decision-making strategies. In the context of Avatar customisation, it offered direct access to the cognitive and emotional processes guiding player choices, including aesthetic reasoning, strategic thinking, and identity expression. Screens and audio were recorded to capture both verbal and on-screen activity for later analysis.

Following this, participants played the first hour of *BG3*, beginning from a standardised point in the game. This consistency reduced variability across gameplay experiences while preserving the branching, choice-driven nature of the game. Observing how participants navigated early interactions, combat, and exploration allowed the study to examine whether and how initial character design shaped in-game behaviours and emergent playstyles.

After gameplay, participants were interviewed in a semi-structured format. These interviews prompted reflection on character creation and gameplay decisions, allowing participants to elaborate on their motivations, values, and connections to their Avatars. The flexible interview structure enabled follow-up questions tailored to individual responses, deepening insight into their characterisation and interpretive frameworks.

All sessions were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's model (2006, 2019). This approach treats the researcher as an active interpreter, emphasising meaning-making over passive theme discovery. An inductive coding strategy was employed to identify patterns in the think-aloud protocols

and interviews, rather than applying pre-existing theoretical codes. Codes were refined iteratively and grouped into higher-order themes such as aesthetic preference, narrative alignment, identity exploration, and strategic gameplay motivation.

All participants received a detailed information sheet and gave written informed consent before taking part. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout data collection, storage, and reporting. Participants were also made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

4.2: Recruitment

The recruitment strategy for this study was designed to target a broad yet relevant sample of players, specifically those familiar with *BG3* and interested in role-playing games more generally. A key inclusion criterion was prior experience with *BG3*. This ensured that all participants had a working knowledge of the game's mechanics, narrative framework, and character creation system, thereby reducing the need for extensive onboarding and enabling more focused insight into Avatar customisation and player motivation.

To attract suitable participants, a public call for participation was circulated via online platforms with strong gaming and RPG communities. These included social media outlets such as Twitter and Instagram, as well as dedicated *BG3* and *D&D* forums on Reddit. This digital recruitment approach allowed the study to reach a geographically diverse audience while also appealing to individuals already engaged with the relevant game world and genre. The goal was not just to gather a large number of participants, but to ensure that those involved could speak meaningfully to the game's systems and role-play mechanics.

Upon expressing interest, potential participants were sent a participant information sheet detailing the structure and aims of the study. This included an overview of each research phase: the pre-experiment questionnaire, the character creation task, the standardised gameplay session, and the follow-up interview. The information sheet also addressed ethical considerations, such as confidentiality, data anonymisation, and participants' right to withdraw at any point without penalty.

4.3: Survey

Following this, participants were invited to complete the pre-experiment questionnaire, which can be seen in full in the appendix. By combining targeted outreach with a clearly structured onboarding process, the recruitment phase helped lay the foundation for a rigorous and ethically sound investigation into player motivation and identity in CRPGs.

The survey included questions on age, gaming history, number of hours played prior to this study in *BG3*, and preferences in character customisation such as race, class, and appearance. While the study's primary emphasis was on qualitative data, this survey served an important foundational role by capturing quantitative data that established each participant's gaming profile.

This baseline was essential for contextualising the qualitative insights drawn from gameplay and interviews. Understanding each participant's experience with RPGs and character creation systems provided a framework for analysing how and why they made certain choices during the study. It also allowed for the identification of patterns across participants, such as recurring preferences for specific race-class combinations or highlighted when individual behaviours diverged from broader trends.

Importantly, the survey encouraged participants to reflect on their own habits and expectations before the session began. By documenting their anticipated choices and motivations, the survey provided insight into player self-awareness and opened up opportunities to later examine whether participants adhered to their stated preferences or made unexpected decisions during gameplay. This comparison between self-reported tendencies and observed behaviour helped deepen the analysis of player motivation and identity expression.

4.4: Play Session

During the gameplay session, participants were asked to create a new character in *BG3* and to verbalise their thoughts throughout both the character creation and gameplay phases using the think-aloud method (Ericsson and Simon, 1984). To maintain a natural flow and avoid influencing decisions, no direct questions were asked during this phase. Participants were encouraged to freely express their thoughts, preferences, and rationales as they interacted with the game's systems.

Once character creation was completed, each participant played the first hour of *BG3*. This starting point was chosen because it offers a consistent introduction to the game's mechanics, narrative structure, and player choices. While *BG3* is a complex and expansive title with highly branching gameplay that can span upwards of 80 hours, the first hour provides a relatively standardised experience. This early segment allowed for the collection of comparable data across participants, focusing on how character customisation influenced initial gameplay behaviours, including exploration, interaction with non-playable characters, and combat.

Although participants were encouraged to speak freely, it is acknowledged that being observed may have influenced how they framed or justified their actions. Nonetheless, the aim was not to eliminate all forms of observer effect but to understand how participants explained and understood their own motivations in the moment. These self-narrated accounts offered valuable insight into how players interpreted their decisions and connected them to their chosen Avatars.

Both the character creation and gameplay sessions were recorded to capture participants' actions and verbal commentary. These recordings were later transcribed and analysed using NVivo. An inductive coding approach was applied to the transcripts to identify recurring patterns and themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This bottom-up analysis focused on key areas such as aesthetic preference, identity expression, narrative alignment, and strategic gameplay choices.

4.5: Interview

Following the gameplay session, participants took part in a semi-structured interview designed to deepen the understanding of their motivations, identity expressions, and decision-making strategies during character creation and gameplay. Conducted via Microsoft Teams, the interviews provided a flexible yet focused environment for participants to reflect on their experiences, while maintaining convenience and comfort.

The questions prompted participants to elaborate on the choices they made during the character creation process and to consider how those decisions shaped their sense of connection to their Avatars and influenced their in-game behaviour. Particular attention was given to the role of aesthetics in fostering identification, immersion, or narrative alignment. Participants were also asked to consider whether their characters reflected aspects of their own identity, idealised versions of themselves, or entirely fictional personas.

Other prompts explored the influence of gameplay goals, genre expectations, and previous RPG experience on their decisions. This approach encouraged reflective thinking about the alignment between the players' intentions and their actual in-game actions—something also explored through the pre-game survey and think-aloud data.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then imported into NVivo for coding and analysis. The transcripts were examined using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), supporting the inductive development of themes based on patterns identified within the participants' reflections. This phase of the research offered vital insight into how players made sense of their choices, helping to contextualise both their customisation behaviours and gameplay strategies within broader motivational and identity-driven frameworks.

4.6: Considerations

When analysing the data, several important considerations were taken into account to ensure the findings accurately reflected participants' genuine motivations and behaviours. One key challenge was the possibility that participants altered their responses during the interview, either consciously or unconsciously, in an attempt to align with what they perceived as the expected or desirable answers. This tendency, known as social desirability bias, is common in behavioural research, where individuals may report what they think researchers want to hear rather than what truly reflects their internal reasoning (Grimm, 2010).

To address this issue, the pre-game survey served as a useful baseline. It provided insight into participants' motivations, preferences, and expectations before they began gameplay. This allowed for a meaningful comparison between what players said they intended to do and what they actually did during the session. Identifying discrepancies between the survey responses and in-game behaviour offered valuable clues about the

accuracy of participants' self-perceptions and the degree to which their reported motivations matched their real-time decisions.

The combination of the think-aloud data, pre-game survey responses, and follow-up interviews provided a well-rounded perspective on player motivations and decision-making. These three sources formed the core of the study's triangulation strategy, offering a layered and balanced understanding of participant behaviour. The survey established a baseline of expectations and preferences, while the think-aloud method captured real-time reasoning during the character creation process. The semi-structured interviews then provided space for reflection and elaboration, allowing participants to clarify or expand on their earlier choices. Although gameplay footage was recorded, it was not systematically analysed due to time constraints. Instead, the emphasis was placed on these three core methods, which together offered a robust and coherent dataset for exploring the relationship between player identity, motivation, and Avatar customisation.

4.7: The Participants

Participants were selected from a group of individuals who had previously played *BG3*, a requirement intended to streamline the onboarding process and reduce the need for tutorial guidance during character creation and gameplay.

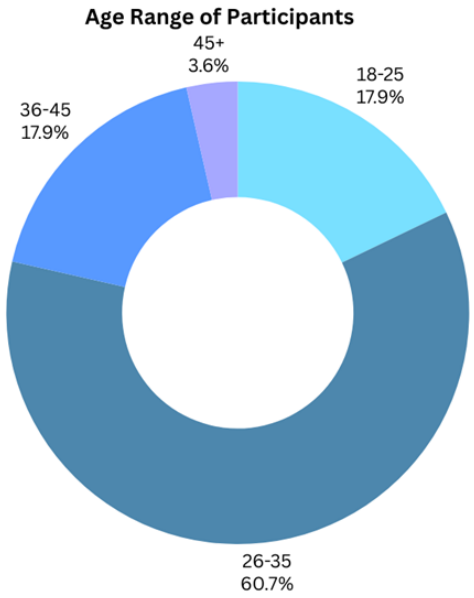

Figure 4. Age Range of Participants in Aesthetic Choices and Player Motivation

Participant demographic data was collected from the first three questions of the Pre-Game Survey. All information provided in the survey was self-reported. The responses indicate that the sample consisted of individuals from a range of age groups and gender identities. As illustrated in Figure 4, the largest proportion of participants (60.7%) fell within the 26–35 age range. Smaller groups were represented in both younger and older brackets, contributing to a degree of demographic diversity within the study sample.

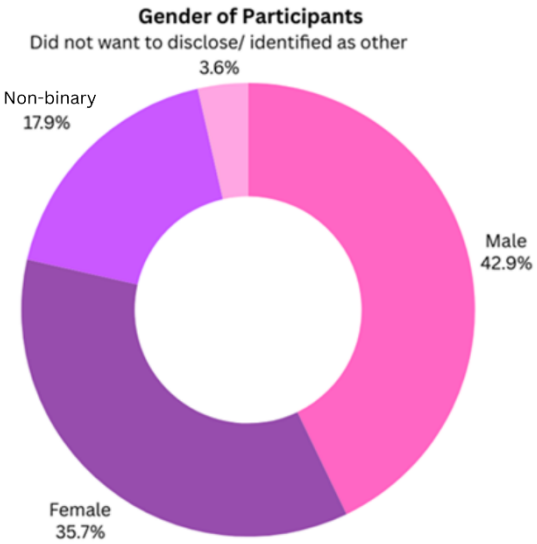

Figure 4. Gender of Participants in Aesthetic Choices and Player Motivation

Gender identity as seen in Figure 5, shows 43% of participants identified as male, 36% as female, and 18% as non-binary. An additional 4% chose not to disclose or identified as something other than the given options. This provided a mix of demographic backgrounds from which to explore Avatar customisation preferences.

Participants also reported varying levels of general gaming experience, with years of gaming ranging from 11 to 35. The median was 20 years, and the average was approximately 22 years. These values indicate that most participants had long-term experience with video games. Experience levels correlated with age groups: those in the 36–45 range typically reported 20+ years of gaming, while participants in the 18–25 group reported shorter histories, as expected.

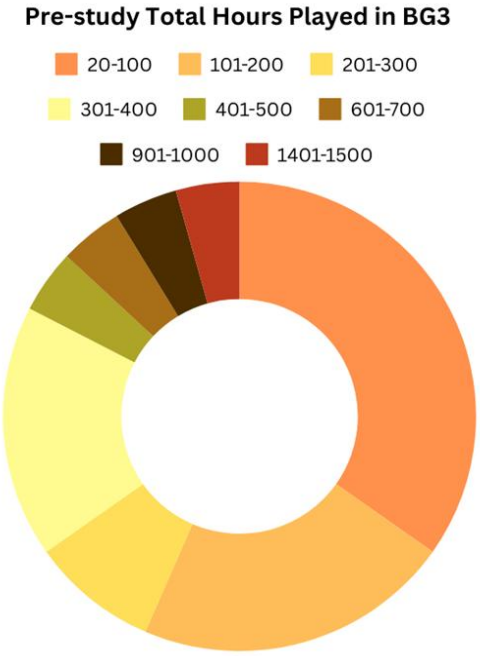

Figure 5. Pre-Study Total Hours Played in BG3 *by the Participants*

In terms of experience with *BG3* specifically, reported playtime ranged from 20 to 1500 hours. While the mean was influenced by outliers, the median was approximately 200 hours. This suggests a varied level of prior engagement with the game across the sample. Some participants had only brief exposure, while others had extensive experience, including multiple character builds and completed playthroughs. The variance allowed for a range of perspectives on customisation and gameplay familiarity.

These descriptive characteristics offer a foundational understanding of the study sample, providing demographic and experiential context for interpreting the qualitative and quantitative data gathered during the subsequent stages of the research.

Chapter 5: Findings

5.1: Pre-Game Survey Analysis

The pre-game survey (see Appendix) offers detailed insight into how players reflect on their previous *BG3* Avatar experiences and plan the creation of new ones. These reflections provide valuable context for understanding player motivations, character creation strategies, and expectations for gameplay engagement. The responses suggest that players often adapt or refine their Avatars over time, indicating a dynamic and iterative approach to role-playing. By combining these quantitative survey responses with the themes identified during later analysis, this section examines key trends in pre-game planning and motivation, offering insight into the evolving relationship between players and their Avatars.

5.1.1.i: Which Race do you think you will pick for your Character?

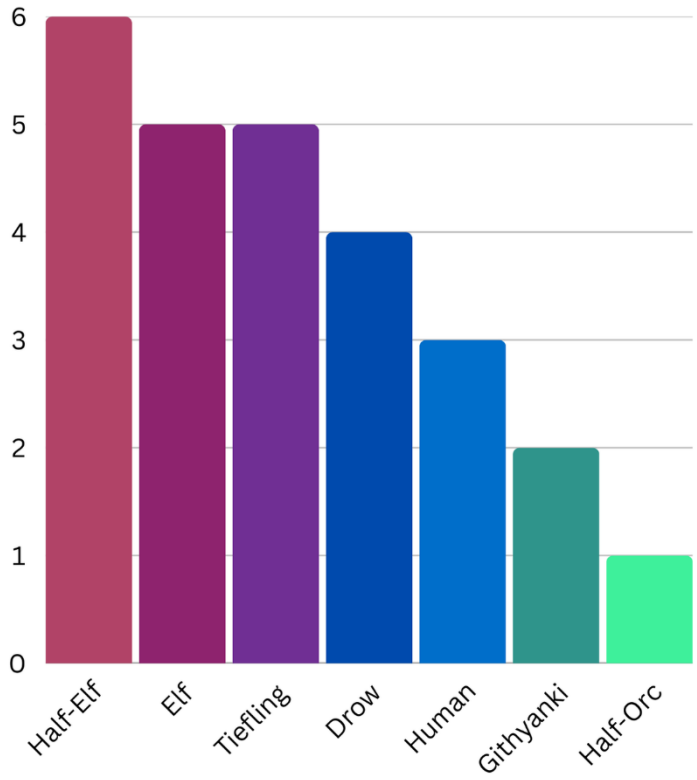

Figure 6. Which Race do you think you will pick for your Character?

In response to this pre-game survey question participants demonstrated a clear preference for races associated with agility and magical backgrounds. As shown in Figure 7 participants' self-reported preferences for character race in *BG3*. The majority selected races such as Half-Elf (23%), Elf (19%), and Tiefling (19%), followed by Drow (15%), Human (12%), Githyanki (8%), and Half-Orc (4%). Notably, no participants reported regularly choosing Dwarves, Gnomes, or Halflings, despite these races being core to the game's fantasy setting.

Figure 8. Top Race Picks – Close up of Infographic by Larian Studios, 1 year anniversary statistics on Avatar choices (2024)

An initial interpretation might suggest that this absence reflects player alignment with more popular or visually customisable races. This is further supported by data released by Larian Studios, which places Elves, Half-Elves, Humans, and Tieflings as the most frequently selected races, while Dwarves, Gnomes, and Halflings consistently appear at the bottom of the list. The consistency between this smaller sample and the larger player base suggests broader aesthetic and narrative preferences, with players gravitating towards races that offer perceived elegance, flexibility, or perhaps the bonuses associated with these races such as an increased movement speed – giving players an in-game advantage.

5.1.1.ii: Which class will you choose for your character?

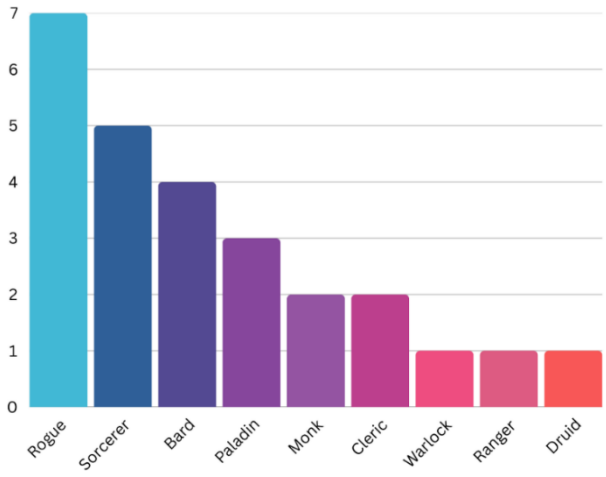

Figure 9. Which class will you choose for your character?

Figure 9 displays participants' anticipated class selections from the pre-game survey. Rogue was the most frequently selected class, chosen by 27% of respondents, followed by Sorcerer 19%, Bard 15%, and Paladin 12%. Monk and Cleric were each selected by 8% of participants, while Warlock, Ranger, and Druid each accounted for 4%. Notably, no participants indicated an intention to play as a Barbarian, Fighter, two core classes typically associated with direct combat. Wizard was also notably absent.

Figure 10. Top Class Picks – Close up of Infographic by Larian Studios, 1 year anniversary statistics on Avatar choices (2024)

Figure 10 presents class popularity rankings based on player data released by Larian Studios. According to these statistics, the most selected classes among the wider *BG3* player base were, in order: Paladin, Sorcerer, Fighter, Barbarian, Rogue, Bard, Wizard, Monk, Druid, Ranger, and Cleric. This distribution differs slightly from the responses given in the pre-game survey, where Rogue was the most frequently selected class, followed by Sorcerer and Bard. Notably, none of the participants in this study indicated a preference for Fighter or Barbarian, both of which rank highly in Larian's dataset. These differences highlight how class selection among this study's participants may diverge from broader player trends, potentially influenced by the demographic makeup or role-playing preferences of the group.

5.1.1.iii: Do you like to customize your character's appearance in games?

Participants were asked about their preferences regarding character customisation in previous playthroughs. As shown in Figure 11, the majority of participants strongly agreed approximately 57.7% or agreed approximately 26.9 that they liked to customise their character's appearance. A smaller group was neutral approximately 11.5%, and

only a very small number approximately 3.8% strongly disagreed with enjoying character customisation.

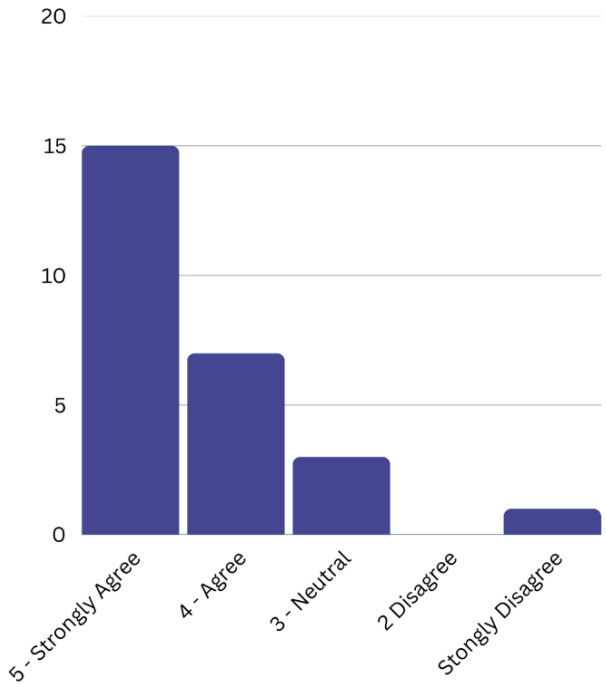

Figure 11. Do you like to customize your character's appearance in games?

This aligns with the literature discussed earlier in Chapter 2, where research by Turkay and Kinzer (2014) and Yee and Bailenson (2007) highlights that Avatar customisation significantly strengthens players' emotional connection to the game, enhancing their immersion and identification with their Avatars. These findings reinforce previous research demonstrating that personalising Avatars plays a vital role in player satisfaction and engagement.

5.1.1.iv: What aspects do you tend customize? (Check all that apply)

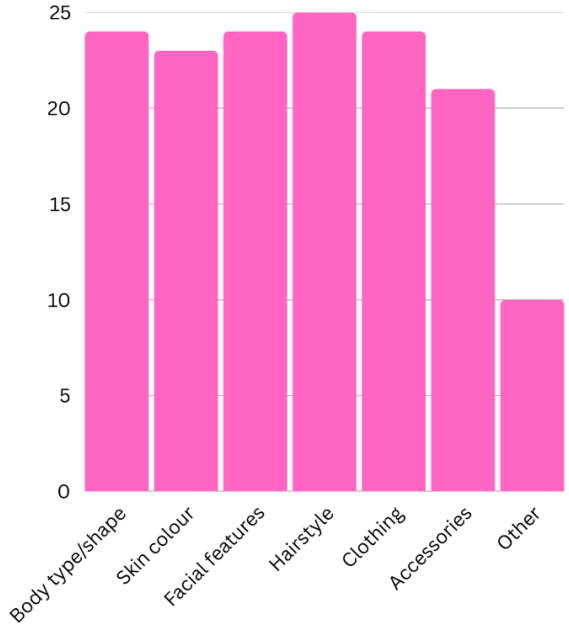

Figure 12. What aspects do you tend customize?

Figure 12 illustrates participant responses to the multiple-choice question regarding which aspects of their character's appearance they typically customise. It is important to note that although 26 participants completed the pre-game survey, participants could select multiple options, making the total selections higher than the number of participants. The data reveals two clear patterns: participants either focused narrowly on one or two attributes, or they extensively engaged with most or all available customisation categories. The most frequently customised attributes included hairstyle, clothing, body type or shape, and facial features, closely followed by skin colour and accessories. The "*Other*" category was the least selected, indicating a preference among participants for predefined customisation options provided by the game.

However, those who did select the "*Othe*r" option frequently elaborated with comments such as "*Everything*," "*All options,"* "*I tweak everything*," and "*Every option given*." These responses demonstrate a tendency among many players to approach Avatar customisation comprehensively, reflecting a desire for maximum personal expression and control over their Avatars. This comprehensive customisation approach aligns with findings from earlier studies, suggesting that extensive personalisation enhances player immersion, identity expression, and overall satisfaction within the gaming environment (Turkay & Kinzer, 2014; Yee & Bailenson, 2007).

5.1.1.v: What do you feel influences your character customization choices? (Open-ended)

The open-ended responses to this question revealed several key themes relating to participant motivations for Avatar customisation: alignment with preferred gameplay style, aesthetic appeal, personal identification or aspiration, immersion in narrative, and the creation of detailed thematic personas.

Many participants designed their Avatars to visually reflect their preferred playstyle or narrative role, with Participant 0002 stating, "*I like my characters to appear quick and able-bodied*," due to a preference for stealth and ranged combat. Participant 0032 similarly tailored their Avatar's appearance around character alignment and D&D lore, describing a "*Lolth-sworn Drow cleric*" who wears "*dark colours with spider-related motifs."*

Aesthetic preferences also strongly influenced customisation choices. Participant 0022 expressed a practical yet personal aesthetic approach, noting, "*if you have to look at a character all game, then it might as well be one you like looking at*".

Identity exploration emerged frequently as another significant influence. Participant 0008, for instance, aimed to create Avatars "*close to me, whether in looks or demeanour or identity*," but acknowledged the limitations imposed by customisation options, particularly concerning gender identity. Participant 0029 similarly created Avatars reflecting their own traits: *"I am tall and androgynous, if that is possible in the game I will do that."*

Narrative immersion and thematic consistency were highlighted by participants who created distinct personas or alter egos. Participant 0024 emphasised this narrative-driven approach, stating, "*I'm a big believer in creating the brand for my new character anew each playthrough*," illustrating this with a vivid persona: "*Ulrich Firelord: Breaker of Mountains*," a character completely distinct from their real-world identity. Similarly, Participant 0038 expressed a desire to "*visualise the idea of a character centred around a specific theme,*" specifically an "*eccentric old man mushroom mage*."

Emotional and personal resonance also influenced customisation, with Participant 0048 noting a deep emotional connection with their repeated Avatar choice, linking their character's narrative journey through darkness and redemption with their own life experiences.

These responses collectively illustrate the complex interplay between personal identity, gameplay strategy, aesthetic preferences, and narrative immersion driving Avatar customisation, aligning with findings from Yee and Bailenson (2007) and Turkay and Kinzer (2014), highlighting the rich psychological processes behind player decisions.

5.1.1.vi: Do you feel your character represents you in any way?

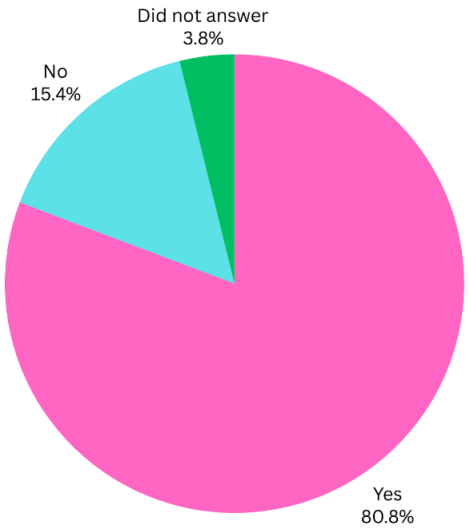

Figure 13. Do you feel your character represents you in any way?

As illustrated in Figure 13, when participants were asked if they felt their characters represented them in any way, an overwhelming majority of 80.8% answered "Yes." This indicates that most participants see a connection between their Avatars and themselves, even without explicitly elaborating on how or why. However, given that the survey at this stage did not yet delve into the specifics of this representation, the responses highlight an initial acknowledgement of self-representation in Avatar design, suggesting a deeper, nuanced relationship worth further exploration in subsequent questions or analyses.

5.1.1.vii: On a scale of 1 to 5, how much does your character resemble yourself visually?

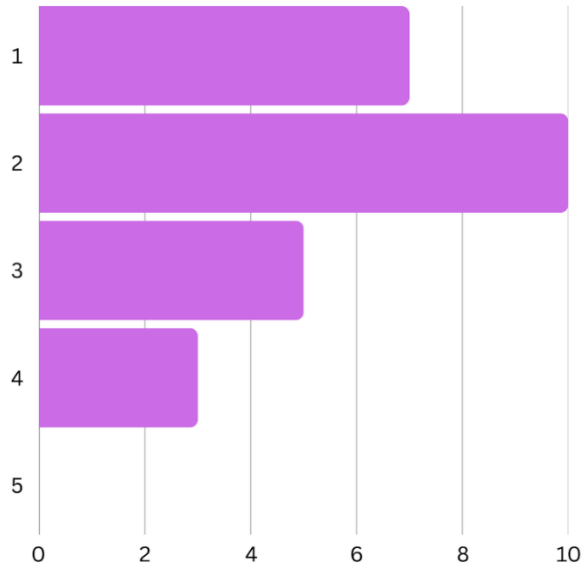

Figure 14 How much does your character resemble yourself visually?

Figure 14 illustrates participants' responses to the question regarding the visual resemblance between themselves and their Avatars on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very strongly). The data indicates that most participants rated the physical similarity as relatively low, with a majority selecting options between 1 and 3, suggesting that while many players felt represented by their Avatars in some way, they generally did not perceive a strong visual similarity.

This finding is particularly notable because the majority of participants indicated that their Avatars did not visually resemble themselves, which appears to contrast with existing literature suggesting that players typically prefer Avatars that reflect either their actual or ideal selves (Zimmerman, Wehler, & Kaspar, 2022; Yee & Bailenson, 2007). One potential explanation could be that while players may seek to express an idealised or aspirational version of themselves through Avatars, the visual distinction between their real appearance and this idealised representation might have caused them to rate similarity lower. Therefore, participants may indeed be engaging with ideal self-representation, but the divergence between their actual physical characteristics and the ideal Avatar's appearance might lead them to perceive little visual resemblance. This implies that Avatar customisation could serve more as a vehicle for psychological and aspirational self-expression rather than direct physical mirroring, supporting Zimmerman et al.'s findings that idealised traits significantly influence Avatar creation.

This finding might also be influenced by the fantasy context of *BG3*, where Avatar creation involves non-human racial options like elves, tieflings, or Drow, making literal visual resemblance challenging. Players' responses could reflect the constraints imposed by these fantastical elements, prompting them to create Avatars that are conceptually or symbolically aligned with their identities rather than visually similar. This aligns with the literature discussed in Chapter 2, particularly the work of Turkle

(1984) and Zimmermann et al. (2022), which highlights how identity exploration through Avatars is often mediated by the context and affordances of the digital environment.

5.1.1.viii: On a scale of 1 to 5, how much does your character resemble your personality or skill set?

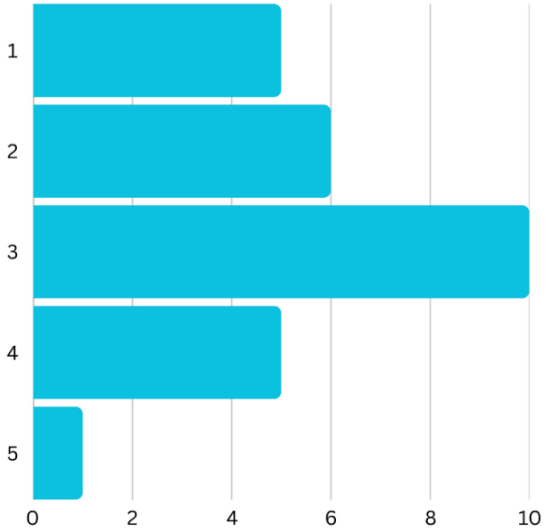

Figure 15 How much does your character resemble your personality or skill set?

More participants felt that their character resembled their personality or skill set than resembled them visually. This suggests that players may relate more to the internal attributes of their characters than to outward appearance. While the game allows for customization of physical traits, it also offers choices in class, background, and skills, which may more meaningfully reflect how players see themselves (Vasalou et al. 2012). The alignment between personal traits and Avatars can heighten identification and self-awareness, which may explain why players felt a stronger connection on a personality level. Similarly, Klevjer (2006) frames Avatars as prosthetic extensions of the player, enabling agency and self-expression within the game world.

5.1.1.ix: On a scale of 1 to 5, do you feel your character is you in the game (do their actions reflect yours)?

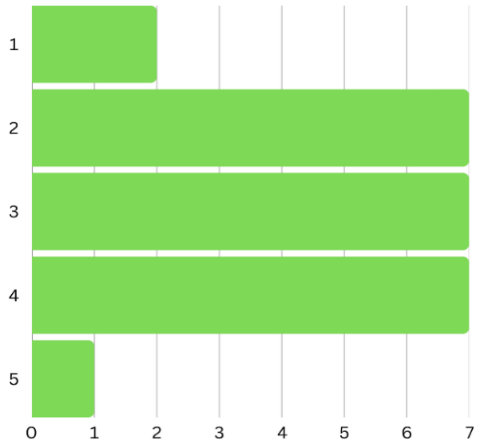

Figure 16 Do you feel your character is you in the game (do their actions reflect yours)?

This question explored whether players felt that their character's actions within the game reflected their own real-world decision-making. The data shows that most participants selected the middle of the scale, suggesting a moderate level of identification with their Avatar's choices. Very few participants felt that their character was entirely separate from them or completely representative, which may point to a nuanced relationship between self and Avatar. Klevjer (2006) argues that Avatars act as embodied interfaces, allowing players to navigate virtual spaces through a digitally extended self. In this context, actions taken by the Avatar are not wholly detached from the player but filtered through the player's own perspective. Vasalou et al. (2012) similarly highlight how the more players identify with their Avatar, the more likely they are to act in alignment with their real-world values and personality. This suggests that for many players, their character is both a narrative tool and a proxy for themselves, allowing for limited but meaningful experimentation with identity and moral choices.

5.1.1.x: How do you believe your character represents you?

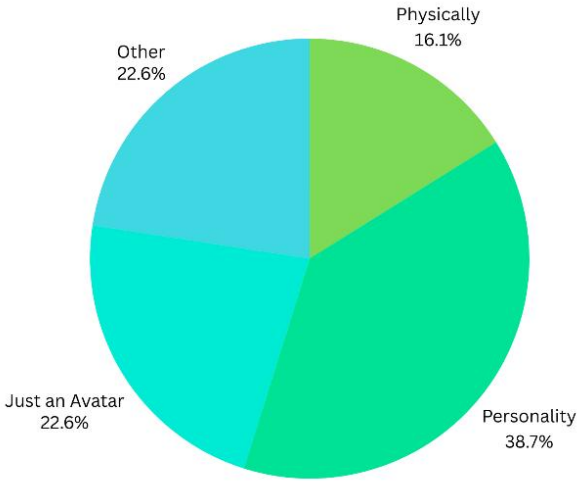

Figure 17 How do you believe your character represents you?

This follow-up question asked participants to reflect more openly on how their character represents them. The most common response was "Personality," suggesting that players often imbue their Avatars with internal traits rather than focusing solely on visual resemblance. This aligns with findings from Vasalou et al. (2012), who noted that players frequently identify more strongly with Avatars that mirror their values, emotions, or personality, rather than physical appearance alone. Interestingly, a notable number selected "*Just an Avatar*" or used the "*Other*" option to elaborate nuanced relationships with their Avatars. These included mentions of mood-based character design, aesthetic preference, or differences across multiple playthroughs. Participant 0003 took a more aesthetic or detached approach, saying their Avatar *"represents aesthetic preference,"* while Participant 0015 said "*It will depend on if it's a first playthrough of the game If it is, similar personality*." This supports Klevjer's (2006) idea that Avatars are not fixed identities but flexible interfaces, allowing players to embody different selves depending on context and intention. It also reveals a layered approach to Avatar construction,

where players switch between self-representation, experimentation, and narrative roleplay depending on their goals in each session.

Participant 0021 explained, "*The character has some of my characteristics by the nature of me being the one playing and will represent me in the same manner. I think of it as a bit of heightened reality where I imagine what choices I would make if I were this character, in their shoes, rather than being them.*" This perspective illustrates a blend of identification and distance, where the player projects aspects of themselves into the character without fully becoming them. It reflects a flexible relationship with the Avatar, one grounded in self-reflection rather than strict self-representation. This aligns with the idea of the porous magic circle (Castronova, 2005), where the boundaries between the real and virtual worlds are not fixed. The player engages with the Avatar from a position that is both inside and outside the game world, allowing real-world values and personality traits to influence in-game decisions. In this way, the Avatar becomes a conduit for exploring the self within a fictional space, reinforcing the Avatar's role as both a representational and performative tool.

5.1.1.xi: Does your character's appearance influence how you play Baldur's Gate 3?

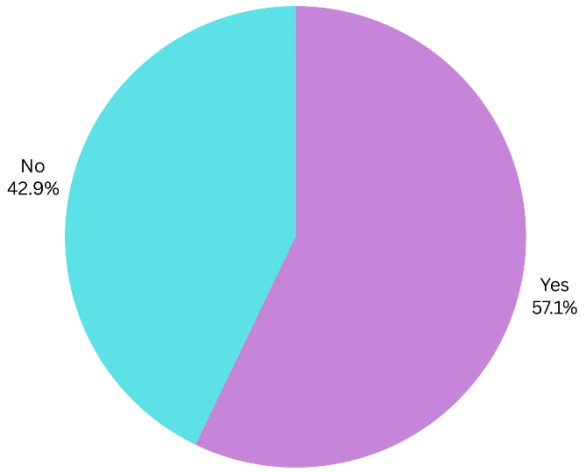

Figure 18 Does your character's appearance influence how you play Baldur's Gate 3?

When asked whether their character's appearance influences how they play *BG3* the responses revealed a mixed picture. While many participants indicated that appearance plays a role in shaping their gameplay decisions, a notable portion said it did not. While 57.1% of participants answered yes, a notable 42.9% said no. The fact that such a significant proportion of players reported that appearance did not influence gameplay invites deeper investigation. It may suggest a disconnect between conscious self-perception and subconscious behavioural influence, as outlined in the Proteus Effect (Yee & Bailenson, 2007). While some players may not feel visually influenced, their actions or strategies could still be shaped by the identity they assign to their Avatar. This contradiction will be explored further in the gameplay sections to determine whether player behaviour aligns with their self-reports. It also points to a broader complexity in Avatar-player relationships, where appearance might matter in more subtle or indirect ways than players immediately recognise.

Which of the following most accurately describes how you create your characters looks in RPGs:

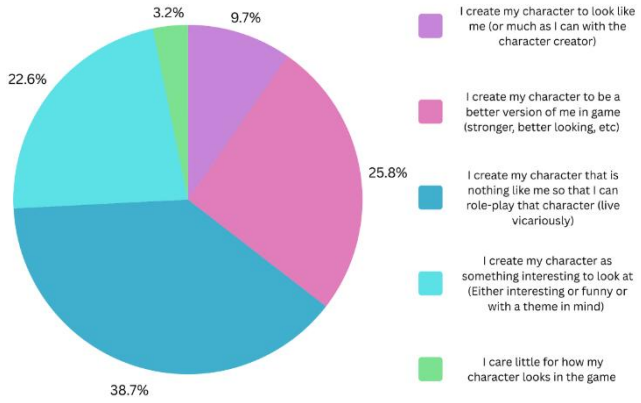

Figure 19 Which of the following most accurately describes how you create your characters looks in RPGs?

This question focused specifically on the visual design of RPG characters, shedding light on how players approach the aesthetics of their Avatars. The largest proportion of respondents, 38.7 percent, said they create characters that are nothing like themselves in order to role-play, suggesting that appearance plays a key role in facilitating immersion and imaginative exploration. A further 25.8 percent chose to create idealised versions of themselves, reinforcing earlier findings that some players use Avatar visuals to express aspirational identity. Meanwhile, 22.6 percent reported designing characters to be visually interesting or thematic, which points to creativity and visual storytelling as significant factors in character creation. Only 9.7 percent tried to recreate their own appearance as closely as possible, indicating that direct self-representation through visuals is relatively uncommon. Notably, just 3.2 percent said they did not care about how their character looked, emphasising that visual design is a meaningful and intentional part of the RPG experience for most players. These results support the idea that Avatar aesthetics serve both expressive and narrative functions in digital play (Klevjer, 2022).

Which of the following most accurately describes how you create characters background, class and stats in RPGs:

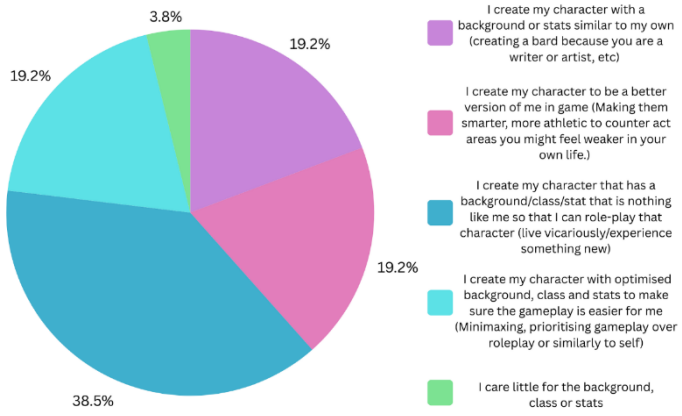

Figure 20 Which of the following most accurately describes how you create characters background, class and stats in RPGs?

When looking at how players create their character's background, class, and stats in RPGs, the most common approach was selecting a character “nothing like me (for Roleplay)” with 38.5 percent of participants choosing this option. This aligns with role-playing motivations, suggesting that a significant portion of players enjoy exploring alternative identities or experiences within the game world. However, a notable 19.2 percent opted for backgrounds and stats either similar to themselves or improved versions of themselves, reflecting a desire to extend or enhance aspects of their real identity in-game. Another 19.2 percent focused on optimization for gameplay efficiency, prioritising stats that make the game easier rather than roleplay authenticity. A smaller group, also at 19.2 percent, created characters with aesthetics or class combinations that are simply “interesting or themed” without necessarily linking to the self. Only 3.8 percent stated they cared little for these elements. These patterns reflect what Vasalou et al. (2012) described as the varied motivational forces in Avatar creation, where identity exploration, gameplay strategy, and aesthetic creativity each play distinct roles. Klevjer (2006) would interpret this as an example of the Avatar functioning as a prosthetic body, not always an extension of the self, but often a vessel for experimentation within the boundaries of play.

5.1.1.xii: Do you adjust your character's appearance throughout the gameplay?

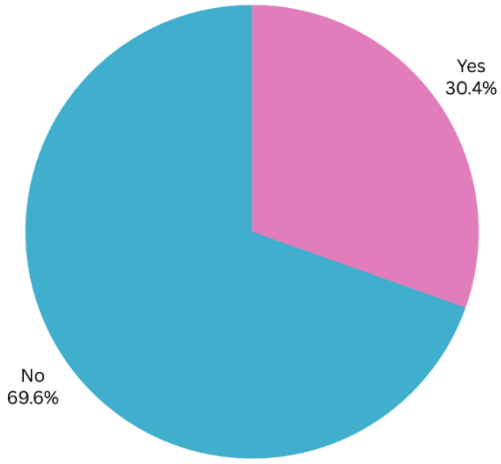

Figure 21 Do you adjust your character's appearance throughout the gameplay?

This question aimed to uncover whether players continue to consider or modify their Avatar's visual design after the initial creation process. The majority of participants, 69.6 percent, reported that they do not adjust their character’s appearance throughout gameplay, suggesting that most players view the character creation screen as the definitive space for shaping visual identity. Only 30.4 percent indicated they make visual changes later on, which could involve adjusting hairstyles, outfits, or other cosmetic features available in-game. This finding suggests a disconnect between the initial act of Avatar construction and ongoing visual expression, which could be influenced by how often or easily appearance changes are integrated into the game mechanics. It also raises questions about whether players are aware of how much visual continuity or change affects their sense of immersion or identity. As Vasalou et al. (2012) observed, physical resemblance between Avatar and player can enhance self-awareness and

connection, but this connection may not be revisited once the game begins unless the game actively encourages it.

5.1.1.xiii: If yes, what prompts you to make adjustments to your character's appearance? (Open-ended)

Participants who indicated that they did change their character's appearance mid-game were prompted by a variety of motivations, many of which related to refining or evolving the character's visual identity once in-game lighting, animations, or narrative progression revealed new contexts.

For example, Participant 0003 explained, "*The character customisation often has limitations in lighting and angle test options… I might even circle between different hair styles during the first hours of gameplay before stopping at the one I like in every situation.*". Participant 0015, connected these changes to narrative immersion, stating, "*I have also considered changing what appeared between acts for some visual character development but never remembered to actually do it.*"
Similarly, Participant 0024 noted, "*My characters pretty much always have a new haircut in each chapter/section of the game as that's the closest that you can get to a story arc," while Participant 0042 viewed changes as symbolic of time passing: "I like to portray a passage of time with a new hairstyle… time for a new look.*"

Interestingly, however, many players chose not to alter their Avatar's appearance at all after initial creation. One reason for this could be the potential disruption of the flow state where players become deeply immersed in the game. Once an Avatar's visual identity feels consistent with the narrative and emotional tone of the game, changing it might feel intrusive or disorienting. This aligns with Soutter and Hitchens' (2016) findings that character identification plays a key role in sustaining immersion. For some players, keeping their Avatar visually stable may help preserve their emotional investment and seamless connection to the game world.

5.1.1.xiv: Do you choose to equip items (clothes, weapons, etc) based on their appearance or their effectiveness? (Open-ended):

When asked whether they equip items based on appearance or effectiveness, participants offered varied and thoughtful responses that revealed a spectrum of motivations. While some players focused on stats and survivability, particularly in the challenging early stages of *BG3*, others demonstrated a strong concern for how their characters looked.

Participant 0049 explained, "*Effectiveness mostly. Early game of BG3 is quite rough with that part,"* and Participant 0027 shared, "*I equipped items to help give my character a better chance at staying alive."* However, even among those who leaned toward optimisation, many expressed a desire to maintain character coherence. Participant 0021 reflected, "*If it looks ridiculous and out of character, I might think twice about doing it, even though it has a benefit.*"

Others took advantage of in-game systems to maintain aesthetic consistency. For example, Participant 0015 described using the dye system to tailor equipment: "*I do tend to dye the clothes and armour if I don't feel they fit the character's look.*" Dyeing is a feature in *BG3* that allows players to recolour armour and clothing using collectible dyes, which are single-use items found or purchased throughout the game. This mechanic enables personalisation without sacrificing effectiveness, helping players balance visual storytelling and gameplay.

These behaviours align with Vasalou et al. (2012), who argued that alignment between player identity and Avatar appearance enhances emotional connection and engagement. This suggests that even practical decisions, such as equipping items for survival, are filtered through players' evolving sense of character, narrative immersion, and identity expression.

5.1.1.xv: What aspects of Baldur's Gate 3 do you enjoy the most? (Check all that apply)

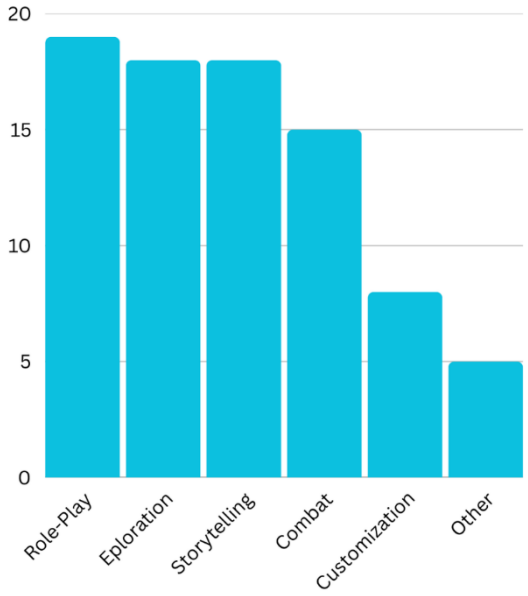

Figure 22 What aspects of Baldur's Gate 3 do you enjoy the most?

Participants were allowed to select multiple aspects of *BG3* that they enjoyed, and the data shows that role-playing was the most frequently selected, followed closely by exploration and storytelling. This supports earlier findings where participants indicated a strong preference for designing characters that allowed them to role-play or explore identities outside of themselves. The popularity of storytelling and exploration also highlights the game's narrative depth and environmental richness, reflecting a clear desire for immersive and personalised gameplay experiences. Combat was a commonly selected option, though slightly less frequent, suggesting that while players enjoy mechanical challenges, these are often secondary to narrative and identity-driven motivations. Customization and "Other" received fewer selections, but write-in responses such as *"VFX," "the music,"* and *"Romance"* suggest that audiovisual presentation and emotional storytelling elements still meaningfully contribute to player satisfaction. These findings reinforce the idea that *BG3* resonates most when it enables emergent, emotionally rich experiences, something deeply rooted in RPG design

principles and consistent with the perspectives of Turkle (1995), Klevjer (2006), and Zimmermann et al. (2022).

5.1.1.xvi: What motivates you to continue playing Baldur's Gate 3? (Open-ended):

This section explores the open-ended responses to the question: "What motivates you to continue playing *BG3*?" Five core themes emerged that reflected different dimensions of player engagement: narrative and character investment, exploration, mechanics and challenge, replayability and choice, and emotional and immersive enjoyment.

Narrative and Character Investment:

The most prominent theme related to players' attachment to the game's story and its characters. Many participants cited the evolving narrative and companion arcs as key motivators:

"A huge motivation is the storyline and character development of the companion characters." (P0015)

"I want the characters in the story to have had a satisfying narrative arc." (P0030)

This aligns with Turkle's (1995) ideas around narrative immersion and identity projection, where the Avatar and companions serve as vessels for emotional investment and reflective play. The attachment to companion characters also connects with Bowman's (2010) notion of character-driven immersion in RPGs.

Exploration and World Engagement:

Exploration emerged as a strong motivator, with players referencing the vastness and richness of the world:

"I just like exploring areas and talking to characters." (P0002)

"So many avenues are still yet to be fully explored." (P0009)

This theme resonates with Bartle's (1996) Explorer type, but also with the sense of autonomy emphasized in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), where players are intrinsically motivated by the freedom to discover and navigate complex environments.

Replayability and Choice:

Several participants were drawn to the game's high replay value and branching narratives:

"Each time I play I find something new that I didn't see before." (P0041)

"The replayability because of how different all of the choices are." (P0033)

This links with Zimmerman et al.'s (2022) findings around identity play and the appeal of trying out different character types and decisions in multiple playthroughs.

Mechanics, Strategy, and Challenge:

A number of participants appreciated the combat and mechanics of the game, particularly those that offered strategic depth:

"I also like the strategic aspect of the combat scenarios." (P0014)

"I'm now interested in trying a more advanced skill level in hopes that my understanding of the mechanics improves." (P0024)

This reflects the importance of competence in SDT, where overcoming complex challenges enhances intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement.

Emotional Immersion and Roleplay:

Some players referenced emotional investment and immersive roleplay as key motivators:

"The acting and writing is amazing – very realistic and mature." (P0048)

"I enjoy exploring different storylines and really attempting to get into the head of the character I'm roleplaying." (P0048)

These responses point to the cognitive and emotional dimensions of gameplay (Lieberoth et al., 2015), reinforcing the idea that Avatars serve as tools for both introspection and emotional resonance.

5.1.1.xvii: What do you feel are the most enjoyable gameplay aspects of *BG3*:

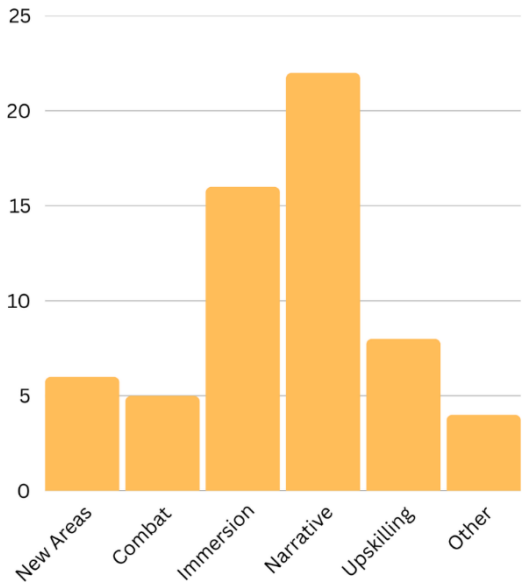

Figure 23 What do you feel are the most enjoyable gameplay aspects of BG3?

This question was intentionally designed with Bartle's (1996) taxonomy in mind, offering players options that align with the key motivations behind player types: Explorers (unlocking new areas and finding loot), Killers (boss battles), Socialisers (implied through narrative choices and interactions), and Achievers (upskilling and character

customization). Role-playing, a central theme in RPGs, is also embedded through narrative choices and character progression.

Preliminary results indicate a spread across multiple player types, highlighting the multi-layered appeal of *BG3*. A significant number of players selected "*Immersion*" suggesting that engagement and setting, hallmarks of RPG design, are central to the game's appeal. The popularity of "*narrative*" also reinforces the idea that *BG3* is succeeding in delivering the sense of agency and identity play discussed in the literature by Turkle (1995), Zimmerman et al. (2022), and Klevjer (2006).

Interestingly, responses like "*unlocking new areas*" speak to the Explorer type, while "*boss battles*" correlate more with Killers, those who enjoy overcoming difficult opponents. "*Upskilling and character customization*" aligns with Achievers, who are driven by progression and optimization, echoing theories of competence from Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

In response to the question, participants were allowed to select multiple options, reflecting the multidimensional nature of enjoyment in RPGs. The most frequently chosen option was narrative, followed closely by immersion and upskilling, suggesting that players are particularly drawn to the story, the depth of the world, and the sense of character progression. This supports earlier findings where storytelling and role-playing were core motivations, reinforcing the idea that *BG3* delivers on its promise as a narrative-driven RPG (Zimmerman et al., 2022).

New areas and combat were selected less frequently, indicating that while exploration and tactical engagement are important, they are not the primary drivers of enjoyment for most players. Interestingly, the "Other" responses - such as *puzzles*, *NPCs*, *personal playstyle*, and *the voice of the narrator*; highlight the unique and often overlooked elements that contribute to the richness of the experience. These responses align with Turkle's (1995) view of games as spaces where players engage emotionally and personally, while also resonating with Klevjer's (2006) understanding of Avatars as interfaces for narrative immersion.

5.1.1.xviii: Do you believe character creation impacts your gameplay experience in Baldur's Gate 3?

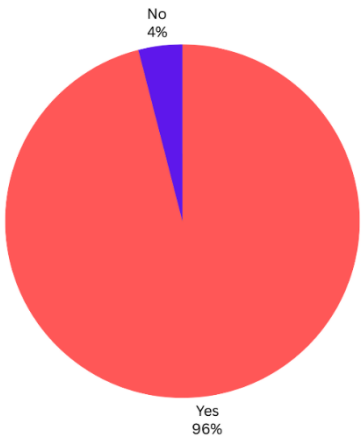

Figure 24 Do you believe character creation impacts your gameplay experience in Baldur's Gate 3?

When asked whether character creation impacts their gameplay experience in *BG3*, an overwhelming 96 percent of participants answered yes, with only a small minority (4 percent) stating otherwise. This result strongly supports the notion that the process of designing a character is far more than a superficial step at the start of the game. Instead, it shapes how players engage with the world, interpret storylines, and interact with characters.

This aligns closely with Turkle's (1995) argument that digital Avatars act as extensions of the self, and with Klevjer's (2006) suggestion that Avatars serve as both performative and representational interfaces. It also reinforces earlier findings in this study where players frequently cited role-play and immersion as key sources of enjoyment. Character creation acts as a foundation for this immersion, setting the tone for how players interpret their journey, challenges, and relationships throughout the game.

5.1.1.xix: If yes, in what ways does character creation impact your gameplay experience? (Open-ended)

One of the clearest themes to emerge from the open-ended responses is the strong connection players feel between character creation and narrative immersion. Many participants highlighted that building their own Avatar enhances the emotional weight and meaning of the gameplay experience. This connection is not merely about aesthetics or mechanical function, but about constructing a personal narrative lens through which to experience the world of *BG3*.

Several respondents discussed how character creation allows them to establish a unique tone and role-playing arc from the outset. One participant explained:

"For me the character creation sets the tone for me as to how I will play the game – my race, class and the personality I set for my character through the rest of the playthrough" (0004).

This idea of "*setting the tone*" was echoed by others who saw their character not just as a tool for interaction, but as a narrative anchor.

The significance of being the author of one's Avatar was particularly well articulated by one respondent:

"If I were to be presented with a character in this world, it would have a very different meaning for me if they came with their own narrative. The game is more interesting with me getting to know other characters' narrative arcs and play a part in them. Part of that is having the freedom to decide who that character is, both physically and narratively" (0002).

This process of designing a character, then, becomes a way for players to embed themselves in the world more fully. Participant 0008 noted,

“I think it’s easier for me to feel more invested when I create the character versus something like Horizon Zero Dawn or God of War, for example. I think that it makes the gameplay feel somehow more meaningful.”

There was also a strong emphasis on how caring about the character facilitates greater investment in the wider game world. As one participant put it:

“The character is my vessel through which I experience the game, so if I care about them then I care more about the experience, the story, and the game as a whole” (0021).

Others described the character as central to their sense of identity within the world. For example, Participant 0048 stated:

“The character I create is someone I can imagine roleplaying as and identifying with. Some of the character creation choices relate to her background. Her body type and general bearing and voice also affects what sort of person I imagine she is.”

Together, these responses suggest that character creation is not a neutral or cosmetic stage, but a deeply narrative act that shapes how players understand and emotionally invest in the game. It reinforces the porous boundary between the player and the Avatar, and supports the kind of immersive, expressive identity play that theorists such as Turkle (1995), Klevjer (2006), and Zimmermann et al. (2022) describe as central to the RPG experience.

In addition to narrative immersion, many participants highlighted how character creation directly affects the mechanical experience of gameplay in *BG3*. This includes the way characters approach combat, dialogue, and exploration depending on their race, class, background, and other traits selected during creation. For these players, their Avatar's build shapes the strategic framework of how they interact with the world and its systems.

Several participants explicitly linked class or stats to moment-to-moment decisions, underscoring the influence of character setup on gameplay flow. Participant 0014 explained:

“Class has a huge impact on how you play the game – different classes will use different ways to solve problems or go through encounters in combat or in dialogue. I played as a happy-go-lucky bard on one playthrough, but had a very different playthrough with another Avatar who was a Dark Urge origin.”

The capacity for different outcomes or methods of progression based on character build was seen by some as central to their enjoyment of the game. One participant noted:

“Because there are different options in dialogue to choose based on your race and class” (0033)

while another added:

“Playing the game with a different race or class will impact your experience. I think that’s really important for keeping people engaged in a story game – being able to have a different experience every time you play” (0032).

Others described the mechanical consequences of their design choices as contributing to a sense of alignment or dissonance with their preferred playstyle. Participant 0029 remarked:

“The narrative is designed to change NPC reactions and player choices based on your race and class selection. Even if the impact is small, it does exist. I like to talk my way out of combat if I can, but playing a dark elf (Drow) means that sometimes people are just automatically aggro.”

This awareness of mechanical consequence supports the idea that the RPG genre offers a systemic responsiveness to player identity choices. It also reinforces Zimmerman et al.’s (2022) framing of games as narrative systems where player agency and game architecture are constantly negotiating meaning.

Interestingly, a few participants also pointed out limitations or desires for even more depth in this area. For instance, Participant 0030 reflected on the possibilities for more dynamic expression:

“Character creation can be both a positive and a negative, particularly when it requires a game to have to provide such a broad range of options throughout gameplay. I would like there to be a slightly more involved process… for example things like scars or makeup being tied to an event or experience in the character’s backstory.”

These insights point toward an emerging player expectation for character creation systems to integrate more deeply with in-game progression and world reaction. As RPGs continue to evolve, systems that allow players to feel the ripple effects of their choices through both narrative and gameplay dimensions will likely remain central to engagement and replayability.

5.1.1.xx: How significant do you perceive the role of Avatars in Baldur's Gate 3?

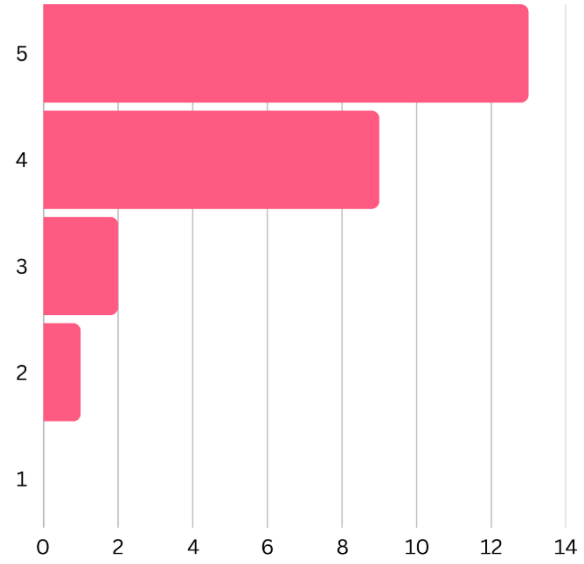

Figure 25 What aspects of Baldur's Gate 3 do you enjoy the most?

The chart above illustrates participant responses to the question: *"How significant do you perceive the role of Avatars in BG3?"* Over half of the participants 52% consider the Avatar to be very significant to their gameplay experience, with an additional 36% identifying it as somewhat significant. This means that a large majority of players feel that the Avatar plays a meaningful role in how they engage with the game. Only a small number of respondents described the Avatar's role as neutral 8% or not significant 4%.

These responses are consistent with earlier qualitative findings, where players described their characters as vessels through which they interact with the world of *BG3*. Participants often noted how their Avatars shaped the way they navigated the game, influenced dialogue choices, and framed moral or narrative decisions. As Klevjer (2006) describes, the Avatar mediates the player's presence in the game world, enabling them to perform identity, explore alternate selves, and engage deeply with the narrative structure.

The high percentage of participants who rated Avatars as significant highlights the central role of character embodiment in role-playing games. This significance extends beyond mechanics or aesthetics and into emotional and narrative investment, supporting the broader idea that RPG Avatars are more than tools - they are expressive and interpretive devices through which gameplay is personalized and meaning is created.

5.2: Emerging Themes

The pre-game survey findings illuminate how players approach Avatar creation in *BG3* and RPGs more broadly as a layered process that blends strategy, identity, and narrative anticipation. Rather than seeing customisation as superficial, many participants described it as a way to set narrative intentions and personal stakes for the journey ahead. Choices around race, class, and background were not made in isolation but

were tied to the kind of experience players wanted to have. This might include exploring an alternate persona, reflecting aspects of themselves, or optimising for specific gameplay styles. For many, the Avatar was not just a playable character but a narrative lens through which they expected to interpret the game world.

Visual design was described as a significant part of emotional engagement. Some players said they like to adjust their Avatar's appearance as the story progresses, either to enhance immersion or reflect character development. Others preferred to leave the design unchanged to maintain a consistent sense of identity. Aesthetic choices were often discussed in relation to narrative coherence, with appearance treated as part of the storytelling. While mechanical decisions like class or stats were noted for their impact on gameplay, many participants also connected them to role-play or interaction preferences, rather than solely for gaining advantage.

The vast majority of participants felt that character creation shaped how they would experience the game. This suggests that the Avatar functions as more than a tool for play. It becomes an emotional and interpretive framework through which players anticipate making decisions and connecting with the game world. These insights offer a strong foundation for the gameplay and interview sections that follow, allowing for a comparison between players' stated intentions and the ways those intentions later manifest in practice.

5.3: Character Creation Sessions

Building on the findings from the pre-game survey, this chapter explores how players engage with the character creation process in real-time. While the survey provided valuable insight into participants' stated preferences, motivations, and habits across RPGs, the character creation session offers a more grounded view of how those ideas play out in practice. Each participant was recorded while creating their Avatar for *BG3*, allowing for a closer analysis of how choices around appearance, class, background, and narrative identity were made in the moment.

This section examines not only the selections players made, but also the dialogue and commentary offered during the process. By closely analysing these sessions, we gain a deeper understanding of how Avatar construction functions as a performative and reflexive act. Character creation is not simply about choosing traits or appearances but about situating oneself within a world of imagined possibilities. As players make decisions about who they will be in the game, they also articulate values, explore identity boundaries, and lay the foundation for their upcoming playthrough. This section therefore serves as a bridge between intention and action, marking the shift from imagined identity to embodied gameplay.

5.3.1: Class and Race

Figure 26 Participant 0033's Character

Across all recorded sessions, players spent an average of 19 minutes in the character creator, with the shortest session lasting 7 minutes and 49 seconds and the longest extending to 49 minutes and 21 seconds. This wide range highlights how varied player approaches to Avatar creation can be. While some players moved swiftly through the process, others took significantly longer to fine-tune visual features, voice, and background details.

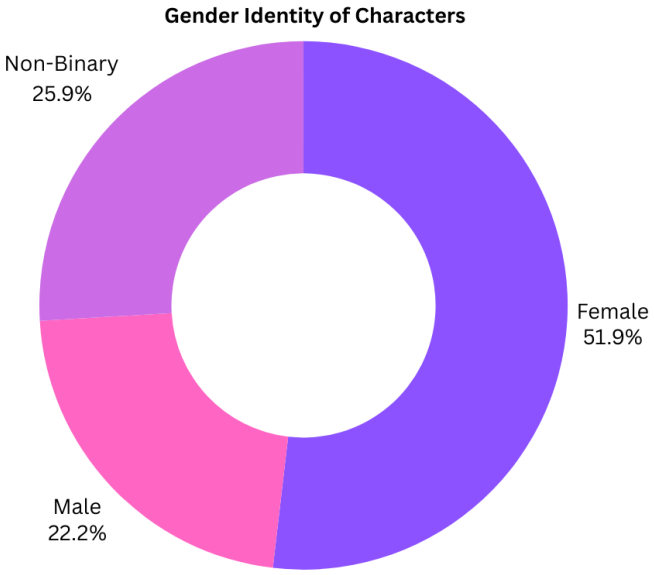

Figure 27 Gender Identity of the Characters

Gender selection marks another area of interest in the character creation process. In this study, a notably high proportion of participants chose to create non-binary characters, accounting for 25.9 percent of all Avatars. This suggests that participants may have been more inclined to explore diverse representations of gender or use the character creation process as an opportunity to experiment with identities beyond traditional binaries. This trend reflects a broader cultural shift in gaming spaces, where increased representation and inclusion of non-binary identities is fostering more open and expressive forms of play (Taskas, 2022).

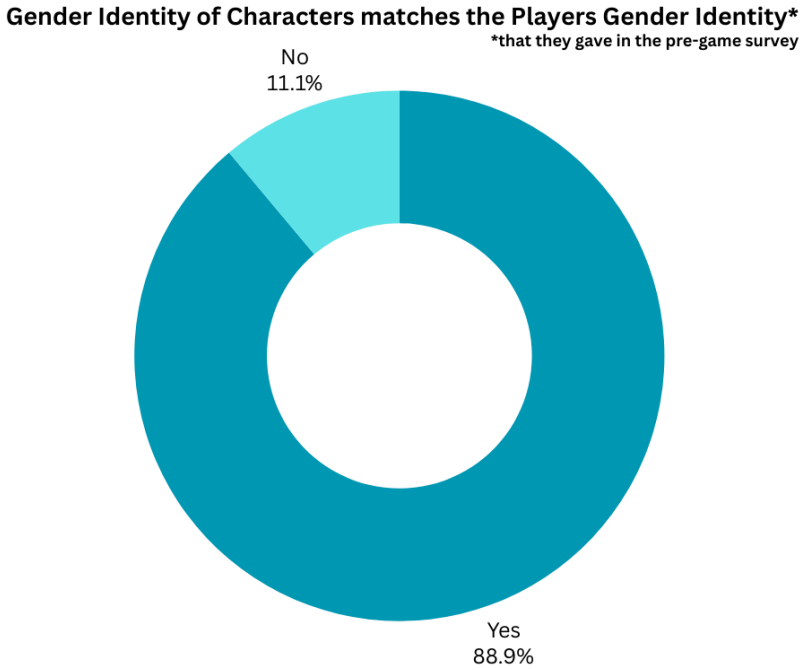

Figure 28 Gender Identity of the Characters matches the Players Gender Identity

Additionally, the majority of participants selected a gender that aligned with their own. Only 11.1 percent of players created characters whose gender differed from their own, which suggests that many participants preferred to maintain a sense of personal connection or familiarity through their Avatar. However, this does not negate the value of those who chose to explore different identities. Rather, it highlights the dual function of Avatars in role-playing games: as tools for both self-representation and imaginative transformation.

Hussain and Griffiths (2008) noted that players often engage with Avatars to either extend or depart from their real-world identities, and these findings mirror that dual function. For some, Avatar creation served as a means of aligning closely with self-concept, while others used it to embody alternative gender identities and roles.

5.3.2: Gender Switching

Among participants who selected a gender identity different from their own, a variety of motivations and interpretations emerged, illustrating how character creation in *BG3* can function as a space for both identity exploration and creative variation. For some, gender-switching was intentional and tied to narrative immersion. Participant 0002

noted, "*So I'm nearly always a woman in RPGs*," emphasizing a desire to explore different physical and social perspectives. They elaborated, "*To me, that's kind of why you play games: to explore different characters and viewpoints,*" suggesting that role-playing different genders can enrich the player's understanding of diverse identities and experiences. This aligns with Hussain and Griffiths (2008), who argue that gender-switching in online games can be a way for players to explore alternate identities and engage in imaginative self-expression.

Participant 0002 also reflected on how gender might implicitly shape their in-game behaviour: "*If I were to hazard a guess, it's probably because the way I like to play these games—talking through situations rather than fighting—feels more fitting with a female character… I know that's just a stereotype… but yeah, that's probably what's going on.*" This comment reveals how real-world gender norms may subtly influence Avatar design and gameplay style, even when players are consciously aware of the constructed nature of these associations (Vasalou et al., 2012).

Figure 29 Player 0004's Avatar

Other participants showed a more casual or habitual relationship to gender-switching. Participant 0004 remarked, "*I had a male character last time, so I think I'll try a female one*," framing the choice as an opportunity for variety rather than a deeper identity-driven decision. This reflects the flexible and performative nature of Avatar design in RPGs (Klevjer, 2006), where players can shift roles across playthroughs to keep their experiences novel and engaging.

In contrast, Participant 0024 offered a more fixed stance, stating, "*When it comes to identity, we always build female. Always have, always will. Next*." This statement demonstrates a consistent alignment with a specific in-game identity, perhaps reflecting a personal preference or a habitual comfort with a particular Avatar type. It suggests that, for some players, Avatar design functions less as an exploratory tool and more as a reaffirmation of an established digital identity (Turkle, 1995).

Together, these responses reveal the multiple layers of meaning involved in gender selection during character creation, highlighting how RPGs provide both a mirror and a canvas for identity expression and experimentation.

5.3.3: Themes

Analysis of the character creation sessions employed inductive thematic coding, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data without being constrained by pre-existing theoretical frameworks. This approach was chosen to ensure that the insights drawn reflected the actual language, behaviours, and decisions expressed by participants during the recorded sessions, rather than being retroactively fitted to predetermined categories. As players voiced their choices and reasoning aloud while designing their Avatars, the coding process focused on recurring motivations, decision-making patterns, and the emotional or narrative significance attributed to their choices.

As seen in Appendix 2, across the recorded sessions, several distinct themes emerged. Identity alignment was a prominent pattern, with many players either intentionally designing Avatars that mirrored their personality traits or choosing attributes that symbolised an aspirational or idealised version of themselves. This aligns with Klevjer's (2006) concept of the Avatar as a prosthetic body—an interface that both represents and performs the player's identity within the digital world. Similarly, Vasalou et al. (2012) argue that players often design Avatars that reflect meaningful personal traits or social identity goals, reinforcing the idea that even fantasy Avatars can act as expressive extensions of the self.

Another core theme was role-play intent, where players framed their decisions around the type of story they wanted to experience or the persona they wished to embody. Some treated their character as an alter ego, distinct from themselves but thoughtfully constructed to fit a particular worldview, morality, or aesthetic.
"*I want her to be tall and elegant — like she's got this confidence, but it's not loud. That's important for how I want to play her.*" (P0021), this reflects how visual design supports role-play and narrative tone. These choices often shaped everything from dialogue approach to anticipated quest outcomes, reflecting Zimmerman et al.'s (2022) view that RPGs support identity performance through emergent storytelling structures.

Aesthetic expression also emerged as a significant category. Many participants spent time discussing hair, scars, body shape, and colour schemes, not just for visual appeal but as a way to hint at backstory or personality. Visual elements were described as tools for supporting immersion or helping the player "*feel*" the character more fully. These patterns are consistent with Turkle's (1995) theory that digital identities are crafted narratives that allow players to experiment with and present versions of themselves in alternative contexts. Many participants engaging deeply in decisions about hair, skin tone, scars, tattoos, and clothing to visually craft a persona that aligned with their imagined narrative. These aesthetic choices were rarely arbitrary. For many, they served as storytelling tools that helped define a character's history, attitude, or worldview. Participant 0032, for instance, described designing an "*edgy*" character with pale skin and sharp features to signal a more morally ambiguous role. Others, like Participant 0029, noted that their Avatars "*always look androgynous*," using aesthetic design to explore aspects of personal identity that might not otherwise be accessible in traditional gameplay. For several players, colour palettes and thematic visual elements,

such as dark tones for necromancers or bright patterns for bards, were used to reinforce class identity or emotional tone.

Participants also frequently discussed narrative setup and mechanical strategy, viewing the character creation process as laying the groundwork for the playthrough. Class, background, and race were not only selected for gameplay advantages but also as narrative anchors that influenced how players imagined their character would respond to the world. "*Being a bard means I can talk my way out of things, which fits the personality I want for her.*" (P0022). This intersection of mechanical and narrative planning supports the argument by Klevjer (2006) and Hussain and Griffiths (2008) that character creation plays a dual role; enabling player agency while also supporting emotional investment and identity exploration.

Finally, emotional investment was a recurring theme. Many players expressed affection, anticipation, or pride during the creation process, even before entering the game world. "*I like her. I think she's going to be fun to play*." (P0029). This emotional connection often stemmed from the creative agency granted by the system and the sense of ownership it fostered over the Avatar.

5.3.4: Frustrations

In addition to the rich expressions of identity, creativity, and role-play observed during the character creation sessions, another theme that surfaced was dissatisfaction with limitations in the character creator itself. While many participants expressed enjoyment and emotional investment in designing their Avatars, several also voiced frustrations about the lack of customisation options. These critiques often focused on body diversity, with players noting that the available body shapes were limited and overly idealised. Others wished for more inclusive or varied hairstyles, particularly styles representing different cultural backgrounds, as well as more nuanced facial features, scars, or makeup options that could help construct more distinct and believable personas.

"It's a shame I can't make him older looking… not everyone in Faerûn is young and beautiful." (P0038) This highlights limited age representation - a point not often raised by the participants but showcases a significant gap in in character creator diversity. While much attention is often given to race, gender, and body type, age is frequently overlooked as a meaningful axis of identity.

These observations suggest that while the current system allowed for significant creativity, players are increasingly seeking character creation tools that reflect a broader spectrum of human identity and expression. As Turkle (1995) and Vasalou et al. (2012) have suggested, Avatar construction is deeply tied to the desire for personal resonance and self-representation. When options feel too narrow or homogenised, this expressive potential is stifled, limiting both immersion and the player's sense of ownership over their character.

5.4: Game Play Session Findings

This section delves into the analysis of player motivations and behaviours observed during the hour-long gameplay sessions. The aim of this analysis was to uncover how players navigated the game world, approached decision-making, and expressed their individual playstyles within the constraints of the game's first hour. By mapping player actions to broader motivational frameworks, I sought to determine whether their in-game behaviours aligned with their self-perceptions, as indicated in pre-game surveys, and whether these behaviours revealed patterns consistent with established player typologies.

Categories from Bartle's Taxonomy were first applied to identify patterns in player behaviour or spoken reflections that aligned with the motivations of Achievers, Explorers, Killers, or Socialisers. This provided an initial framework for understanding the variety of approaches players brought to their gameplay. Following this, inductive thematic coding was employed to allow additional themes to emerge directly from the recorded sessions. This bottom-up approach ensured that the analysis reflected the players' own expressions, priorities, and motivations, rather than forcing the data into pre-established theoretical categories.

One of the key objectives of this section is to explore how players' actions are influenced by both internal and external factors. Internal factors include their own pre-established preferences, character backstories, and stated playstyles, while external factors stem from the game's design, such as its encouragement of exploration, socialization, and resource management in the early stages. The observed behaviours are particularly relevant to understanding how players respond to the structured constraints and opportunities presented in the first hour of gameplay, a period designed to introduce key mechanics and set the tone for the larger game experience.

Later this will be incorporated into the examination of whether players were aware of or recognized their own behavioural patterns when reflecting on their actions in subsequent interviews. By comparing their in-game behaviours to their later reflections, I aim to assess the extent to which players acted intentionally versus reacting to the immediate demands of the game environment. This dual-layered approach analysing actions during gameplay and reflections afterward allows for a nuanced understanding of player motivations, particularly in how they relate to broader themes of agency, immersion, and self-expression.

Through this analysis, the variety and complexity of player behaviours are highlighted and contextualised within both the game's design and the underlying motivations that shape player engagement. By grounding these insights in qualitative observations and established frameworks, this section offers a comprehensive exploration of how players navigate the interplay between personal intention and game structure during the crucial opening hour of *BG3*.

One defining characteristic of the first hour of gameplay in *Baldur's Gate 3* is that all players begin at a vulnerable, low-level state with limited access to loot, equipment, or

experience points. While this design choice provides standardisation across sessions by placing everyone in the same starting conditions, it also creates a practical necessity: players must prioritise looting and resource gathering to avoid being at a significant disadvantage. Without taking time to collect weapons, armour, potions, and gold, players risk entering early encounters unprepared, which can hinder progression or result in failure.

Although many participants had played the game before and were therefore able to move quickly through the tutorial sections, their previous experience did not remove the need to scavenge extensively in the early areas. In fact, almost all players looted anything they came across within the first hour, regardless of how familiar they were with the mechanics. This reinforces that the game's design actively encourages, if not requires, players to focus on resource collection, reinforcing a particular playstyle early on.

While this behaviour aligns with the motivations outlined in Bartle's taxonomy - particularly those of the Achiever, who seeks advancement, and the Explorer, who values discovering new areas; it is important to recognise that this is not purely a player preference. The game structures early progression around these behaviours, guiding players towards exploration and optimisation whether they identify with these motivational types or not. As Participant 0036 noted, *"An awful lot of different routes in this map, which is very cool. There's a lot of player freedom."* This highlights how even within a constrained opening scenario, the game creates opportunities for players to feel agency and autonomy through the act of looting and uncovering hidden elements. However, this freedom is tightly coupled with necessity, making exploration less of a choice and more of a survival strategy in the game's early moments.

Another important aspect of the first hour is the introduction of social interaction through the recruitment of companions. Early in the game, players encounter key non-player characters (NPCs) who can join the party, each with their own backstories, personalities, and potential for relationship development. These companions serve a dual purpose: they contribute strategically in combat and exploration, while also enriching the game's narrative through interpersonal dynamics and character arcs.

Although not all players chose to recruit every available companion during the recorded sessions, many made conscious decisions about who to engage with based on either narrative interest or tactical reasoning. For some, the desire to form connections was immediate and tied to broader goals of cooperation and survival. As Participant 0014 explained, "*We need allies. Oh, we're going to help her. I will try to find a way to get her out."* This focus on aiding and connecting with NPCs underscores how socialisation is embedded into the early mechanics of the game. Such interactions reflect the development of parasocial relationships, where players emotionally invest in and respond to game characters as if they were real, a process Bowman (2010) identifies as central to immersion in narrative-driven games.

By placing these potential companions in the player's path within the opening hour, the game encourages immediate engagement with its relational systems. This early introduction reinforces the idea that interpersonal decision-making is as crucial as exploration or combat, and that forming bonds with NPCs can significantly shape the direction and emotional tone of the playthrough.

5.5: Themes Emerging

As players navigated the early challenges of limited resources, tutorial encounters, and initial character dynamics, a number of distinct behavioural patterns began to emerge. These patterns were analysed through thematic coding which can be found in the appendix, which revealed not only what players prioritised in this constrained segment of the game, but how their individual motivations shaped their choices. The following section outlines the key themes identified during this analysis, highlighting the interplay between player agency, game mechanics, and narrative intent in the earliest stages of the playthrough.

5.5.1: Spontaneity

One of the most evident patterns across the first hour of gameplay was the presence of instinctive, improvisational decision-making. Several players approached the game without a rigid plan, instead allowing the moment to guide their actions. Player 27 remarked, "*I don't really think through my decisions when I play this game, I just kind of do it,*" a statement that typifies a spontaneous, responsive mode of play. This fluid style aligns with the concept of flow and immersion (Turkle, 1995), where players become absorbed in the game and act intuitively rather than analytically. Such play styles suggest comfort within the game world and a confidence in the mechanics that allows for immediate, affective responses rather than calculated ones.

5.5.2: Strategic Planning and Efficiency

In contrast to spontaneous players, others displayed methodical and calculated behaviours that reflected strategic thinking and a desire to control outcomes. Player 41 exemplified this approach with the comment, "*I usually save here in case I fail,"* highlighting a cautious, performance-driven playstyle. This behaviour aligns with what Bartle categorises as Achiever motivation; players who value optimisation and success through mastery of systems. It also supports Bowman's (2010) concept of instrumental immersion, where players engage deeply with the mechanics to maximise effectiveness. These players used knowledge of the game to pre-emptively manage failure and improve results, demonstrating that even early in gameplay, resource management and forward-planning were top priorities for some.

5.5.3: Role-Playing

Role-playing motivation emerged as a dominant theme, with many participants intentionally aligning their actions with their character's backstory, personality, or moral compass. This was evident in the decisions players made around conflict, conversation,

and party dynamics. Player 21 asked aloud, "*What would my character do in this situation? Would I leave this person and follow the advice of my fellow? Or try to free them?*" showing a clear desire to act in accordance with their avatar's fictional worldview. Similarly, Player 38 explained their non-violent approach by stating, *"Violence isn't his first port of call."* These comments reflect a deep commitment to narrative immersion and identity performance, supporting Zimmerman et al.'s (2022) assertion that players often engage in storytelling through in-game action, and Vasalou et al.'s (2012) claim that avatars are designed to reflect personal or aspirational identities.

5.5.4: Escapism

Some players explicitly framed their gameplay as a form of escapism, using the fantasy setting to distance themselves from everyday concerns and explore alternative identities. Player 21 described the game's appeal by saying, "*The element of fantasy… is the ability to step away from the day-to-day*." This desire to escape through play aligns with Hussain and Griffiths' (2008) discussion of escapism as a core motivation in avatar use. It also reflects Turkle's (1995) understanding of digital play as a space where players can engage with selves that differ from their real-world identity.

5.5.5: Exploration

Exploration played a central role in early gameplay, with players engaging deeply in discovering the environment, looting, and interacting with as much of the world as possible. Player 14 noted, *"Every time I do this, I find something new,"* while Player 34 described their methodical discovery style: "*My process of coming into new lands is exploring, like, basically everything."* This mirrors the Explorer archetype in Bartle's taxonomy and aligns with Turkle's (1995) assertion that digital spaces are places of identity testing and discovery. However, it's important to contextualise these behaviours within the game design itself.

5.5.6: Achievement

Achievement-driven players focused on collecting loot, levelling up, and securing healing items, these actions enhanced survivability and ensured future success. Player 22 explained, "*It's more loot, it's more XP,"* in reference to prioritising side quests. Player 27 similarly noted, "*Try to do everything I can in this area. Because even though it seems like a minor amount, having the healing potions can be pretty helpful*." These comments highlight the value placed on efficiency, safety, and preparedness. In alignment with Bartle's Achiever type and Klevjer's (2006) discussion of the avatar as a tool for mastering systems, these players used character progression not only as a mechanical advantage but to deepen their control and immersion in the game world.

5.5.7: Tactical Combat and Analytical Play

A final trend involved players who prioritised tactical thinking and combat preparation. This group of Participants often paused to assess their own stats and make optimal

equipment decisions before engaging with enemies. Player 31 stated, "*Let's see which one is statistically better in a moment,"* reflecting an analytical mindset and a data-driven approach to gameplay. These players displayed an emphasis on preparation and calculation, using in-game systems to maximise success during combat. Their behaviour bridges both the Achiever and Killer types in Bartle's taxonomy, showing how motivation can be shaped by the game's mechanical complexity as much as personal preference.

5.6: Conclusion for Gameplay Session Findings

The gameplay session analysis reveals how players engage with Baldur's Gate 3 during its critical opening hour, showcasing a diverse range of motivations shaped by the game's structure and individual player preferences. Exploration emerged as a dominant theme, driven in part by the game's design, which starts players with minimal resources and encourages the discovery of loot, gear, and tactical advantages. Most participants instinctively responded to this constraint by prioritising looting and area traversal, reinforcing the centrality of exploration to early gameplay.

Socialisation also played a key role, as players encountered and choose whether to recruit companions. These decisions were influenced by both strategic utility and emotional or narrative alignment, highlighting the importance of relational dynamics in shaping engagement. Player motivations varied significantly, from those focused-on optimisation and efficiency, to role-players acting in accordance with character backstories or moral codes. Escapism was another frequent theme, as players used the game to temporarily step away from everyday identities and explore alternative selves within a rich fantasy world.

This behavioural variety underscores *BG3*'s flexibility in accommodating different playstyles. The game's systems, ranging from combat and character building to narrative and relational mechanics; support a high degree of agency and immersion. These observations also emphasise the value of adaptive game design in fostering meaningful and personalised experiences across a broad player spectrum.

The following section will turn to the post-gameplay interviews, examining whether players were aware of these behaviours and how they reflected on their choices. This reflective insight will deepen the understanding of player motivations and identity construction within the narrative space of Baldur's Gate 3.

5.7: Interview Findings

The final stage of data collection involved post-playthrough interviews, conducted after participants completed their recorded gameplay sessions. These interviews were designed to provide deeper insight into player motivations, perceptions, and decision-making processes. The structured set of questions, included in the Appendix, aimed to prompt reflection on aspects of character creation and gameplay that may not have been consciously articulated during play or captured through observation alone. This approach helped fill in potential gaps, offering a more comprehensive understanding of

how players relate to their avatars and engage with the systems and narratives of *Baldur's Gate 3*. Unlike the pre-survey section, where the questions were discussed one by one and findings presented in order, the post-game interviews generated open-ended, qualitative responses. As such, the analysis of this section is laid out thematically, using inductive coding to identify patterns, trends, and motivations emerging from the participants' own language and experiences.

5.7.1: How Players Categorized Their Own Avatar Use

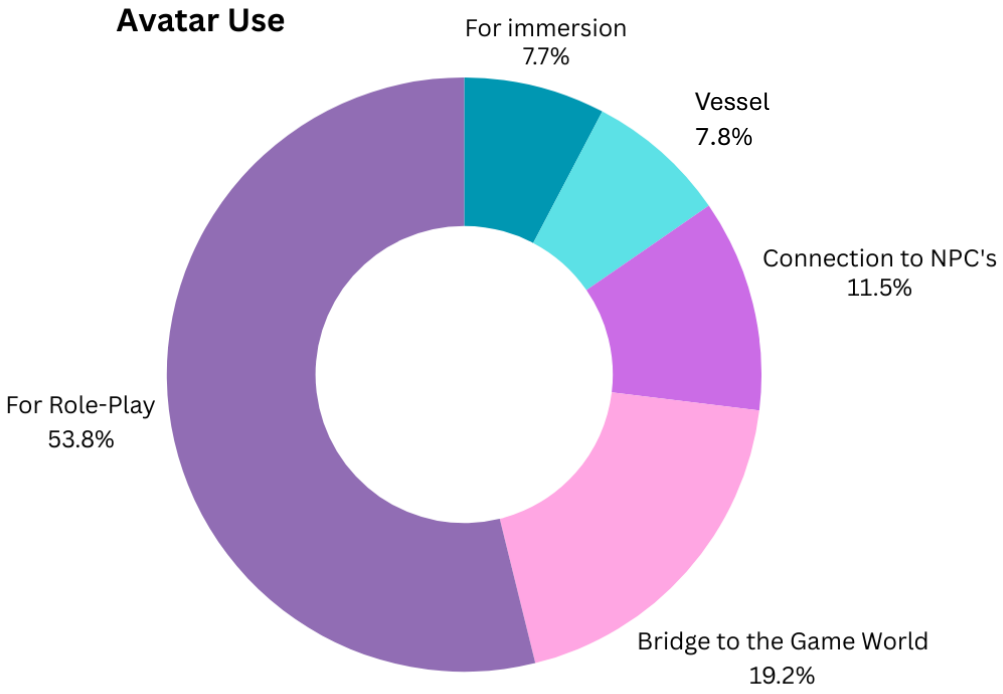

Figure 30 How Players Categorized Their Own Avatar Use

A central focus of the post-game interviews was understanding how players viewed and used their avatars in *Baldur's Gate 3*. After applying inductive thematic coding, several distinct motivations emerged. While these themes often overlapped, each provided insight into the complex ways players approached identity, immersion, and social interaction through their characters. These motivations included role-play, world connection, relational engagement, immersion, and the avatar as a vessel for self-exploration.

Role-play was the most frequently identified motivation, with 53.8% of participants explaining that their avatar served primarily as a character through which to explore alternate personalities, moral codes, or narrative perspectives. Participants described making in-game decisions based on how their avatar would act, rather than their own preferences. Participant 0045 stated, "*I usually try to think of how the character, if it was real, would make the decision. So it's role-playing as that character*," while Participant 0024 explained, "*Absolutely. My real life and my character's life are worlds apart. The role-playing aspect is a big part of why I enjoy the game.*" Similarly, Participant 0002

noted, *"I like to explore it as someone different to myself, not just a reflection of me."* These motivations align with Turkle's (1995) view of avatars as second selves and with Vasalou et al. (2012), who suggest that avatars are tools for experimenting with identity and narrative. In a game like *BG3*, where players shape the story through character-driven choices, role-play becomes central to the experience.

The second most common motivation was the avatar as a bridge to the game world**,** selected by 19.2% of participants. These players described how customisation helped them feel more connected to the game's setting, story, and tone. Through design choices; such as alignment, backstory, and visual style, players established a sense of place and purpose within the world. Participant 0021 explained, "*The game relies on having a character who's part of the story, so having an avatar to anchor you into the world is essential,"* while Participant 0049 added, "*Creating a character that fits in with the world is essential to me."* This motivation reflects Klevjer's (2006) concept of the avatar as a performative body that anchors players within digital spaces and enhances narrative immersion.

Connection to NPCs and companions accounted for 11.5% of responses. These players viewed their avatars as social tools used to build relationships and navigate interpersonal dynamics in the game. Participant 0009 observed, "*I think it was more that I felt sort of a connection between my character and the other companion characters*." For these players, dialogue choices and personality traits were often tailored to foster meaningful bonds, underscoring Bowman's (2010) emphasis on the social functions of avatars and their role in narrative-driven engagement.

Immersion was the primary motivation for 7.7% of participants. For these players, crafting a believable or personally meaningful avatar allowed for deeper engagement with the story. Participant 0031 described how their avatar enabled them to step more fully into the world: "*They allow me to make bold decisions and live out immersive moments*." This emotional connection echoes Hussain and Griffiths' (2008) work, which highlights the importance of customisation in facilitating psychological investment and presence within virtual environments.

Finally, seeing the avatar as a vessel was the mentioned by 7.8% of players. Participant 0015 described this function succinctly: "*Avatar feels more like a vessel to explore."* While distinct from overt role-play or immersion, this perspective reflects a more symbolic use of the avatar as an interface for identity, echoing Klevjer's (2006) understanding of avatars as prosthetic extensions of the player's body and mind.

Although these motivations were coded separately, the interviews revealed that players often held more than one simultaneously. For instance, those who role-played also described feeling immersed or connected to NPCs. These overlapping motivations suggest that avatar use in *Baldur's Gate 3* is not driven by a single purpose, but by a multifaceted relationship between the player and the character. The avatar appears to become a narrative, emotional, and strategic tool, offering players not only control over

the game but also a means of self-expression, social interaction, and imaginative escape.

5.7.2: Familiar Choices

One significant trend emerging from the post-game interviews is the influence of familiarity with *D&D* on players' character creation in Baldur's Gate 3. With 55.5% of participants mentioning their knowledge of or experience with D&D, this background appeared to provide valuable insight into navigating the game's character creation system. Many participants noted that their understanding of D&D mechanics and lore allowed them to make informed decisions during the creation process. For instance, participants frequently referenced their ability to 'min-max' effectively, which is where players use their knowledge of a game to select optimal class and race combinations. This knowledge often resulted in characters tailored to the game's narrative and mechanical intricacies, reflecting a deeper understanding of how to maximise both storytelling potential and gameplay effectiveness.

For some, familiarity with D&D translated into a seamless integration of their tabletop experiences into the digital realm. Player 0041 explained, "*I actually based this character on a new D&D character I'd been creating for a new campaign*," demonstrating how offline role-playing knowledge carried over into the game. Other players described how they brought long-standing character preferences or archetypes into *BG3*, adapting them to the digital environment. This practice of reimagining D&D characters within the game provided a strong sense of continuity and creative satisfaction.

About 44.4% of participants mentioned basing their character in Baldur's Gate 3 on choices or archetypes they had previously explored in other games or D&D campaigns. This repetition reflected a desire for consistency and comfort in character creation. Participant 0002 noted, "*I tend to usually go with an Elf character, whether that's regular or Half-Elf*". These familiar choices helped streamline the creation process and allowed players to quickly immerse themselves in the game world without the added pressure of inventing something entirely new. This approach suggests a kind of player-branding, where individuals develop and refine recurring character templates across games and campaigns.

Participant 0029 shared, *"I tend to create the same character each time - my 'default' dark elf with a sneaky assassin vibe because I prefer non-confrontational gameplay."* This comment illustrates more than just narrative preference; it demonstrates how the player's prior knowledge of class mechanics and encounter styles facilitates the design of a character specifically tailored to their preferred approach. Understanding that certain encounters in *BG3* allow for stealth, dialogue-based solutions, or avoidance of direct conflict, the player selected a class and race combination that naturally supports those methods. These familiar choices helped the player align gameplay mechanics with personal style.

This tendency to recreate familiar characters was often rooted in emotional attachment and prior success with specific playstyles. For these players, character creation was not just a mechanical or aesthetic exercise but a continuation of long-standing preferences and personal narratives. Player 0022 stated that they approached character creation in Baldur's Gate 3 "*just like I would in D&D,"* pointing to a seamless transition of role-playing habits between formats. The sense of familiarity also supported immersion, allowing players to project themselves into the world more comfortably and confidently. This supports Bowman's (2010) argument that avatars often serve as emotionally resonant figures that players return to, revisiting them across different gaming contexts to experience new challenges while maintaining a consistent identity.

The prevalence of familiar character designs highlights the dual role of experience and preference in shaping player behaviour. Familiarity with D&D provided a framework for making informed and immersive choices, while the repetition of designs across games reflected the emotional and creative ties players have to their avatars. This continuity helped streamline the decision-making process and enhanced immersion by providing a stable anchor within the fantasy setting. This suggests that players not only carry over narrative ideas but also strategic approaches that reinforce a sense of personal continuity and investment, aligning with Bowman's (2010) theory that avatars can become central to a player's self-concept and long-term emotional connection to gameplay.

5.7.3: Avatars as Reflections of Self

Participants reported constructing avatars that represented either their real-world selves or an idealised version of their identity. This process frequently involved a combination of visual resemblance and aspirational qualities. Many players used the character creation system as a platform for self-expression, choosing physical features or personality traits that either mirrored their own or reflected how they wished to appear or act.

Several participants focused on visual similarity, reinforcing their identification with the avatar through aesthetic choices. Participant 0030 noted, "*I had the option to make a character that looked a little like me,"* while Participant 0009 shared that they created a character who was "*kind of like the ideal representation of what I would want to be inside that kind of game world*." These statements suggest that the visual customisation features in *BG3* offered players an opportunity to connect with their avatars on a personal level.

Others extended this identification into personality alignment. Participant 0029 stated, *"I always make a character that reflects how I'd make decisions,"* showing that some players built characters with internal traits that closely resembled their real-life behaviours and values. This approach deepened immersion by ensuring that the avatar's decisions felt intuitive and consistent.

For many, the avatar served not just as a mirror but as a projection of their ideal self. Participant 0031 described this process as striking a balance between "*what I am and*

what I want to be,". Participant 0042 echoed this sentiment, stating, "*They were an ideal version of how I wish I could look in real life.*" Similarly, Participant 0003 shared, "*I tend to make an idealised version of myself, even in looks*," and Participant 0009 noted, "*I was playing as kind of like the ideal me. So, how I would ideally like to behave and act if I was suddenly in Baldur's Gate."*

These motivations reflect a blend of familiarity and aspiration, demonstrating that avatars can act as both anchors to the self and tools for self-enhancement. The pre-game survey supports these findings, where players reported choosing characters either like themselves, ideal versions of themselves, or entirely different personas for role-play. In this section of the study, those who favoured self-reflective or idealised avatars reiterated these preferences, suggesting a consistent and conscious pattern in how they approached identity construction.

These behaviours align with the findings of Vasalou et al. (2012), who argue that players often craft avatars to reflect personal identity or social ideals. Turkle (1995) similarly describes digital avatars as narrative extensions of the self, serving as tools for meaning-making and identity construction.

5.7.4: Avatars as Tools for Role-Play and Alternate Selves

In contrast, many participants intentionally created avatars that were markedly different from themselves, embracing the opportunity for immersive role-play. These players used their avatars as vessels to explore unfamiliar personalities, moral codes, or narrative trajectories.

Participant 0024 reflected on this distance, saying, *"My real life and my character's life are worlds apart. The role-playing aspect is a big part of why I enjoy the game.*" Participant 0045 similarly stated, "*I usually try to think of how the character, if it was real, would make the decision. So it's role-playing as that character,"* indicating a commitment to decisions rooted in the avatar's persona rather than the player's own. Participant 0002 supported this sentiment, explaining, "*To me, that's kind of why you play games: to explore different characters and viewpoints.*"

Others emphasized the creative freedom this provided. Participant 0033 remarked, "*I try to let my characters be themselves. For this one, Adelaide, she'll usually choose what's funny or neutral, whereas I tend to be more of a people-pleaser,"* and Participant 0034 noted, "*My characters don't always respond the way I would*." These examples show how players adopted alternate viewpoints to enrich their gameplay.

This type of role-play was often deliberate and thoughtful. Some players adhered to fictional backstories or character archetypes, while others used role-play to explore traits they did not exhibit in real life. These behaviours reflect Zimmerman et al.'s (2022) understanding of RPGs as spaces for identity experimentation and performance. Likewise, Hussain and Griffiths (2008) argue that online environments offer a safe venue for exploring alternate selves.

These findings mirror responses from the pre-game survey, where many participants noted a preference for playing as characters "*nothing like me*" in order to enhance the role-playing experience. In these cases, character creation was not about reflecting or idealising the self but about stepping into new roles, perspectives, and experiences.

5.7.5: Thematic Design and Pre-Created Archetypes

For many participants, character creation in *BG3* was less about spontaneous decisions and more about bringing a clear vision to life. Players frequently entered the game with a concept in mind, whether inspired by previous role-playing games, specific character archetypes, or established personalities, and worked to align their avatar's appearance and background with that theme.

Several players detailed how their characters' visual design supported their chosen class or persona. Participant 0002 shared, "*I play as a sneaky character, I might go for darker face makeup or neutral hairstyles,"* while Participant 0015 noted their rogue's "*slightly edgy design, lots of black, red, and heavy eyeshadow."* These visual choices weren't arbitrary but intentional, aimed at enhancing immersion and consistency within the game world.

Others drew inspiration from elemental or magical themes. Participant 0003 explained, "*like if I have a fire mage, I'll make them look more fiery,*" and Participant 0038 crafted their spore druid with specific green pupils to match the in-game ability Halo of Spores, saying it symbolized their "*affiliation with the necrotic magic of rot and decay."*

Some participants even incorporated small but impactful details to support narrative backstories. Participant 0030 described adding a "*minor facial scar*" to reflect their character's soldier background, while Participant 0024 picked a hairstyle that *"looked like a weapon*" to suit their monk's martial prowess. Participant 0032, crafting a darker moral archetype, said, "*I based the appearance off what a stereotypical 'mean' character would look like, dark clothing, a dark aesthetic, things like that.".*

These findings align with Turkle's (1995) notion of digital identity as a form of storytelling and with Vasalou et al.'s (2012) view that avatars act as expressive tools. Furthermore, Jenkins (2004) provides a useful lens through his concept of "*narrative architecture,"* suggesting that games function as spaces where players construct and inhabit stories.

5.7.6: Designing Characters to Fit the Fantasy of the Game World

For many players, creating a character in *Baldur's Gate 3* involved a careful balance between individuality and immersion. These players aimed for their Avatar to feels like a natural part of the game's fantasy world, aligning with its themes, lore, and aesthetics. Rather than prioritising self-resemblance or realism, these players crafted characters that contribute to the immersive qualities of the setting. This approach reflects a deep engagement with the narrative environment and a desire for thematic consistency, echoing the role of Avatars as extensions of self within structured fictional spaces (Klevjer, 2006; Turkle, 1995).

A significant number of participants emphasised the importance of their character's appearance in reinforcing the fantasy of the game world. Mundane designs were frequently avoided in favour of visually striking, otherworldly traits. Participant 0024 explained that they tend to avoid human characters because they are too "*normal*" for an RPG, while Participant 0003 described their preference for pale skin tones with a marble-like or ethereal appearance to better match the fantasy setting. Participant 0034 similarly stated that they liked Githyanki because they were "*human enough to feel relatable but still clearly belong in a fantasy world*." These motivations align with findings from Zimmermann et al. (2022), who observed that players often construct Avatars that blend idealised traits with immersive fidelity, reflecting a nuanced balance between fantasy and self-representation.

These aesthetic decisions were often closely informed by the game's lore or the thematic attributes of the chosen class. For example, participants who created druids or sorcerers tailored their designs to evoke magical or environmental associations. Participant 0038, who designed a spore druid, selected green pupils and skin tones reminiscent of necrotic magic to ensure their Avatar embodied the eerie qualities of their chosen subclass. Alignment between a player's Avatar and personal or narrative themes fosters greater identification and emotional investment (Vasalou et al. 2012).

Players actively co-create meaning by drawing upon shared genre conventions and established lore during the process of avatar construction. (Jenkins, 2004). Participant 0027, designing a Drow character, referenced the race's canonical superiority complex and visual styling, aligning their aesthetic and behavioural choices with the D&D lore. Participant 0010, who crafted a Half-Elf, described aiming for a balance between uniqueness and plausibility, ensuring their character felt distinct but still believable within the game world. Players actively co-create meaning by drawing upon shared genre conventions and established lore during the process of avatar construction. (Jenkins, 2004)

This attention to narrative coherence extended beyond race and class into finer aspects of visual customisation. Multiple participants described selecting scars, hairstyles, and clothing that reflected the thematic tone of their character's role. For instance, Participant 0022, creating a bard, chose flamboyant features and accessories to convey theatricality, while Participant 0018, designing a fighter, incorporated rugged facial features and visible scars to suggest combat experience. Notably, Participant 0005 chose a style for their character's hair that resembled a weapon, explicitly linking aesthetics to thematic symbolism. These design choices illustrate the fusion of narrative, aesthetic, and ludic elements in avatar creation, a complexity often overlooked by psychological models (Yee & Bailenson, 2007), which tend to reduce avatar impact to visual appearance alone.

For these players, immersion was strongly tied to the consistency between their Avatar and the broader game world. When a character visually and thematically matched the setting, participants reported feeling more emotionally connected to the narrative and more motivated to role-play. Several participants commented that their enjoyment of

the game was significantly heightened by having a character who felt like it belonged in the world in a way that supported the fantasy tone of the story. This finding supports Turkay and Kinzer (2014), who suggest that meaningful avatar customisation strengthens emotional investment and narrative engagement by aligning design choices with player goals.

Ultimately, the consistency players strive for in Avatar design underscores the strength of *Baldur's Gate 3*'s customisation systems. By offering a robust range of visual options, class archetypes, and lore-driven choices, the game empowers players to create Avatars that feel simultaneously unique and contextually appropriate. This balance between personal creativity and thematic alignment supports the psychological needs for autonomy and competence outlined in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), reinforcing both immersion and motivation throughout the gameplay experience.

5.7.7: Players Prioritizing Aesthetics in Character Creation

For many participants, the primary motivation in character creation was the desire to craft an Avatar that aligned with their personal sense of beauty or style. Participant 0034 stated, "*I definitely prefer being able to make my character look aesthetically pleasing*," while Participant 0003 remarked, "*Mostly it's about personal preferences and making something visually pleasing to my eye.*" These statements highlight how visual appeal was a central consideration for a wide range of players, shaping their initial engagement with the character creation system. In *BG3*, where characters are frequently visible during exploration and cinematic sequences, this emphasis on aesthetic engagement formed an important part of how players connected with the game world.

For some, this focus on beauty and personal taste took precedence over practical or narrative considerations. Participant 0009 explained that they made "*a character that honestly is just kind of like as hot as I could possibly make them*," underscoring a desire for visual satisfaction over in-game role functionality or lore coherence. Similarly, another participant described their approach as "*more aesthetic, just picking designs I liked*," emphasizing immediate visual gratification rather than long-term narrative investment. These preferences support Zimmermann et al. (2022), who argue that avatars are often shaped by the interplay between real and idealised identities, where aesthetic choices reflect both self-perception and aspirational expression.

This emphasis on visual pleasure also aligns with the motivational frameworks of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), particularly the need for autonomy. The freedom to make expressive choices during avatar creation empowered players to assert personal identity and preference, reinforcing their emotional investment in the game. As Turkay and Kinzer (2014) found, when players feel a sense of personal control and connection through customization, they experience greater immersion and satisfaction.

Interestingly, these visual preferences often laid the foundation for narrative retrofitting, in which players crafted backstories to match their aesthetic decisions. For example, scars or distinct hairstyles were sometimes explained post hoc to align with imagined

histories or personality traits. This process reflects what Jenkins (2004) describes as participatory culture, where players engage in co-authorship, using available tools to construct meaning and narrative from their creative outputs. In this way, even purely aesthetic choices evolved into deeper forms of narrative and thematic alignment, albeit starting from a position of visual appeal.

5.8: Comparing Observed Behaviour and Self-Identified Player Types of All Participants

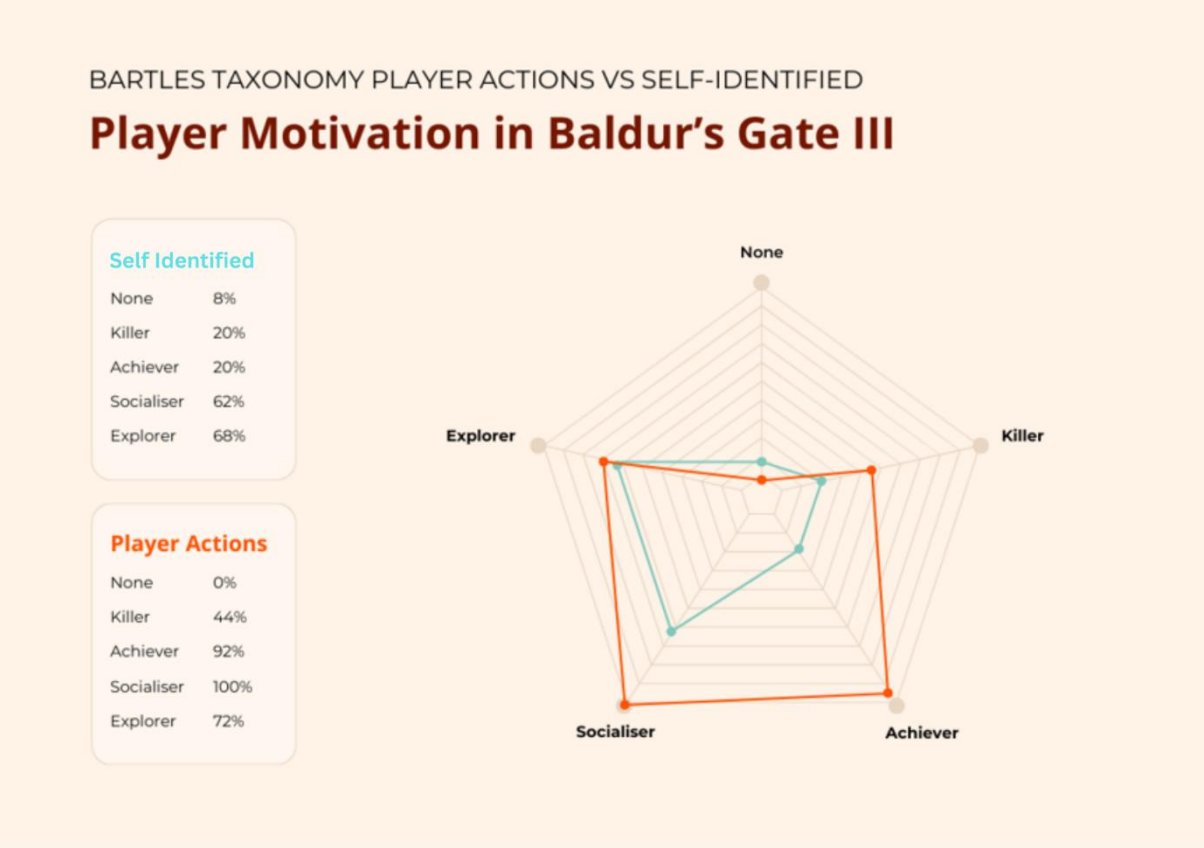

Figure 31 Comparing Observed Behaviour and Self-Identified Player Types of All Participants

The comparison between observed behaviours and self-identified player types in *BG3* reveals a complex and layered picture of player motivation. Using Bartle's Taxonomy as an interpretive framework, this section highlights how players' perceptions of their own playstyles do not always match their observed in-game actions. It also underscores how game design can guide, shape, or even obscure certain motivations.

5.8.1: Socialiser Behaviours

All participants displayed Socialiser behaviours during the gameplay sessions. Players consistently engaged in dialogue with non-player characters (NPCs), fostered relationships with companions, and often prioritized social outcomes when presented with branching narrative paths. These interactions were not isolated events, but rather a central part of how players progressed through the game and understood its world. This supports Bowman's (2010) argument that games often encourage emotional investment

through character-driven interactions and aligns with Turkle's (1995) view of avatars as socially meaningful entities within digital environments.

Despite this, only 62 percent of players identified as Socialisers during post-game interviews. This gap may be explained by how *BG3* embeds social interactions into its primary gameplay loop. Many players may not see these behaviours as choices, but as required mechanics for story progression. The game's design encourages players to adopt Socialiser behaviours regardless of whether they see themselves that way. This suggests that player identity is often shaped by the systems of the game itself, rather than by a fixed internal preference.

5.8.2: Achiever Behaviours

Achiever behaviours were highly prevalent, with 92 percent of players demonstrating a drive to complete quests, optimize builds, and replay encounters for better outcomes. These players took time to maximize their rewards, plan their strategies, and ensure their characters were fully prepared for challenges ahead. Despite this high rate of achiever-like behaviour, only 20 percent of players described themselves as Achievers.

This contrast may point to how players interpret their own motivations. Many of those who behave like Achievers might understand their actions as a natural part of gameplay rather than a pursuit of in-game success. Some may even see their strategic behaviours as secondary to a narrative or exploratory goal. This echoes the argument from Zimmerman et al. (2022) that player identity in complex RPGs is often fluid and tied to shifting situational needs rather than rigid categories.

5.8.3: Explorer Behaviours

Seventy-two percent of players demonstrated behaviours consistent with the Explorer type. These players actively sought out new paths, examined environmental details, and experimented with different outcomes, even if it did not serve a mechanical purpose. Unlike Achievers, Explorers appeared driven by curiosity and immersion rather than optimization.

This closely aligned with self-reported data, where 68 percent of players identified as Explorers. This high correlation may be due to the visible and deliberate nature of exploration in Baldur's Gate 3, which rewards discovery with lore, narrative outcomes, and gameplay advantages. Exploration is also easy for players to recognize and describe in interviews, leading to stronger identification with the archetype.

5.8.4: Killer Behaviours

Although 44 percent of players exhibited tactical combat behaviours that aligned with the Killer archetype, only 20 percent self-identified as such. These behaviours included using weapon equipment, anticipating enemy movements and moving tactically to counter or gain advantages, and choosing abilities to maximize effectiveness in battle. For many, these decisions were instrumental rather than expressive.

Players may avoid identifying as Killers due to the aggressive connotations of the term. In *BG3* combat is often a tool for progression rather than a form of expression. This suggests that many players who demonstrate Killer behaviours may see them as functional necessities rather than reflective of their core motivations.

5.8.5: Mixed or Unidentifiable Motivations

Eight percent of players indicated that none of Bartle's categories described them. This reveals the limitation of rigid archetypes in capturing the nuance of modern CRPG playstyles. These players may see their decisions as too situational or multifaceted to fit a single label. Vasalou et al. (2012) argue that avatar-based play often contains overlapping identity strategies, which supports the idea that players do not always see themselves in terms of one distinct category.

5.9: Conclusion to Interview Findings

The post-game interviews offered essential insight into how players perceived, used, and reflected upon their avatars in *BG3*. While earlier data from the pre-survey and observational phases captured preferences and in-the-moment choices, the interviews revealed a deeper layer of intentionality, imagination, and emotional meaning. Participants did not simply create avatars as static representations. Instead, they actively engaged with them as tools for narrative expression, aesthetic enjoyment, role-play, and strategic gameplay.

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that avatar use was shaped by multiple overlapping motivations. Some participants designed avatars that mirrored their real-world identity or projected an aspirational version of themselves. Others deliberately created characters that differed from their actual personalities in order to explore alternate viewpoints or moral codes through role-play. These practices echo theories from Turkle (1995) and Vasalou et al. (2012), who view avatars as flexible instruments for both self-exploration and self-presentation. Hussain and Griffiths (2008) similarly argue that avatars can act as vehicles for identity experimentation in safe, controlled environments.

This study builds on these models by analysing avatar use within the specific context of a narrative-driven CRPG. *BG3* offered players a detailed world with complex lore and flexible mechanics, which encouraged not only personal expression but also narrative integration. Participants often described making aesthetic or thematic choices that reinforced their avatar's role in the story. These decisions were not random or purely cosmetic. Instead, they were shaped by class, race, and archetypes, illustrating what Jenkins (2004) describes as participatory culture, where players co-author meaning through interaction with game systems and shared genre conventions.

Even small customisation decisions, such as hairstyle or scars, frequently carried narrative weight. These features were often tied to imagined backstories, personality traits, or thematic cues related to character roles. This shows that avatar customisation is not only a visual preference but also an emotional and narrative process that

strengthens immersion and fosters a deeper sense of player investment. The findings support the work of Klevjer (2006) and Turkay and Kinzer (2014), who emphasise the role of avatars in shaping both player experience and emotional connection to the game world.

Additionally, the interviews revealed a small noticeable contrast between how players described themselves and how they actually behaved during gameplay. Most participants engaged in Socialiser behaviours, such as building relationships with NPCs and companions, even if they did not explicitly see themselves that way. Many also demonstrated Achiever tendencies through strategic planning, character optimisation, and a focus on completing objectives, yet few identified with that label. Explorer behaviours, such as curiosity-driven exploration and trying different outcomes, showed a closer match between self-perception and actual playstyle. Players were least likely to identify as Killers, even when they made tactical decisions or approached combat with a competitive mindset. These patterns suggest that rigid player typologies do not fully capture the complexity of player identity. Instead, motivations appear to be fluid and shaped as much by the structure of the game as by the player's internal preferences.

In conclusion, the interview findings show that avatar creation and use in *BG3* is not guided by a single purpose. Instead, it reflects a complex relationship between identity, narrative engagement, and game mechanics. Players may not always be aware of the full scope of their motivations, or they may downplay behaviours that feel systemic rather than intentional. As avatars serve to explore alternate selves, reinforce immersion, express personal style, and navigate social and mechanical systems, they become dynamic tools for bridging player identity with the narrative world of the game.

Chapter 6: Answering the Initial Research Questions

6.1: Initial Research Question Responses

6.1.1.i: How do players prioritize between aesthetic and gameplay-related customization options?

Players prioritize customization in *Baldur's Gate 3* based on a spectrum of motivations that range from aesthetic appeal to gameplay utility. Many players emphasized the importance of creating visually striking Avatars, often prioritizing personal style or thematic coherence over functionality. For example, participants frequently selected weaker armour or avoided helmets because they felt these items detracted from their character's aesthetic. On the other hand, utility-driven players leaned toward optimizing their Avatars for combat effectiveness and progression, especially in the game's early stages when survival was critical. A significant portion of players sought a balance between these priorities, dyeing armour to match thematic designs or tailoring their character's appearance to align with their role, while ensuring their builds remained viable in gameplay. This balance required trade-offs, as players combined visual preferences with practical considerations, creating Avatars that were both functional and personally meaningful.

BG3 offers a highly detailed aesthetic customization system but it is not without player dissatisfaction. Players can adjust physical features such as face, hairstyle, skin tone, eyes, tattoos, piercings, and voice. They can also choose race, gender, and origin, which, although partially tied to mechanics, carry strong aesthetic and narrative connotations. This scope of options supports both self-representation and imaginative projection. It aligns with Turkle's (1995) and Vasalou et al.'s (2009) observations about avatar design being a space for identity experimentation and visual self-expression.

6.1.1.ii: How do the game's lore and narrative influence character customization choices?

Participants typically began with aesthetic choices, using appearance as a foundation for identity or narrative engagement. However, many adjusted their aesthetic choices to better suit desired gameplay outcomes. This interplay supports Bowman's (2012) model of dual motivations (instrumental versus immersive) and echoes Zimmerman's (2009) view of the avatar as both a character and a gameplay tool. Klevjer's (2006) theory of the avatar as an embodied agent helps explain why aesthetic and functional design are often entangled rather than separate priorities.

6.1.1.iii: How do players balance creating characters that reflect their identities versus immersing themselves in the game?

The game's lore significantly shaped character creation. Players often made choices to fit the world of Faerûn, such as selecting specific races or deities that aligned with personal story arcs. These behaviours support Bowman's (2018) understanding of players as co-authors of narrative experiences and align with Turkle's (1995) notion that players engage with the fiction of the game as a lens for exploring self and story. Juul's

(2005) concept of the "half-real" game world is especially relevant here, as it captures the hybrid nature of digital games where fictional immersion is constrained by rule-based systems. Players made customization decisions that balanced personal narrative expression with the game's existing lore, highlighting how fiction and structure jointly shape avatar design.

6.1.1.iv: Are there specific in-game benefits or advantages associated with certain customization choices, and how do players weigh these factors?

Players balanced self-reflection and immersion by mixing identity expression with role-play and strategic design. While some avatars reflected idealized traits or gender expression, many players selected fantasy races like Tieflings or Elves for their narrative appeal or in-game advantages. This supports Turkle's (1995) and Vasalou et al.'s (2009) view of identity experimentation, but also aligns with Bowman's (2018) idea of narrative co-authorship and Zimmerman's (2009) emphasis on avatars as functional tools. The popularity of races with strong lore or mechanical benefits shows how players blend personal identity with immersive and strategic priorities.

6.1.1.v: What are the primary motivations for players to engage in character creation in *Baldur's Gate 3*?

Motivations for character creation varied significantly between players and were often shaped by whether they had a clear vision of their desired gameplay experience. Some entered the process with a strong narrative or role-play focus, aiming to tell a story or explore aspects of identity. Others prioritized class mechanics or race-based advantages, seeking to optimise gameplay from the outset. This variation aligns with Bartle's (1996) taxonomy, which captures the spectrum of player motivations from storytelling and social interaction to strategic achievement. Hussain and Griffiths (2008) further note that avatar creation often involves identity experimentation or escapism, particularly when players switch gender or create idealised selves. Character creation thus served different functions depending on the player, acting either as a narrative entry point or a tool for gameplay planning.

Aesthetic design was another prominent motivator, with players investing in visually appealing or thematic Avatars to enhance their connection to the game. Strategic optimization also played a role, as many participants tailored their characters for gameplay efficiency, focusing on race and class combinations that maximized performance. Exploration and storytelling further motivated players, as they crafted Avatars to interact deeply with the world and experience its branching narratives.

6.1.1.vi: How does the level of customization available influence player engagement with character creation?

The extensive customization options in *Baldur's Gate 3* enhanced player engagement by allowing for greater narrative control, identity experimentation, and aesthetic expression. Players often spent significant time adjusting visual details and

constructing backstories, which deepened their emotional connection to the avatar. This supports Ratan et al. (2020), who argue that greater customization increases a sense of avatar ownership. It also reflects Turkle's (1995) claim that flexible digital identities allow users to project and play with aspects of self, increasing psychological investment before gameplay even begins.

6.1.1.vii: Do players tend to create characters that align with their personalities and preferences, or do they experiment with different personas?

Players engaged in both self-alignment and experimentation during character creation. Some avatars reflected idealised aspects of the self, while others embodied contrasting identities, such as different genders or moral outlooks. This supports Yee's (2006) research on Role-Playing motivations, where players use avatars to explore alternative narratives or expressions of self. It also aligns with Turkle's (1995) argument that digital environments enable identity play, allowing users to shift between versions of themselves or adopt entirely new roles. Character creation in *Baldur's Gate 3* thus became a space for both reflection and transformation, depending on the player's intent.

6.1.1.viii: How much does character creation contribute to the sense of ownership and investment players feel in their in-game Avatars?

Character creation played a central role in fostering a sense of ownership and emotional investment. Players described feeling connected to their avatars even before gameplay began, often referring to them in personal or protective terms. This supports Klimmt et al.'s (2009) theory of identification, which suggests that the more players shape and personalise an avatar, the more likely they are to experience self-presence. Turkle (1995) also argues that when players project identity into digital characters, emotional bonds form through the act of representation. The process of designing an avatar thus laid the foundation for a deeper sense of attachment and engagement throughout the game.

6.1.1.ix: Are there correlations between specific character creation choices and subsequent gameplay behaviours or preferences?

Clear correlations emerged between the types of characters players created and their in-game behaviour. Players who selected stealth-oriented or morally ambiguous avatars tended to approach gameplay more cautiously and favoured exploration or subversion. In contrast, those who designed charismatic or combat-optimized avatars often adopted assertive, leadership-focused playstyles. These patterns align with Bartle's (1996) player taxonomy, which categorises players based on dominant motivations such as achievement, exploration, social interaction, and competition.

6.1.1.x: To what extent are players consciously aware of the motivations behind their avatar design choices?

Players demonstrated partial awareness of their motivations during avatar design. Many identified with a general "player type," such as preferring narrative, combat, or role-play-driven gameplay, but also fulfilled additional goals like aesthetic expression or identity exploration. This made the decision-making process layered and often fluid. The findings reflect Juul's (2005) concept of the "half-real," where avatar choices are influenced by both narrative intentions and gameplay systems. Klevjer (2006) adds that avatar embodiment blends deliberate functionality with expressive design, which is not always consciously articulated. Players engaged in impression management potentially without full awareness of the psychological or social motivations behind their choices (Vasalou et al. 2009). As a result, player motivation exists in a multifaceted space that combines intention, intuition, and evolving goals.

6.1.1.xi: Are players already decided on the type of gameplay experience they want before designing their avatar?

Some players began the character creation process with a clear idea of the type of gameplay experience they wanted, such as favouring stealth, combat, or narrative immersion. Others explored their preferences during customization, allowing their intended playstyle to emerge through experimentation with class, race, and aesthetics. This reflects the view that players often approach games with a combination of instrumental and experiential motivations (Bowman's 2012). It also supports Klevjer's (2006) argument that the avatar acts as an embodied interface, meaning that gameplay intent and avatar design evolve together rather than sequentially. The findings suggest that while some players enter with defined goals, others use customization as a space to shape and refine their approach to the game.

6.1.1.xii: Does Bartle's Taxonomy still offer useful insight into broad player motivations in narrative-rich RPGs like *Baldur's Gate 3*?

Bartle's (1996) taxonomy continues to offer useful insight into broad player motivations, particularly in identifying general preferences such as achievement, exploration, or narrative engagement. In this study, players often aligned with one or more of Bartle's categories, but their choices also reflected overlapping motivations and external influences, such as mood, social context, or narrative goals. The taxonomy's structure proved too binary to fully capture the complexity of motivation in a narrative-rich game like *Baldur's Gate 3*. While it remains a valuable framework, the findings suggest that motivations are fluid, situational, and shaped by more than just playstyle; including identity expression, aesthetics, and evolving gameplay experiences.

6.1.1.xiii: Are players aware of their own player behaviour, and can they categorise themselves within player taxonomies like Bartle's?

Most players demonstrated some awareness of their own behavioural tendencies, such as favouring exploration, role-play, or mechanical efficiency. Some explicitly identified as a certain "type" of player, while others described preferences that aligned with categories in Bartle's (1996) taxonomy, even if they did not use the framework by name. However, player behaviour often shifted in response to narrative developments or personal interest, showing that rigid categorisation was not always sufficient. This supports Bowman's (2012) argument that player motivations are both experiential and adaptive, influenced by changing goals and engagement styles. The findings suggest that while players can loosely categorise themselves, their behaviour often extends beyond fixed types and reflects a flexible, context-driven approach to gameplay.

6.2: Bartle's Taxonomy Future Use Suggestions:

From a development perspective, player-type taxonomies offer a structured way to analyse how different player archetypes engage with a game. This is particularly valuable in two areas: post-release analysis and quality assurance (QA) testing.

In a finished title like *Baldur's Gate 3*, taxonomies help developers identify which archetypes are most engaged and why. For instance, if behaviours associated with Socialisers are especially prominent, as observed in this study, developers can infer that systems supporting character interaction and narrative resonance are highly effective. These insights can inform future updates, expansions, and marketing strategies by emphasising the elements players find most rewarding.

During QA, taxonomies serve as diagnostic tools. Developers can assess whether key player types are being adequately supported. If Achievers appear unsatisfied, it may indicate insufficient challenge or unclear reward structures. If Explorers are not engaging deeply, environmental or narrative content may need refinement. Similarly, if tactical players (akin to Killers in Bartle's framework) show disengagement, this may prompt improvements to AI or combat systems.

However, the taxonomy shows its limitations when applied to individual player behaviour. As this study found, players often misidentify or underestimate their own motivations. For example, those exhibiting highly goal-oriented, achievement-driven behaviour may not self-identify as Achievers. This disconnect highlights the complexity of contemporary gaming, where overlapping motivations are common and fluid.

As a result, taxonomies are better suited for aggregate analysis than individual classification. They help reveal patterns across groups rather than providing reliable insights into individual player satisfaction. To gain a full picture of engagement, developers should complement taxonomy-based frameworks with qualitative and quantitative methods such as surveys, behavioural data, and player interviews.

In a complex RPG like *Baldur's Gate 3*, where motivations often overlap and evolve, player taxonomies are most valuable when integrated into a broader toolkit. They allow developers to better understand not only what players are doing, but also why, and how design decisions influence those behaviours. When applied thoughtfully, taxonomies support the creation of more responsive, satisfying, and inclusive gameplay experiences.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1: Gaps in the Literature

The extensive literature on avatars, identity, and motivation within digital gaming environments provides a rich foundation for understanding player behaviour, self-representation, and emotional engagement. However, as demonstrated in Chapter 2, several key gaps remain in existing scholarship, particularly in relation to how character customisation intersects with identity expression and role-play motivations in complex modern RPGs like Baldur's Gate 3.

One significant omission lies in the lack of research that examines avatar customisation in context, that is, within the narrative, mechanical, and thematic frameworks of specific game worlds. Much of the literature (e.g., Turkle, 1995; Yee & Bailenson, 2007; Vasalou et al., 2012) investigates avatar design in broad, often decontextualised terms, treating self-representation as a generalisable psychological phenomenon. While this work offers important insights into the symbolic and emotional functions of avatars, it does not sufficiently account for how genre, setting, or gameplay systems mediate identity construction. This is especially pertinent in CRPGs, where character creation is often embedded within highly elaborate world-building and branching narrative systems. Specifically, the ways players align their avatars with in-game lore, class archetypes, or strategic needs.

Similarly, although scholars like Klevjer (2006, 2022) and Zimmermann et al. (2022) explore embodiment and idealisation through avatar design, these analyses often foreground aesthetic representation without fully integrating narrative and ludic motivation. The psychological models frequently referenced, such as the Proteus Effect or Self-Determination Theory, explain player behaviour in relation to visual traits or motivational need fulfilment, but they overlook the storytelling intentions that many players bring to character creation. For example, a gap remains in understanding how players use avatars as tools for narrative authorship, especially when crafting morally ambiguous or thematically aligned characters. As the study data reveals, participants often drew on fantasy archetypes, character backstories, or symbolic aesthetics, yet the existing literature rarely addresses these creative strategies as core to avatar identity work.

Another underdeveloped area is the interplay between identity expression and gameplay functionality. While theorists such as Stern and Newman distinguish between avatars as identity vehicles and avatars as gameplay tools, little work has been done to explore how these roles overlap or conflict within actual player practices. Particularly in customisation-heavy games, players must frequently balance visual or narrative coherence with mechanical optimisation, a dynamic that is often missing from current theoretical frameworks. The literature tends to either the aesthetics of the avatar (as in studies of digital selfhood) or reduce it to a gameplay instrument (as in ergodic or ludological analyses), without adequately capturing how players negotiate this tension.

Cultural and gender representation in avatar design has received increasing attention in recent years (Da Silva et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2018), yet gaps remain in how gender-switching practices are interpreted within the context of role-play rather than identity experimentation alone. For instance, while scholars like Hussain and Griffiths (2008) explore gender-swapping as a form of escapism or self-exploration, they do not always address the performative dimensions of gendered characterisation in narrative-driven games. Nor do they fully account for how genre conventions shape the acceptability and narrative logic of such choices. There is a need for further work that positions gender-switching not just as a psychological or sociological behaviour but as a creative, thematic, and performative practice embedded in specific media contexts.

In sum, while existing literature provides valuable foundations for understanding avatars in virtual environments, it often isolates identity from its game-specific, narrative, and performative contexts. There is a pressing need for research that examines how players weave together aesthetic, strategic, and thematic intentions during avatar construction, and how these practices intersect with broader psychological and cultural frameworks. Notably absent is sustained attention to the role of motivation in this process, particularly the balance between conscious and unconscious drivers that inform avatar design and use. While players may articulate deliberate intentions, such as aligning their character with a preferred narrative arc or aesthetic ideal, they are also influenced by less visible forces, including genre expectations, social norms, and ingrained schemas around gender, race, and power. These motivations shape both the initial act of creation and the ongoing relationship between player and avatar throughout gameplay. This study aims to address these gaps by situating avatar customisation within the lived, narrated, and strategic experiences of players engaged in a rich narrative RPG, offering a more integrated model of identity performance, motivational complexity, and self-awareness in contemporary game worlds.

7.2: Positioning This Study

This study contributes to the ongoing scholarly conversation around avatars by offering an empirical, contextually grounded analysis of avatar customisation in Baldur’s Gate 3, a narratively rich CRPG. While it does not claim to resolve all the gaps identified in Chapter 2, especially given its limited timeframe and scope as a Master's-level project, it has aimed to bridge some of the key theoretical and methodological divides in the literature.

Much of the existing scholarship approaches avatar identity through psychological or aesthetic lenses. For example, work by Yee and Bailenson (2007) and Deci and Ryan (1985) foregrounds motivation and behavioural outcomes, while scholars like Turkle (1995) and Zimmermann et al. (2022) focus on digital self-expression and idealisation. However, these studies often overlook how avatar design choices emerge from the overlapping demands of gameplay mechanics, narrative alignment, and cultural expectations. This project attempts to address that oversight by analysing how players in a CRPG environment negotiate these intersecting pressures when designing and playing with their avatars.

By using a mixed-methods approach that includes pre-game surveys, think-aloud sessions, and post-game interviews, the study captures both conscious and unconscious aspects of player motivation. Participants were often aware of their aesthetic and narrative preferences, but their actions also revealed deeper motivations that were less immediately articulated. This supports Turkle's (1995) view of digital spaces as arenas for both self-exploration and identity experimentation and expands on it by situating those explorations within the genre-specific expectations of role-playing games.

The findings also highlight avatar customisation as a site of participatory storytelling. This aligns with Jenkins' (2004) concept of participatory culture, where players are not passive consumers of game content but co-authors who shape narratives through their choices. In this study, participants created backstories, made moral decisions, and designed avatars that reflected personal values and role-play intentions. These actions demonstrate that avatar creation is not simply a preparatory step but an integral part of the narrative experience.

Furthermore, the study builds on Klevjer's (2006, 2022) framing of avatars as prosthetic extensions of the player, adding that these extensions are often culturally and narratively inflected. It also adds to Hussain and Griffiths' (2008) work on gender-switching by examining it within the context of role-play conventions and character-driven storytelling, rather than focusing solely on psychological or escapist motivations.

In sum, while this project cannot offer a comprehensive solution to the gaps in current avatar research, it makes a meaningful contribution by exploring how players blend aesthetic, functional, and narrative considerations in avatar design. By foregrounding player reflections and in-game practices, this study proposes a more integrated model of identity performance and motivation in digital gaming environments. It provides a foundation for future research that may continue to investigate the rich, layered relationship between avatars, narrative agency, and player psychology.

7.3: Directions for Future Research

While this study offers insight into the motivations and identity performances behind avatar customisation in a fantasy CRPG context, it also opens several avenues for further research. Given the constraints of time, sample size, and project scope, there is considerable potential for future work to extend, deepen, and diversify the findings presented here.

One key area for future research lies in expanding the scale and duration of data collection. A longitudinal study that tracks players across multiple sessions or full playthroughs could provide a richer understanding of how identity performance evolves over time. Observing how players adapt, modify, or reinterpret their avatars in response to narrative events, character progression, or emotional investment would yield valuable insights that go beyond the initial stages of gameplay.

In addition, a larger and more demographically diverse participant pool would allow for more detailed analysis of how age, cultural background, gender identity, and gaming history intersect with avatar design and motivation. These dimensions were touched on in the current study, but a more extensive dataset would allow for comparative and potentially quantitative analyses that could map trends across different subgroups of players.

Another fruitful direction would be to expand the focus beyond the fantasy-medieval setting of *BG3*. While fantasy RPGs offer a well-established framework for identity exploration through race, class, and morality systems, other genres such as science fiction, post-apocalyptic, or cyberpunk may evoke different motivational patterns and identity dynamics. Comparing avatar choices across thematically distinct RPGs could reveal how genre conventions influence player behaviour and self-representation. For instance, the ideological or aesthetic choices in games like *Cyberpunk 2077 (CD Projekt Red, 2020)*, *Mass Effect (BioWare, 2007)*, or *Disco Elysium (ZA/UM, 2019)* may invite different expressions of selfhood, role-play, and moral experimentation than traditional fantasy titles.

Furthermore, future research could explore the social dimension of avatar use in multiplayer or online cooperative RPGs. While this study focused on single-player narrative engagement, multiplayer settings introduce new layers of performance, peer perception, and social signalling. Investigating how players construct and adapt avatars in relation to other real-world players would complement the existing focus on internal motivations and narrative alignment.

Finally, there is room to further explore even more of the unconscious dimensions of player behaviour, particularly through psychoanalytic or neurocognitive frameworks. While the think-aloud method used in this study provided access to players' immediate reasoning, some motivations may operate at a symbolic or affective level that eludes direct articulation. Integrating tools such as biometric feedback, eye-tracking, or deeper psychological profiling could enhance our understanding of the emotional and cognitive investment players have in their avatars.

In sum, future research could broaden the field by studying avatar customisation over longer periods, across different game genres, and within more socially complex contexts. These approaches would help refine our understanding of how players construct meaning through their avatars and how digital identity is shaped not just by individual psychology, but also by genre, culture, and community.

7.4: Recommendations for Improving Avatar Design in Games

Based on the findings from this study of player motivations and behaviours in *Baldur's Gate 3*, the following recommendations outline how RPG developers can refine avatar creation systems to better support identity expression, gameplay engagement, and narrative immersion. These suggestions are grounded in both participant data and relevant theoretical frameworks.

One key recommendation is to support iterative customization and post-creation flexibility. Many players adjusted their avatars during gameplay, with 30.4% of survey respondents reporting changes to appearance or build. To accommodate evolving player identities and strategies, developers should implement in-game re-customization systems that allow for appearance and trait adjustments beyond the initial creation screen. This could be achieved through narrative-justified transformations, such as magical effects or character growth, that explain visual or trait changes within the game world. Additionally, systems that allow for class re-spec and character progression shifts can help players adapt to new gameplay priorities. These features support long-term player agency and reduce the friction between identity experimentation and rigid mechanics, as supported by Nacke and Deterding (2017).

Another important area of improvement is integrating narrative meaning into customization options. Given that 78% of players cited storytelling as a key motivation, character creation should feel meaningfully tied to the game world. Developers can enhance immersion by linking avatar choices, such as race, scars, tattoos, or voice, to origin stories and in-world lore. Opening scenes or early dialogue could be tailored to reflect background choices, while avatar traits could influence how NPCs react or what quests become available. These design strategies align with Bowman's (2018) concept of players as co-authors of narrative and reinforce immersion through character consistency.

Inclusive and intersectional design should also be a central goal of avatar systems. Players in this study used avatars for both self-representation and fantastical exploration. To support this duality, character creators should decouple gender from body type, voice, and pronoun options. A wide range of culturally diverse features, including hairstyles, skin tones, and facial structures, should be included, and diversity should be embedded across all playable races and classes; not just human characters. These inclusive practices align with Da Silva et al. (2018) and Fokides (2017), who emphasise the importance of equitable representation in digital environments.

Developers should also guide player reflection on motivations and playstyle. Many players in the study were only partially aware of their own player types or motivations. Including a short, optional survey or quiz during character creation could help prompt players to reflect on their preferences. Based on these responses, the game could suggest appropriate classes, races, or narrative arcs. Additionally, developers could provide post-session behavioural summaries to show how gameplay aligns with established player categories, such as those outlined in Bartle's taxonomy. These approaches support Bowman's (2012) notion of adaptive player engagement and help players make more intentional choices.

Embedding social identity options within character creation is another way to enhance engagement. Social interaction played a major role in player investment, particularly through companion relationships. Character creators could allow players to define social traits or relational preferences, such as diplomacy, romance, or rivalry, which would then influence dialogue tone and interaction outcomes. Emotional states or

social alignment could also be visually reflected through subtle changes in body language or facial expressions. These features align with research on social play and reflect findings where companion dynamics significantly shaped narrative experience.

Emotional and psychological engagement should also be a design priority. Avatars serve as vessels for identity projection and emotional resonance. Developers can deepen this connection by allowing avatar traits and appearance to evolve based on choices or player behaviour. These systems support Turkle's (1995) framework of identity exploration in digital environments and foster a deeper sense of continuity and emotional investment.

Finally, developers should maximise replayability through customization variety. Participants frequently cited an interest in replaying *Baldur's Gate 3* using different combinations of race, class, and narrative paths. Developers can support this by offering branching storylines, reactive NPC responses, and distinct tactical experiences tied to avatar attributes. Visual and mechanical customization should remain meaningful across multiple playthroughs, encouraging players to explore new strategies and narratives. Replayability is strengthened when avatar design has a lasting impact on gameplay outcomes and narrative direction.

These recommendations aim to help developers build avatar creation systems that reflect the complexity of modern RPG players. By prioritising identity flexibility, narrative integration, and inclusive representation, games can support deeper emotional investment and more satisfying gameplay experiences. Findings from *Baldur's Gate 3* suggest that avatars function not just as visual representations but as dynamic tools for immersion, expression, and engagement.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Pre-Game Survey

Character Customization - Aesthetics and Player Motivation in Baldur's Gate 3

Pre-Game Survey:

Age:

18-25 years [ ]

26-35 years []

36-45 years [ ]

46+ [ ]

Gender:

Male [ ]

Female [ ]

Non-binary [ ]

Prefer not to say/other [ ]

How many years have you been playing video games? [ ]

How many hours do you estimate you have played Baldur's Gate 3 in total? [ ]

Character Customization:

Which race will you choose for your character in Baldur's Gate 3?

Human [ ]

Elf [ ]

Dwarf [ ]

Half-Elf [ ]

Tiefling [ ]

Other: [please specify] [ ]

Which class do you think will you choose for your character?

Fighter [ ]

Wizard [ ]

Rogue [ ]

Cleric [ ]

Ranger [ ]

Other: [please specify] [ ]

Did you like to customize your character's appearance in games?

Strongly Disagree 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Strongly Agree

What aspects do you tend customize? (Check all that apply)

Body type/shape [ ]

Skin colour [ ]

Facial features [ ]

Hairstyle [ ]

Clothing [ ]

Accessories (e.g., jewellery, tattoos) [ ]

Other: [please specify] [ ]

What do you feel influences your character customization choices? (Open-ended)

Do you feel your character represents you in any way?

Yes [ ]

No [ ]

In what ways do you believe your character represents you? (Open-ended)

On a scale of 1 to 5, how much does your character resemble yourself visually?

1 - Not at all

2 - Slightly

3 - Moderately

4 - Very much

5 - Exactly like me

On a scale of 1 to 5, how much does your character resemble your personality or skill set?

1 - Not at all

2 - Slightly

3 - Moderately

4 - Very much

5 - Exactly like me

On a scale of 1 to 5, do you feel your character is you in the game (do their actions reflect yours)?

1 - Not at all

2 - Slightly

3 - Moderately

4 - Very much

5 - Exactly like me

How do you believe your character represent you?

Physical likeness [ ]

Similar personality [ ]

As just an avatar - it simply represents my actions in the game [ ]

Other: [please specify] [ ]

Does your character's appearance influence how you play Baldur's Gate 3?

Yes [ ]

No [ ]

Which of the following most accurately describes how you create a characters looks in RPGs:

I create my character to look like me (or much as I can with the character creator) [ ]

I create my character to be a better version of me in game (stronger, better looking, etc) [ ]

I create my character that is nothing like me so that I can role-play that character (live vicariously) [ ]

I create my character as something interesting to look at (Either interesting or funny or with a theme in mind) [ ]

I care little for how my character looks in the game [ ]

Which of the following most accurately describes how you create characters background, class and stats in RPGs:

I create my character with a background or stats similar to my own (creating a bard because you are a writer or artist, etc) [ ]

I create my character to be a better version of me in game (Making them smarter, more athletic to counter act areas you might feel weaker in your own life.) [ ]

I create my character that has a background/class/stat that is nothing like me so that I can role-play that character (live vicariously/experience something new) [ ]

I create my character with optimised background, class and stats to make sure the gameplay is easier for me (Minimaxing, prioritising gameplay over roleplay or similarly to self) [ ]

I care little for the background, class or stats [ ]

Do you adjust your character's appearance throughout the gameplay?

Yes [ ]

No [ ]

If yes, what prompts you to make adjustments to your character's appearance? (Open-ended)

Do you choose to equip items (clothes, weapons, etc) based on their appearance or their effectiveness? (Open-ended):

Player Motivations:

What aspects of Baldur's Gate 3 do you enjoy the most? (Check all that apply)

Exploration [ ]

Combat [ ]

Role-playing [ ]

Storytelling [ ]

Customization [ ]

Other: [please specify] [ ]

What motivates you to continue playing Baldur's Gate 3? (Open-ended):

What do you feel are the most enjoyable aspects of BG3:

Unlocking new areas and finding loot [ ]

Boss battles [ ]

The immersive nature of the game and the fantasy setting [ ]

The narrative choices [ ]

The upskilling and customization of your character [ ]

Other: [please specify] [ ]

Do you believe character creation impacts your gameplay experience in Baldur's Gate 3?

Yes [ ]

No [ ]

If yes, in what ways does character creation impact your gameplay experience? (Open-ended)

How significant do you perceive the role of avatars in Baldur's Gate 3?

Very significant [ ]

Somewhat significant [ ]

Neutral [ ]

Not significant [ ]

Unsure [ ]

Any additional comments or feedback about your experience with RPG Games? (Open-ended)

Appendix 2. Coding Table

Section	Theme	Files	References
Avatar Usage	Used to connect with NPCs	2	2
Avatar Usage	Avatar as vessel for exploration	2	2
Avatar Usage	Avatar as world anchor	5	5
Avatar Usage	Avatar for role-play	14	18
Avatar Usage	Used to connect to companions	3	3
Familiarity	D&D familiarity	15	18
Familiarity	Reused familiar character	12	14
Character Identification	Player as character guide	1	1
Character Identification	Choices based on character not self	7	9
Character Identification	No similarity to self	2	3
Character Identification	Similarity to self	9	10
Character Identification	Shared personality traits	15	23
Character Identification	Shared visual traits	5	7
Character Identification	Idealized version of self	7	7
Visual Motivation	Self-resembling avatar	7	8
Visual Motivation	Appearance not important	4	4
Visual Motivation	Aesthetic appeal	15	17
Visual Motivation	Fantasy-aligned design	11	12
Visual Motivation	Visuals match pre-imagined concept	22	39
Aesthetic vs Utility	Balanced visual and function	8	9
Aesthetic vs Utility	Did not care about visuals	1	1
Aesthetic vs Utility	Visuals prioritized over utility	6	6
Aesthetic vs Utility	Utility prioritized over visuals	8	12
Character Connection	No emotional connection	2	2
Character Connection	Some emotional connection	3	3
Character Connection	Connection developed over time	4	5
Character Connection	Strong emotional connection	13	16
Game Frustrations	Ugly but optimal gear	1	1
Game Frustrations	Overwhelmed by choices	1	1
Game Frustrations	Wanted more customisation options	22	24

Appendix 3. Participant Avatars