“What will you do?”
Autoethnography on Dialogic Authorship in Role-Playing Game Storytelling

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Abstract

Current theory in role-playing game studies often utilises the author's prior, generalised experience playing and/or creating role-playing games, along with the writings of other theorists as the primary bedrock for their analysis, developing helpful and broadly applicable theory which benefits discussions in fields such as psychology, technology studies, cultural studies, narrative studies, and game studies. I aim to develop the conversation on role-playing games as narratives and cultural practices by directly examining play sessions, with the aim of capturing granular processes which may be skipped, under-perceived, or disregarded in high-level analysis of the RPG medium and fandom.

I utilised autoethnographic techniques to ground the thesis in my lived experience as a player, game-master, and participant in fandom subculture. Utilising structured journaling and online discourse, I analysed narratives, perspectives and behaviours implicated in play within the *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Cyberpun*k franchises. During analysis, I explore the concept of 'Dialogic Authorship'- the idea that the narratives of these RPGs are not pre-existing but rather created moment-to-moment from the interactions between players and developers- be this directly or by proxy of game content. Such a framing illuminates the authorial capacities of players, and the implications fandom subculture often has in the final experience of story that the player takes away from a given play session, campaign, or playthrough.

My findings illuminated processes where developers and players were allies in storytelling who engaged in back-and-forth dialogues responding to authorial inputs, especially where the TTRPG and CRPG medium differed. I explore the interplay between formal and imaginative story content, the ways in which the framing of player-characters interplay with the differing methods of different players and especially examine the implications of fandom subculture on the ongoing construction and reconstruction of narrative storytelling in these titles.

Keywords

Role-playing games, Narrative Studies, Fandom Studies, Autoethnography, Video Games, Tabletop Games

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Thank you to my family and other loved ones, who have supported me emotionally over a transformative half-decade of my life. This thesis is a testament to the many hours of fun spent throwing dice in my living room or whiling away the nights over a discord call with my beloved friends; may this paper stand as proof of the treasured memories we have made and will surely continue to make together.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

1: Introduction

Proliferated by researchers with varied scholarly backgrounds, academic interest in role-playing games (RPGs) has been significant and sustained over the past 40+ years.

Early research into RPGs examined from a sociological perspective, such as Fine's 1983 ethnography 'Shared Fantasy', which established that role-playing games could be considered the foundations of a growing subculture, distinct from the 'wargaming' hobby from which early RPGs emerged (p.8). Later studies such as Mackay's 'A new performing art' (2001) examined RPG aesthetics as a growing art-form alongside their cultural workings. In the years since, fields such as literature (Cover, 2010) and technology studies (Bienia, 2018) have become implicated in RPG studies, especially with the increased proliferation of digitised RPG titles since the time of Fine's ethnography. Barton and Stacks (2019) note that "...1985 was a boom year…" , tracking through the late 90s and early 2000s, where titles like 'Fallout' (1997) and 'Baldur's Gate' (1998) exemplified a "Platinum age" for the medium.

A number of journals and collected texts are dedicated to RPGs, including 'A Transmedia Approach' (ed. Zagal & Deterding, 2018), 'Role-Playing Games in the Digital Age' (ed. Hedge & Grouling, 2021), and the 'International Journal of Role-playing Game Studies' (2008-2024). RPG studies is thus firmly established and broad; The RPG medium, itself significantly variable in form, can be considered through a multitude of lenses.

This thesis contributes to the academic conversation on RPGs through the lenses of storytelling and fandom, utilising autoethnographic techniques. Specifically, multiplayer tabletop RPGs (TTRPGs) and single-player computer RPGs (CRPGs) are the focus of this thesis.

I recorded and analysed specific instances of observed gameplay and queried the greater fandom subculture that surrounds such gameplay, developing our granular understanding of how RPG stories are constructed, delivered, and interpreted by game developers, game players, game systems, and the intersection of the three. Beyond examining the game-as-text, this thesis examines the ways the players and developers use game-mechanical and game-narrative content to mediate a process of collaborative authorship. In doing so, both parties are also acting within, and responding to long–established 'gaming' subcultures. This could be on the level of the general 'gaming' hobby, the player-cultures of TTRPGs and/or CRPGs specifically, and/or the fandoms of individual titles and franchises. All of these levels of subculture provide essential mentorship, models of behaviour and understanding, and spaces for ongoing interpretation and modification of these games and their

stories. I refer to the ongoing narrative-creative conversations which take place between players and developers during play and amidst fandom communities as “Authorial Dialogues”, and the story-writing process that results from them can be called “Dialogic Authorship”.

The uniting research question for this thesis is simple, aiming to enquire broadly using autoethnographic techniques to further develop the current academic conversation surrounding the topic. Overall, this thesis seeks to explore how contemporary players and developers collaborate in a form of authorial dialogue in the construction of role-playing game stories.

1.1: Justification

Whilst current theory discusses RPGs richly, including through the narrative and social lenses this thesis engages with, there is space for further development regarding considerations of RPG players as active participants in story authorship, including the enactment, interpretation, arrangement, modification and outright creation of narrative components. This lack is especially true with regards to CRPGs, where the player’s role in narrative construction is less explored beyond more generically applicable game-narrative studies. This section will dissect the context and reasoning behind this enquiry.

There is an established background of theory which firmly acknowledges that some level of active participation on the player’s part is inherently necessary to realise the meaning of the RPGs as texts. White et al (2018) provide their “presentation of [tabletop role-playing games] as a coherent form as largely reliant…” upon Espen Aarseth’s concept of the ‘Ergodic Text’ (1997)- the idea that certain kinds of texts require “nontrivial effort… to allow the reader to traverse the text” (Aarseth, 1997).

White Et Al. create links with Aarseth’s writing, which primarily focuses on Cybertexts (a concept which focuses on the “mechanical organisation of text” where “the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange”; an early attempt to reconcile with new digital forms of storytelling). MacKay (2001) also makes mention of Aarseth’s work.
“This performativity underscores the complexity and interactivity of the author audience relationship by blurring the distinction between the two and establishing multiple circuits of textual production & interpretation.” That is, even if variance in such inputs does not result in formally distinct narrative experiences, the mere unfolding of narrative is predicated upon ‘nontrivial effort’ by a player, and thus the player is inextricable from the realisation of the text.

These ideas can also be applied to CRPGs, or indeed all video games; even early studies, which "defined them from the perspective of gameplay mechanics" (Schules, Peterson & Picard, 2018) acknowledge that as texts, CRPGs rely on player input to become realised, such as through some manner of controller. This can be linked to the conceptualisation of games, especially digital games, as 'state machines'- "a machine that has an initial state, accepts a certain number of input events, changes in response to inputs using an output function." (Juul, 2004). In other words, the very premise of navigating stories via digital rule systems requires (at least nominal) input from a user in order for the text's narrative meanings to emerge from its computer code.

This is only the most basic form of player involvement in game-narratives acknowledged in current theory. Mackay defines (tabletop) RPGs as "episodic and participatory story-creation system[s] [with] quantified rules that assist a group of players and a gamemaster in determining how their fictional characters'... interactions are resolved" (Mackay, 2001, p4-5). Peterson similarly describes a "dialogue-based format" (2018) for table-top RPGs as reliant on social processes to create and deliver a story. In other words, existing theory already understands that these TTRPGs are not self-contained narrative texts, but toolsets explicitly designed to assist the authorship of partially or wholly original stories by mediating the social interactions of players through gameplay systems.

The complete meaning of these TTRPGs cannot be unpacked without the presence and engagement of the player, who is always an active participant in the enactment and interpretation of the game's narrative meaning, and in many formats is directly involved with the creation of formal narrative elements such as characters, worlds, and plot. Such participation in narrative creation is thoroughly explored in TTRPG-focused papers, but is less considered in CRPG theory. White et al describe TTRPG players as engaging in "tertiary authorship"; so-called in comparison to the "secondary authorship of the gamemaster as story-builder or scenario-writer, who mediates the primary authorship of the game designer as world-builder and rules-maker." (White Et Al, 2018). With tabletop RPGs, "the game itself as a form does not lie in interacting with the text as a reader; it is instead realised through the act of playing with the text as players, and players and game-masters (GMs) have considerable flexibility in interpreting and making the game world for their own use." (Wee, 2024). Scholars such as Schrier, Torner & Hammer, (2018) and Stewert & Trammel, (2018) discuss similar 'co-creative' concepts elsewhere in the 'A Transmedia Approach' collated text (ed. Zagal and Deterding, 2018). The concept of TTRPG as collective creativity is long-standing, appearing in ethnographies like 'Shared Fantasy' (Fine, 1983), which views the medium as "Players and Referees collectively constructing history and biography"; indeed, Fine was among the first to acknowledge that TTRPGs (then 'Fantasy

RPGs') were the centre of a distinct subcultural practise, a hobbyist fandom community with its own wisdoms, turns of phrase, and models of best practise.

For CRPGs, with more recent studies "the emphasis on mechanics [has] receded as other elements, such as story, rose to prominence" (Schules, Peterson & Picard, 2018). However, despite the increased attention on CRPGs as storytelling media, there is seemingly less consideration in current CRPG-specific theory for how players participate in story-authorial behaviours in comparison to the TTRPG space. I speculate that this may be due to the relative visibility of a player's contributions to the story of a single-player CRPG; in TTRPGs, players contribute formal narrative elements in a visible, social manner in front of an audience of their peers. In CRPGs, which are a rigid format where new narratives elements are difficult to formally incorporate without some degree of a game development skillset, it is easier to assume that the totality of the game's possible narratives come pre-prepared within the game's code, be that explicitly or as the logical consequence of overlapping rules and content- an 'emergent' possibility (Juul, 2004). Any new narrative elements a CRPG player can present to others thus reads as fan-fictive rather than as incorporated with pre-made elements within text. Far more are only expressed by the player to themselves within their imagination, never becoming visible to an outside audience or registered by the game's code.

As an example, CRPGs such as 'Cyberpunk 2077' (CD Projekt Red, 2020) never ask the player to define their player-character's sexuality in formal code-based terms yet allow avenues for the player's ability to contribute this narrative detail by imagining the character's internal world. For instance, a male version of the player-character ('V') in '2077' romancing the female love interest Panam Palmer at least suggests that said character is attracted to women. However, the player can choose to interpret their V- purely through imagination- as heterosexual, bi/pansexual, asexual or even homosexual, all of which reshape the narrative significance behind V and Panam's romantic and sexual interactions throughout the story. The game never reflects or recognises this aspect of the player's imagined narrative, yet these details nonetheless are a part of the player's experiential narrative. Thus, the player's imaginative interpretation of on-screen details, whilst absent from the game text, are nonetheless contributed to the game's story in a way that can be considered a co-creative act.

However, since CRPGs are simultaneously Role-playing games and video games, theory from general game and video game studies can be applied comfortably to CRPG analysis; this is thus an essential avenue of exploration for bridging the gap between CRPG and TTRPG theory within this thesis.

One such concept is 'emergence'- what Juul describes as "the primordial game structure, where a game is specified as a small number of rules that combine and yield large numbers of game variations…" (Juul, 2004). When applied to game-narrative contexts, scholars reach the oft-discussed concept of "Emergent Storytelling' which "tends to be described very loosely as the player's experience of the game" (Pearce, 2004), or "the stories that the players can tell about the game." (Juul, 2004). In other words, 'Emergent narrative' acknowledges that game-narrative elements (such as character, worldbuilding, or plot beats) can- and indeed often do by design- result from the varied inputs a player provides, and the subsequent reactions the game's overlapping rule systems can create. Whilst authors like Juul, Jenkins (2002), and Salen and Zimmerman (2003) most commonly link this concept to open-ended systemic games like The Sims (2000), other recent authors such as Sierra (2021) link the concept to typical forms of CRPG play; Sierra describes how narrative elements present in 'The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim' (2011) combines "The threads of [their] own choices… with specific game systems…" to create narrative moments that feel personal to their specific playthrough. Whilst Sierra considers this to be an "illusion of agency for players", I would instead argue that such emergence grants (at minimum) more experienced players some degree of actual narrative-authorial agency (to be explored further, see sections 2 & 4). In other words, this thesis takes the stance that information and expertise of a game's possibility space convert uncertain outcomes into certain ones, and thus players who are aware of the potential outcomes of various decisions or strategies in a given game gain increased power to decisively 'select' an outcome- with this, comes greater authority over the game's final narrative.

Large parts of this thesis will link this play between knowledge and authorial power to fandom subcultures, which disseminate expertise and tools which similarly inform and empower players to become more definitively authorial in their engagements with developers (be that directly in conversation with a TTRPG GM, or via the game's digital content in a CRPG).

It is therefore accurate to say that a complete understanding of the underpinning mechanics of game-narrative (including the RPGs this thesis analyses) intrinsically necessitates consideration of the player's role in narrative production. This is thoroughly acknowledged within TTRPG and Video Game scholarship, with room for further research concerning CRPGs specifically.

1.1.1: Abstraction versus Observation

RPG studies are "characterised by intense para-academic scholarship and aca-fandom." (Zagal and Deterding, 2018, p9)- as such, many texts share the approach of an abstracted perspective which examines these games based on the author/s' long-developed expertise. When personal expertise of a medium becomes the primary source for discussion and analysis of said medium, the academic focuses on the most memorable, novel, significant, or common observations they can draw from said experience. This paradoxically means that such fandom academia can become depersonalised from granular moment-to-moment experiences which may be barely perceptible or easily forgotten in the 'big picture' of analysis of a title or medium.

Such depersonalisation helps to develop widely applicable theory for understanding a particular subset of games from specific angles, and in doing so establish firm theoretical foundations for any academic or creative working in said medium, free from the quirks and eccentricities- in other words, idiocultural practises- a specific individual player or group of players may bring to the act of play and thus the resulting narrative.

Consequently, few of these texts refer specifically to recorded instances of actual play, and as such there is room for further consideration of phenomena that may be missed or sidelined as improper or edge-case behaviours, in order to make room for broad analyses of the medium of 'games' or 'RPGs' or a subset thereof, including the role and behaviour of a nonspecific 'player'.

For example, "Worldbuilding in role-playing games" (Schrier Torner & Hammer, 2018) provides valuable insights into how the storytelling concept of world-building applies in the context of RPGs, including considerations on transmedia storytelling (p.353). However, when discussing the co-creativity of player participation in worldbuilding, authorial dialogues are expressed plainly as "every game is to some extent a co-creation between player and designer", in order to spring into a more rigid discussion of specific kinds of RPGs which more explicitly "balance their world building aspects between players and designers". There remains room to further discuss the granular worldbuilding that a TTRPG or CRPG player may participate in- be this formally, socially, or merely imaginatively. Players of systems that are not explicitly designed as exercises in worldbuilding through play, such as 'Dungeons & Dragons' (Crawford et al, 2014) still, in practice, regularly participate in an ongoing worldbuilding process.

Some more recent RPG studies texts, such as “If it’s held dear…” by Kellyn Wee (2024), are beginning to explore this space, examining cultural practices and meanings which permeate gameplay and game-narrative authorship, yet are absent from the game-as-text and thus from textual analysis. “Viewing (TTRPGs) merely as a textual artifact does not account for how the player becomes a co-creator of meaning through interacting with and transforming the game as a form of media” (Wee, 2024). Observing play directly in a holistic, granular manner allows us to better appreciate the rich array of cultural meanings that permeate through the experience.

Thus, in order to understand game-narratives as constructed and delivered by RPGs, this thesis analyses the actual behaviour of real players and the actual narratives they construct and experience through play alongside game developers and game masters, who are more often ascribed traditional authorial power. This thesis aims to understand both the free-form, socially constructed narratives of tabletop RPGs (TTRPGs) and the firmly code-based single-player computer RPGs (CRPGs) using such techniques. In doing so, I aimed to illuminate novel, personal, proprietary or invisible practices, biases, tools and influencing factors that cannot be accounted for by writing from the perspective of a purely textual understanding of a diverse medium.

1.1.2: Fandom

Such complexities do not appear spontaneously; early RPG ethnographies including ‘Shared Fantasy’ (Fine, 1983) explore that players do not exist within a cultural vacuum; that RPGs are a cultural practice as well as media artefacts. The experience of RPG narrative is thus affected, contextualised, molded, or outright facilitated by the player’s participation in gaming subcultures. This is well established in RPG fandom studies- “Early studies examined the tabletop RPG (TRPG) in terms of their players and history (Holmes, 1981) Sociality (Fine, 1983), and as a performative text (MacKay, 2001). These perspectives are important because they placed the early analysis of RPGs firmly within a sociological framework, focusing on the players and the contexts of play.” (Stewart & Trammell, 2018)

In other words, gaming subculture grants each participant subcultural values, vocabulary, and tools which can be as essential to the experience of a given game-story as the game’s text itself. Whilst the practice has certainly evolved with the advent of the online, there is a rich history of fandom context playing a palpable role within the game itself. Fandom studies into TTRPGs, for example, have already illuminated commonplace practises which have significant effects on the materiality, meaning, gameplay and narratives of given titles. Nicholas J Mizer, for example, discusses that “For many gamers, attending a convention exposes them to a much wider diversity of gaming styles than their

more insular home games… As one convention-goer... related to me, “you realize.. when you… play at other DM’s tables… none of us are actually playing the same game as far as rules.” Once exposed to a new game, style, or technique, gamers take those experiences back to their home groups.” (2019)

Even those RPG players who have not engaged with RPG subcultural spaces and discussions- such as newcomers to the hobby- grant credence to the idea that such subculture affects play and narrative. Their lack of initiation into the RPG as cultural practices in and of itself presents itself in varied behaviours and emotional relationships to the text; sections 5.3 and 6.3 explore how the subculture works to mentor such newcomers into more informed, ‘optimal’, and enjoyable methods of play.

When framing this thesis as combining the considerations of recorded behaviour within a specific hobby and the subcultural context such hobbyists exist within, the solution of ethnographic techniques becomes a clear fit for this line of analysis. This thesis aims to understand the role of players and developers as participants in creating game-narratives. Since such authorship is inherently implicated in subcultural practices, doing so necessitates an inquiry of “proverbs, virtues and values, rituals, mentors, artifacts.” (Chang, 2008) which permeate RPG subculture and thus shape the subcultural practice of RPG narrative authorship. By understanding the language, mentorship, and discourse present in RPG subculture, I in turn better understand the methods and meanings that underscore my own experiences of participating in dialogic story authorship via RPGs.

Given that I, the researcher, came to this thesis already an established member of RPG gaming subculture, Autoethnography becomes an obvious choice. This thesis is an analysis of my own cultural perspectives, an act of “aca-fandom” (Zagal & Deterding, 2018), and as such my perspective is affected by subcultural constructed frameworks of meaning-making which I have participated in for several decades. Since autoethnography “shares the storytelling feature with other genres of self-narrative but transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation” (Chang, 2008, p43) this technique assisted me in identifying and critically examining commonplace behaviours myself or close friends engaged in. Such behaviours may well have been fundamental to the construction of the stories we/I authored and experienced narratives may have seemed obvious to me/us, extraneous to the game itself, personal, or subjective. Such regarding of these behaviours as resulted in exclusion, abstraction or simplification from a more textual understanding of the RPG medium. The detailed self-analysis and cultural understandings forefronted by autoethnography will allow me to comb my RPG-narrative experience for granular details present in the actions and meanings that form components of narrative meaning, especially those which would otherwise be less visible to an academic perspective focused on the broad strokes of the medium’s workings, or

purely textual analysis of a given title. More information regarding autoethnographic methods can be found in section 3.

In summary, this thesis contributes to an ongoing conversation of how players are co-creative participants in the storytelling processes that RPGs facilitate. By utilising autoethnographic techniques of going 'into the field' and examining the workings of narrative creation as play activity and as cultural practice, this thesis bridges the gap between the depersonalised perspectives of many more textual understandings of the RPG medium and the informal experience of storytelling that players engage with in their daily lives.

1.2: Thesis Outline

The thesis will proceed as follows.

Section 2 (Literature Review) establishes the current theory in game, role-playing game and fandom studies that underpin the context and language this thesis is built upon. Links are made to general game-narrative theory and existing ethnographic studies in the RPG space, and major epistemological stances are explored and declared.

Section 3 (Methodology) describes my investigation of four key artefacts: two tabletop role-playing games (hereafter "TTRPG"), *Dungeons and Dragons* (5th Ed., 2014; hereafter "*D&D"* or "*D&D 5E"*) and *Cyberpunk:RED (2020)* (hereafter "RED"); and two computer role-playing games (hereafter "CRPG"), *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023) (hereafter "*BG3*") and *Cyberpunk:2077* (2021) (hereafter "*2077*"). My data collection was divided into three stages: Understanding Game Systems (3.1), Cultural Analysis (3.2), and Systematic Self-Observation (3.3), analysed using a cyclical autoethnographic process incorporating reflexive thematic analysis. Section 3 explains all three stages in detail in their own sub-section, outlining data collection strategies, the formats of relevant documents, and quantities of participants and data collection sessions.

Section 4 (Exploration of Themes) shows the results of my analysis as three distinct themes, titled:

1. Varied Experiences From Variable Avatars
2. Cyclical Authorial Dialogues
3. Informative Discourse Culture

These themes come together to develop an understanding of RPG play as a creative and subcultural practice, uniting ludic, narrative, and fandom frames.

Section 5 (TTRPG Analysis) discusses these themes in relation to TTRPGS.

Section 6 (CRPG Analysis) discusses these themes in relation to CRPGS.

Section 7 (Conclusion) unites both wings of analysis into a coherent understanding of Dialogic Authorship, finalising the defining traits which underpin both mediums and fundamental differences between the two, before exploring where further research could develop these ideas.

2: Literature review

In recent years, role-playing game studies have "exploded to the point where… new publications [are] difficult to track" (Bowman, White, & Torner, 2024); as such, it is impossible for this literature review to provide a holistic overview of RPG studies available at the time of writing. Instead, I will focus on the relevant parts of the theoretical foundations that align with/are productive to this thesis' framing as an autoethnography on RPGs as a narrative storytelling medium and cultural practise. After all, "In a maturing field the literature is extensive enough to build upon itself." (Bowman, White, & Torner, 2024). Texts from game, technology, and general fandom studies will also be implicated where appropriate for analysis and completeness of understanding.

2.1: Considerations and vocabulary

It may seem pertinent to provide a formal definition of 'role-playing games'; Zagal and Deterding, however, dedicate a chapter to the complexity of this endeavour; "For some, defining "game" is a hopeless task (Parlett 1999)... Still, we use the word "game" every day… [this] holds doubly for "role-playing games."...[RPGs] are maybe the most contentious game phenomenon: the exception, the outlier, the not-quite-a-game game" (2024). They point to examples such as Juul (2003) or Salen and Zimmerman (2004) to explore how RPGs are typically regarded as edge-cases in game studies.
They continue, exploring how this muddied sense of definition is furthered by the plurality of RPG forms- Tabletop, Computer, Live-action, etc.

Despite this difficulty, it is important to explore the grounds on which I delineate the topical focus of this thesis; Instead of declaring one or multiple essential RPG characteristics, a suitable autoethnographic approach would be to align with soft-bordered cultural understandings; "scholars have recently made good arguments that games are social (or sociomaterial) entities (Montola 2012; Deterding 2013; Stenros 2015). Arguably, RPGs foreground this social constitution…" (Zagal & Deterding, 2024).

There is a distinct multiplicity to RPG play; even one feature alone such as the player-character can be understood as one of many separate psychological orientations; they may be a gameplay object, a self-representation or alternate self, or a performative other; all of these distinct experiences can co-exist within the possibility space of a single title (Bowman & Schrier, 2018). "...fans and designers have long observed… different styles and ends of playing RPGs… storytelling, playing a role, simulating a world, or achieving goals… openness to divergent enactment seems characteristic of RPGs." (Zagal

& Deterding, 2024) To say that RPGs are especially suited to or defined by one experience or feature supposes that all experiences which are called RPGs represent a selected characteristic/s; said chapter does go to great lengths to identify non-exhaustive lists of commonly perceived characteristics of RPG forms; for example, CRPGs often demonstrate "In-game events are usually guided along a preplanned plot…" or "extensive rules for combat"; and indeed, this text can assist this thesis in identifying core mechanics, dynamics or aesthetics that underpin these formats.

However, since this thesis does not aim to make sweeping judgements on the fundamental features that define RPGs (but rather the social, cultural, and ludic practise of story-authorship), it is more important to draw on cultural-perceptive, rather than academic-deductive, understandings of what is and is not an RPG. Rather than creating an academic argument that my chosen artefacts exemplify the RPG genre, their belonging to the RPG genre is taken to be self-evident within the fact that self-identified RPG fandom spaces accept, practise, and discuss these artefacts: this thesis considers the defining feature of an RPG to be that they are referred to as RPGs by RPG fandoms.

2.1.1: Framing GMs

An important epistemological stance to decide upon before proceeding with this study is thus; are 'Game masters' (henceforth 'GMs' or 'DMs') more akin to game developers or game players? Whilst not a research question in and of itself, this question frames much of the analysis pertaining to the TTRPG portion of the study, given the core research question explores how players and developers collaborate.

This thesis makes its analysis upon the presumption that GMs are a form of game developer more so than they are a form of player; that they are a/the architect of the world, the referee of play, and a/the prime creative force.

However, the wording of the rulebooks of my chosen artefacts suggests ambiguity. The D&D Player's Handbook implies the DM is a kind of elevated player: "One player… takes on the role of the Dungeon Master (DM), the game's lead storyteller and referee" (Crawford, 2014, p5) However, The Dungeon Master's guide, explains: "The… (DM) is the creative force behind a D&D game… [they] wear many hats… architect… storyteller… actor… referee…". (Crawford, 2014, p4) Similarly, Cyberpunk RED's rulebook refers to the GM and Players as separate, collaborating positions: "The GM uses the background of the game to devise plots into which they place the Players' Characters… the Players and GM create a story together." (Pondsmith, 2020, p22-23) This reflects the core framework of this thesis that story in RPGs emerges from dialogues between a creative force and players. Jenkins writes: "Performance theorists have described RPGs as a mode of collaborative storytelling, but the

Dungeon Master's activities start with designing the space… where the players' quest will take place" (2002, np). Jenkins was forefronting the importance of spatiality, but for my discussion here I assume both statements are true: RPGs are collaborative stories, and the DM provides context to contain the story.

Fine notes that "Rules are imposed on players by the game's developers" (1983), but I disagree. The principles of 'Homebrew' speaks to the fact that DMs can author their own TTRPG systems and fictional worlds, or they can utilise or modify an existing one - one needn't view GMs as beneath the rulebook in terms of storytelling authority. Instead, I view choosing a system as the first creative choice DMs make, a selection of their core toolkit, just as a computer programmer may select tools such as the game's engine or programming languages. Most TTRPG rulebooks present a combination of Setting- the "fictional background", and System "The procedures by which elements in the fiction are introduced, modified, changed, or removed." (White et al, 2018). More plainly, the choice of core rule system a DM selects presents both a foundation for the game's fiction as well as set of game mechanics which resolve the player and DM's inputs into the said fiction during play sessions. Since the DM can choose to forego, modify, or replace any amount of either of these two elements, we can consider the DM as a creative force with authority over both the game's design and fiction. Therefore, when investigating TTRPGs, I consider myself as the DM as performing a role that is more like a Developer than a Player for the purposes of my cross-referential investigation.

2.2: RPG Ethnographies & other cultural studies

Of considerable relevance to this thesis is the examination of existing ethnographies and autoethnographies concerning RPG fandoms. Existing papers tend to study a subset of RPG players, focusing on a specific subgenre (TTRPG, CRPG, MMORPG).

2.2.1: TTRPG ethnography

There is a rich history of examining the cultural practices of TTRPG players; Fine's 1983 ethnography on fantasy role-players (today called TTRPG players) is considered a 'seminal work' by White et al, described as a "broad understanding of fantasy role playing that had appeared in many early gaming magazines" (2018). Fine identifies many of the core cultural workings of TTRPG culture that are associated with the format to this day, such as having regular meeting times with a regular group of friends, fandom slang, and the development of etiquette and best practices. Fine identified that play communities are spaces of cultural and practical exchange, defined by a sense of mutual mentorship- a key cultural implication in my autoethnography.

This establishes a history of studying RPG play as a craft, a practice, not simply a form of media consumption, with behaviours influenced and facilitated by cultural frames beyond the game-as-text. Fine notes the existence of a 'Caller' in some play groups- who "announces to the referee the collective action of the party (...leader)"; a behaviour not commonly noted in modern TTRPG spaces, as evidenced by viewing popular 'live-play' series or the lack of comparable behaviours noted in my data or more recent ethnographies (Reta, 2020; Wee, 2024). Another discrepancy can be noted in the fact that virtual TTRPG playspaces such as Roll20 (Wolves of Freeport, 2012) or Discord (2015) are currently popular, a phenomenon Fine could not observe in the 1980s.

Slang is overall demonstrable of this simultaneous datedness and timelessness. Some terminology is limited to Fine's time and place, (1980s USA) such as 'Monty Hall' ("generous referee", named for a popular TV presenter), is seemingly absent from the fandom I observed (2020s UK / english-speaking online forums). Other terms such as 'NPC' survive in modern vernacular.

I extrapolate, then, that the practices Fine examined are no longer completely applicable to this thesis' publication; 'Shared Worlds' is foundational, but I require more recent ethnographic insights. TTRPG ethnography seems popular amongst PG theses and dissertations. Jose Reta's ''Tell Us About Your Character" (2020) is an autoethnographic MA thesis examining RPGs, chiefly TTRPG, through lenses of decolonisation, self, and queer theory. Whilst both are RPG-Autoethnographies, this thesis and my own differ significantly in methods within this umbrella. Reta's focus lies in real-world concepts of identity as implicated in RPG play, drawing into focus that my own individual identity is less central to my autoethnography. Whilst there were opportunities to explore self-identity, such as with my player-characters Thokk and V as a means of performing genders and sexualities, I focus instead on my understanding of fandom culture, rather than my ethnic or queer cultural experiences. This clarity on the minutiae of my methods and approach are valuable for framing and molding my research methods.

More directly relevant is Claudia Hall's 2015 autoethnography on 'Tabletop role-playing game characters'. Focusing on TTRPG characters (more specific than RPG narratives in general), Hall successfully introduces a number of data collection strategies that could potentially develop this thesis' understanding if not for time restraints, such as interviews with other players. Hall also implicates mythology and psychology theory in her analysis, whereas I focus on narrative theory. We are united in our sociological angle, although Hall focuses more on personae than authorial dialogues.

Published during the writing of this thesis, Kellyn Wee's ethnography on D&D play communities 'If it's held dear, it'll get pushed through' (2024) shares a number of essential similarities with the approach I take with this thesis; chief among those is that "Viewing the game merely as a textual

artifact does not account for how the player becomes a co-creator of meaning through interacting with and transforming the game…". (Wee, 2024). Wee discusses what they call 'soft canon'; "an approach to shared world-making that prioritises the emotional resonance of narrative details over a positivist accounting of narrative events." (Wee, 2024) in doing so, they illuminate an essential truth about TTRPG authorial dialogues; that TTRPG players do not author by decisively declaring narrative details, but collectively experimenting with ideas on the fly; "exploring narrative possibility as much as narrative actualisation" (Wee, 2024). This authorship-by-negotiation is an essential concept for this thesis' analysis.

The publication of Wee's paper during the writing of this thesis provides credence for the academic relevance and timeliness of the approach and aims I employ. Wee's research motivations lie in her identification of similar research gaps to those which prompted this thesis; namely, that the consideration for fandom epistemologies and behaviours in the process of constructing story information "remains under-researched".

Wee's strategy of examining actual instances of play as a first-hand observer in spaces designated as subcultural meeting points is fundamentally similar to my own strategy of analysing the play sessions of TTRPGs and CRPGs in their subcultural, often interpersonal contexts. On a more granular level, her data collection strategy of keeping a field journal- something recommended explicitly by Chang (2008)- is similar to my own field journal, which takes the form of structured journal entries (see section 3.2).

There are some details that set "If it's held dear…" apart from my own thesis, most notably the chosen dataset. Wee examines exclusively D&D, whereas I examine an additional TTRPG (Cyberpunk: RED) as well as a pair of CRPGs. Wee ethnographically examined "a play studio in Singapore… run by professional, paid GMs" (2024) as an outside observer. Conversely, I **auto**ethnographically examined my own play experiences as a game master and player, a context that is distinctly more personal and amateur than Wee's "Professional, paid GMs". It is also important to acknowledge that Wee observed Singaporean D&D players, whilst my players and I are British.

2.2.2: Digital RPG ethnography

Most ethnographic or otherwise cultural enquiries into digital RPGs center 'massively-multiplayer online' spaces (MMOs), as these persistent online worlds forefront the socio-cultural interactions of players during moment-to-moment play and broader cultural events and values. Indeed, Reta (2020)

seemingly conflates the term 'CRPG' with 'MMORPG', using the former to describe games where players "become members of… large convocations of like-minded players" (p.5), sidelining single-player RPGs. There seems to be a popular perception that playing a single-player CRPG is "more about… the prewritten script… character… mastering the potential of the game" , that players are "successful… when [they] overcome the obstacles of the game environment, not when [they tell] a compelling story" (Hall, 2015). As a result, ethnographic research on CRPGs seemingly leans towards MMORPGs, such as 'Play Between Worlds' (Taylor, 2006); as if single-player CRPGs are unsuited to ethnography.

The guidebook 'Ethnography and virtual worlds' (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012) grants legitimacy to my broadly ethnographic methods, but is similarly focused on multi-user persistent environments (IE World of Warcraft, Second Life, Everquest), making its relevance to this thesis tangential; it does offer some support to general ethnographic advice, but generally the text is less useful to this thesis than general fan-studies.

Beyond strictly ethnographic enquiries, fields such as HCI have examined narrative-authorial behaviours in MMOs, as explored by Gustafsson, Helmersen and Mackay (2021).
By virtue of their more social authorial process, MMORPG narrative-studies demonstrate similar perspectives to TTRPG narrative-studies, moreso than the storytelling of single-player CRPGs, despite the digital element. Indeed, Gustafsson Et Al. use virtual tabletop programs (VTTs) as a part of their methodology. Drawing on this, I understand that the most fundamental difference between the storytelling of my TTRPG and CRPG artefacts is not the distinction between the tabletop or digital platforms, but rather the distinction between isolated and sociable play sessions.

In TTRPGs, we understand that the conversations between players create shared imaginative worlds/characters; the role of rules-based elements is to add structure and mediation to the outcome of player actions. In a solo environment the RPG player is not taking part in an immediately social conversation; this does **not** mean, however, that the player is not performing story-authorial behaviours or engaging in a cultural process.

Ultimately, it seems that single-player CRPGs are underexamined as-subcultural-practice by current ethnographies, unlike MMORPGs or TTRPGs. There is an acknowledgement that "There are gamespaces, communities, and games beyond MMOs that have yet to be explored by anthropology." (Ruelos, 2018), and single-player CRPGs are seemingly a critical example. Even beyond RPG studies, ethnography on digital games naturally trends towards online experiences, persistent shared worlds,

and other multi-user environments (Law, 2016) (Pearce, 2006) where social exchanges, and thus cultural behaviours, can be clearly observed in moment-to-moment interactions.
It seems the nature of solo-play limits consideration of how these isolated players act within cultural networks and meanings; this can be remedied by synthesising game studies with fandom studies, which succeeds in understanding cultural networks formed even around media often consumed alone.

2.3: Fandom Studies

Tangential to ethnography is fandom studies, a field which aims to understand the behaviours of fandom groups; this could be considered a specific form of ethnography or a separate but related field. 'Textual Poachers' (Jenkins 1992) is seminal within Fandom Studies; Jenkins defines much of the foundations for academic insight into fandom subcultures, utilising prominent examples such as the 'Star Trek' fandom. Jenkins narrates the public transition from derogatory to accepting perceptions of fandom, legitimised by the proliferation of fandom spaces (conventions, zines, clubs and groups).

The text proceeds to introduce concepts of participatory culture and fans 'poaching' their favoured media; "Fan culture stands as an open challenge to… dominant cultural hierarchies... authorial authority and… intellectual property" (Jenkins 1992). It is in this way that Jenkins can inform our understanding of the role of RPG players as co-authors of narrative, by highlighting "fans as active producers and manipulators of meanings" (Jenkins 1992) beyond ludic interaction; "CRPG players cannot move past the limitations placed on the game" (Reta, 2020), but by 'poaching' said CRPG, fandoms access storytelling agency beyond passive consumption.

Discussing the works of De Certeau, Jenkins highlights that "fans lack direct access to the means of commercial cultural production", yet still hold power to contribute to story authorship through "organized efforts to influence" media-making companies "some successful, most ending in failure" (Jenkins, 1992). For example, new endings were added to Baldur's Gate 3 "in response to fan feedback" (Micheal Douse, 2025). Authorial power here still rests with the 'developers', who merely allow fandom influence over their creative output.
Players maintain direct authorial power, however, in the process of reading, to "promote their own meanings" (Jenkins, 1992) of a given text, even those misaligned with the original authorial intent. Jenkins points to 1980s feminist readings and fan-fiction of Star Wars which "assert the rights of fan writers to revise… to draw… from dominant culture… to produce underground art" (1992). He

elaborates “meanings fans produce [are not] always oppositional ones or… made in isolation from other social factors” (1992). Fan interpretation and re-production occurs in parallel, not merely opposition, to official production, being a process that is simultaneously individual (each reader’s imagination) and collective (discourse, dissemination of fandom and fan-fictive materials). This lends credence to methodically approaching fandom discourse spaces as a means of understanding story-authorial behaviours.

‘Poachers’ (1992) does not self-identify as ethnography, yet Jenkins often refers directly to recorded instances of fandom discourse- zines, letters, conventions- as a data source for the articulation of his arguments. In 2014, Jenkins took inventory of the growth of Fandom Studies in ‘...As I See It’:

> “What seemed radical at the time that ‘Poachers’ was written was the idea that fans were not simply passive consumers, but rather active participants in shaping their own culture…
>
> …Now... rhetoric of participation flows easily from [corporations]... we need a more precise model for understanding what is meaningful about different forms of participatory culture.” (Jenkins, 2014)

Taking Jenkins’ advice, it is important to examine game and RPG-fandom specific forms of participation in story-authorship. Retez (2022) explored how the term ‘lore’, drawn as it is from ‘folklore’, has been appropriated by fandom cultures, and applies this to video games as an angle on participatory narrative authorship; specifically, the term represents story content which is “secondary to the explicit diegesis and composed of the set of events and stories told in a non-linear way through… the virtual world. … a story composed of creative productions of the fandom”. Retez mainly applies this term to audience fandoms of live-streamed gameplay, but the concept is commonplace in fandom communities of single-player titles. The ‘Five Nights At Freddy’s’ (2014) franchise exemplifies presenting indirect storytelling details in the game titles themselves, which are understood and ordered by perpetual fandom discourse. Whilst the franchise’s original run of 8 titles (Cawthon, 2014, 2014, 2015, 2015, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018) are, as self-contained products, relatively simple horror titles, the true depths of the franchise’s narrative experiences are more akin to a collaboratively authored mystery story, as fandoms produce and disseminate theories on timelines, character identities, supernatural elements and more. Barkman (2015) has likened this to Mittell (2012)’s concept of ‘Forensic Fandom’ which “invites viewers to dig deeper, probing beneath the surface to understand the complexity of a story”. We can note parallels with Wee’s ‘Soft Canon’; once again, groups explore authorship not as positivist, but as experimental, non-

committal, and negotiated, demonstrating that a social narrative-play experience is not an essential component for fandoms to engage in collective authorship.

The concept of 'Headcanon' is essential here; defined as "an idea about the text that only exists inside the head of the fan creating it" (Mullis, 2019), headcanon can be understood as a fandom term for each individual fan's imagined version of events within a given story world. Just as regional dialects contribute to an individual's idiolect, so too do fandom subcultures create and distribute interpretations and ideas which can come to influence individuals' headcanons. A common form of this can be found in fan-fiction circles, for example with romantic pairings or sexual/gendered identities. In this fandom-fronted form of interpretive creativity, the original texts lose precedence over the fandom's experience of narrative; it becomes fodder for fandom creativity; Textual Poaching (Jenkins 1992) has occurred. Cover (2010) has similarly implicated 'Textual Poachers' into TTRPG play. Juul also states: that "In a specific genre, [players] fill in the missing pieces by using a combination of knowledge of the real world and knowledge of game conventions" (p117). He also writes: "While all games have rules, most video games also project a fictional world… such fictional game worlds, obviously, do not actually exist; they are worlds that the game projects and the player imagines" (p106). As such "… the player fills in any gaps in the fictional world" (p108). We can link this game-studies concept with the fandom studies understanding of headcanon to come to an understanding of players as imaginative participants in story consumption when presented with a suitably interesting or intriguing starting point.

Retez circles this concept back to CRPGs via 'Dark Souls 3' (FromSoft, 2016), where "lore becomes the ultimate… expression of… narrative"; Retez's discussion focuses on the individual player's experience of canon through small 'lore' details in item descriptions and other cryptic clues, but 'Forensic Fandom' can also be applied to collective efforts to order and understand the franchise's cryptic world.

It is important to understand that despite my aims to examine RPGs beyond a purely textual lens, an underpinning knowledgebase on game studies is paramount to a complete understanding of how my artefacts, inextricable as they are from the authorship they facilitate, are understood by game-studies; this is especially true for the CRPGs, whose nature as a digital title (with the less-negotiable nature that medium creates) and lack of prior analysis from an ethnographic perspective necessitates.

2.4: Game, narrative and technology studies

A number of concepts from general game, narrative or technology studies can be used to underpin the core inquiry of this thesis.

Firstly, this thesis will discuss several kinds of game 'mechanics' and 'aesthetics' as devices of narrative meaning-making, so it is important to highlight that these terms are used in the sense described in the 'Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics' ('MDA') framework (Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek, 2004). MDA defines mechanics as "various actions, behaviours and control mechanisms afforded to the player... together with the game's content [they] support overall gameplay dynamics". Dynamics, then, are the consequent structures created when several game mechanics overlap, Hunicke Et Al give the example of "Time pressure and Opponent Play"- Dynamics are the interplays between rules, which can be built up together to form the game's core Aesthetics. These are the final emotional experiences the game renders to the player; "Sensation… Fantasy Discovery… Challenge…" Throughout this thesis, these terms appear as per their definitions from the MDA framework.

N. Katherine Hayles has also explored the relationship between materiality and meaning. Since, as Juul (2005) states, "all writers agree games are rules-based" (p.32), we can consider the game's mechanics as their materiality.

> "Content is materiality, and materiality is content… Indeed, it is impossible not to create meaning through a work's materiality. Even when the interface is rendered as transparent as possible… that positions the reader in a specific material relationship with the imaginative world evoked by the text" (Hayles, 2002 p.107).

To rephrase this to align with games specifically; players cognitively engaging with rules also engage with the game's meaning and therefore its narrative. Such examination of rules is essential to this thesis' understanding of how the studied RPG games deliver stories, in which I explore not only traditional story delivery mechanisms, but also the underlying making of narrative delivered by abstract game-mechanical actions such as dice-rolling and save-states. I must therefore explore how audience cognition of narrative can interplay with interaction with gameplay mechanics.

Juul's *Half-real* (2004) analyses games as rules-based systems, as fiction, and as the intersection of the two. Juul writes:

> "Rules and fiction interact, compete, and complement each other… the game designer must select which aspects of the fictional world to… implement in the game rules… The player..

> experiences… a two-way process where the fiction of the game cues them into understanding the rules of the game, and… the rules can cue the players to imagine the fictional world of the game" (p.163)...

Salen and Zimmerman's *Rules of Play* (2004) acknowledges four modes of interactivity in games, adding "These… are not distinct categories but… overlapping ways of understanding any moment of interactivity. They usually occur simultaneously…" (2004, p49-55). 'Mode 1' is described as "Cognitive Interactivity"- the player's "psychological, emotional, or interpretative participation…" in meaning-making, including narrative construction. Other mediums have been observed to similarly make use of audience cognition; such as 'montage' in film (Bordwell, 1972) or 'closure' in comics (McCloud,1993, p62-68).

The other three modes also align with established components of this study. Mode 2 is 'Functional Interactivity', or "utilitarian participation"- this aligns with the aforementioned 'ergodic' storytelling (Aarseth, 1992) as linked to TTRPGs by White Et Al. (2018)- since CRPGs are also predicated on "nontrivial effort" (Aarseth), this link holds true for both of my examined mediums. Even games of pure progression, where challenges are "explicitly designed on a case-by-case basis" (Juul, 2004, p97) with no flexibility of strategy can be framed as requiring some latent story-constructive elements of the player, who must cognitively arrange game elements into a coherent whole and act upon this understanding to meaningfully engage with ludic challenges and stories.

Mode 3 is Explicit Interactivity (participation with designs and procedures), the more developed engagement with game mechanics which can be likened to the MDA frameworks' understanding of the interplay between base mechanical elements and the final emotional aesthetics of gameplay.

Mode 4 is 'Beyond-the-object cultural participation', which connects to section 2.3's discussion of fandom, how subculture is a distinct means of interaction with a game's meaning; paying attention to such interactions between fandom, practise, and narrative will be core to this thesis' data analysis.

Rules of Play also implicates Huizinga's (1938) "magic circle" theory, where "within [the space in which a game takes place], the game's rules create a special set of meanings for the players of a game… [which] guide the play of the game" (Salen and Zimmerman, p93-98)). As such, "players accept the limitations of the rules because of the pleasure a game can afford." (Salen and Zimmerman, p93-99). In the same vein, Juul (2005) explains that "game fiction is ambiguous, optional, and imagined by the player…" (p162). The keyword is 'optional': "we are invited to imagine a fictional

world… we can also refuse… and still play the game." (Juul 2005, p129). In other words, players' interactions with the game's meaning is predicated on their willingness to buy into the game's premise, to accept that conditions like victory are desirable, and that the audiovisual or described elements they perceive represent a fictional world they can perceive and invest in emotionally.

Juul (2004) likens gameplay challenge to narrative conflict (p.32). That is, the player's act of overcoming challenge mirrors the 'conflict' fundamental in storytelling of all mediums. Likewise, Salen and Zimmerman (2004) state that "conflict… can shape narrative play, conflict between players or between players and the game system can be tied to narrative conflicts for dramatic effect." (p418) Their argument does not so much state that game conflict *is* narrative conflict, but nonetheless spotlight that the player's actions against game challenges set by the developer or other players *can* be read as narrative information, where "conflict presumes a struggle between opposing forces… a villain character… a competing player or team… the game system as a whole…" (p.387)

This idea that play is inextricable from narrative concepts is disputed, however. Greg Costikyan declares: "Before 1973, if you had said something like 'games are a storytelling medium,'... you were mad… there is no story in Chess, Bridge, Monopoly, or Afrika Korps" (Costikyan, 2007). I dispute "no story in Chess", and Celia Pearce would agree, as she writes: "Chess… has a clear experiential and performative action, it has a metastory of two battling kings" (Pearce, 2004, np)

Many academics discuss interactivity in relation to these 'Emergent Narratives' (Juul; Salen and Zimmerman). Referencing Pearce, Juul (2004) writes: "Emergent Narrative tends to be described very loosely as the player's experience of the game" (p157-159). 'Emergent Narrative' is not to be confused with 'Emergent Gameplay', which Juul describes as "the primordial game structure... a small number of rules that combine and yield large numbers of game variations for which the player must design strategies to handle" (p5). Juul juxtaposes emergence against 'progression', a "historically newer structure… the player perform[s] a predefined set of actions in order to complete the game." (p5) Crucially, Juul claims: "The progression structure yields strong control to the game designer" (p.73). Therefore, he claims that emergence yields relatively more control to the game system and/or game player. "Progression and Emergence are the two extreme[s]... most games fall somewhere between…" (p.82) Indeed, Murray's 'Interactive Onion' also echoes this mapping of how malleable narratives can be (2005).

If gameplay creates narrative, then emergent narrative only results from emergent gameplay. In other words, a 'pure progression' game cannot yield more complex narratives than its one 'true' path

or failstate variations thereof. To apply emergence to a specific RPG, Sierra (2021), for instance, argues that

> ...*Skyrim*'s perceived… freedom or openness, is better understood as careful worldbuilding designed to support an accumulation of emergent narratives across a play session… Gibson [(2014, p34)] asserts that well-crafted emergent behaviour… "is difficult to predict" but also "one of the greatest skills of game design". (2021, p173)

Sierra suggests here that in order for emergent gameplay to become emergent narrative, a well-designed world must contextualise that gameplay, which Pearce (2004) also described as "Metastory". As such, for the inherent drama of play to register as an emergent narrative, the game developer must provide a sufficiently immersive fictional world. Players may fill in missing/ambiguous story information, but there must be a sufficiently complete, vivid and interesting story already to begin with in order for them to care to do so. To this end, Sierra (2021) references "two meaningful terms which contain shades of emergent narratives: "environmental narrative" and "evocative space"" (p.175). Jenkins (2002) explores these ideas through discussing Disneyland 'Imagineers', such as Don Carson, who construct evocative environments to deliver story context for attractions:

> The story element is infused into the physical space a guest walks or rides through… physical space… convey[s] the story the designers are trying to tell… Armed only with their own knowledge of the world, and those visions collected from [media], the audience is ripe to be dropped into your adventure. (Carson, 2000, quoted by Jenkins, 2002).

3: Methodology

This thesis aims to explore a game-narrative studies topic as a sociocultural practice utilising autoethnographic technique, incorporating reflexive thematic analysis as a defined analytical framework. I selected Heewon Chang's 'Autoethnography as method', on autoethnography, written as it is as applicable to the study of any social or cultural experience. Since I observed in my personal life that fandom subculture is implicated in narrative construction, I was motivated to select a methodology and guide which would allow me to order these observations academically; Chang's book provides a comprehensive method for doing so, centred on self-narratives, mentorship, and a highly flexible approach suited to my niche of branching narrative and cultural studies.

Throughout this methodology, I refer to Chang's guidance to justify and contextualize the design of data collection and analysis strategies, ultimately examining my subjective cultural experiences as a storyteller through the medium of RPGs as a player and GM.

This methodology section will first explain which RPG titles I examined and why (3.1), before detailing my three methods of collecting autoethnographic game-narrative data (3.2). Finally, I explain my methods of storing and analysing data using techniques from reflexive thematic analysis (3.3).

3.1: Selection of Research Artefacts

I anchored my research on the study of 4 RPG titles: Firstly, I played the CRPGs '*Baldur's Gate 3*' (2023) and '*Cyberpunk 2077*' (2020) (with its expansion *Phantom Liberty* (2023)). For TTRPGs, I acted as GM in the '*Dungeons and Dragons*' (5th edition, 2014) and '*Cyberpunk RED*' (2020) systems. These are henceforth *BG3*, *2077*, *D&D*, and *RED*, respectively.

RED and *D&D* share their fictional worlds with *2077* and *BG3* respectively, belonging to the same franchises and transmedia ecosystems- Cyberpunk's setting is dystopian sci-fi, whilst D&D/BG3 is high fantasy. Therefore, examining two transmedia worlds allows this study to note when the storytelling experience is being influenced by a prior experience with the franchise in question; "A transmedia storyteller will often assume that the [audience] will have gleaned some details about the story world… from some other platform." (Schrier Torner & Hammer, 2018).

Beyond their shared worlds, these artefacts are highly comparable. Both *2077* and *BG3* present (variably) open worlds in a 3-act structure close to what Carolyn Handler Miller calls the 'Passenger

Train Model' (2014), and similar core plots. *RED* and *D&D* use varied player-character abilities, equipment, and 'skill-checks' to resolve interactions in a multiplayer player-versus-environment setting optimised for 4 players and a Game-Master (or GM).

Analysis of these 4 games enables comparison of two similar franchises- one sci-fi, one fantasy- in both their CRPG and TTRPG formats. Acting as both a player and 'developer' (game master) allows this thesis to understand both sides of the player-developer authorial dialogues and the consequent processes of narrative development.

Similarly, artefact selection was also designed for effective autoethnography. I felt it important to examine artefacts fitting my genuine tastes and popular within a sizable and active fandom, ensuring that data reflected authentic cultural experiences. This ensures vocabulary, experiences and subcultural values are up-to-date, and thus that the thesis' research outcomes are accurate at the time of publication.

BG3 and *2077* have both enjoyed significant success in terms of sales and accolades since their respective launches. Both titles have sold in the tens of millions (CD Projekt Red, 2024a) (Litchfield, 2024). The size and activeness of their fandoms is demonstrable through their online presence; the forum site Reddit hosts active 'subreddits' dedicated to these titles, both of which sit in the site's top 1% of popularity, (r/BaldursGate3, 2025) (r/cyberpunkgame, 2025). Both games are active projects, having received content updates well into the writing period of this thesis (baldursgate3.game, 2025) (CD Projekt Red, 2024b). In terms of critical response, BG3 and 2077 currently hold a 96% and 86% average score on review aggregator Metacritic, representing 'universal acclaim' and 'generally favourable' acclaim respectively (Metacritic, 2025a, 2025b).

On the TTRPG side, it is hard to underestimate the cultural importance of 'D&D'; Forbes reported that "over 50 million people have played Dungeons & Dragons to date" (Wieland, 2021), and academics have described the system as "the dominant game in the hobby" (Wee, 2024). Indeed, D&D is often cited as the first of what are now known as TTRPGs, having grown from the preexisting wargaming fandom by adding a focus on varied player-characters within a high-fantasy world (Schick, 1991, pp.17-34, as referenced by Mackay, 2019)

For RED, sales figures are not publicly available at this time. However, the fact that the Cyberpunk TTRPG series (1988, 1990, 2005, 2020) has become the root of an acclaimed transmedia franchise, including *2077* and animated series 'Cyberpunk: Edgerunners' (Studio Trigger, 2022), grants

legitimacy to claims of current cultural relevance. Active D&D and RED 'subreddits', also rank amongst the site's most popular, with r/DungeonsAndDragons in the top 1% (2025), and r/cyberpunkred at 3% (2025), similar to other popular TTRPGs (r/shadowrun, 2025) (r/callofcthulu, 2025).

Due to the fact I was already taking part in a playthrough/campaign of each, D&D and BG3 are my primary artefacts; the 'Cyberpunk' franchise is the subject of comparatively fewer data entries, used to compare and contrast with the 'D&D' franchise.

It should be noted that several virtual tabletops ('VTTs') are available on the current market; these are digital applications designed to assist TTRPG play, especially remote conference-call sessions. These are not uncommon within the space (Roll20, one of the largest, reported 10 million users in 2022 (Meehan, 2022), compared to the 2020's 50 million total 'D&D' players (Wieland, 2021)) but are not examined within this thesis, due to the fact that my experiences as a hobby participant have not, as of the time of writing, included these technologies. Further studies may wish to expand upon this gap.

3.2: Data Collection Strategies

This thesis can be considered as two aligned perspectives; a narrative studies paper, and an autoethnography. During proposals, my initial perspective was solely the former; a study into the dialogic storytelling processes that underpin RPGs in computerised and tabletop environments, additionally drawing out similarities and differences between the two. This followed personal interest in RPG storytelling and some initial readings such as 'Half-Real' by Juul (2004), which examined games as systems of rules and a method of fiction, but not as an activity in narrative player-authorship beyond a rich discussion of so-called 'emergence'. Literature reviews revealed addressable research gaps wherein I observed that numerous moment-to-moment narrative-authorial acts, regularly observed in my daily life and fandom spaces, were under-examined in existing literature.

In short, this paper uses autoethnographic techniques to approach the core game-narrative studies angle with greater complexity and completeness. This thesis sees game-narrative authorship as an ongoing process of interaction between game designers and game players, interactions which often draw on tools, techniques, and wisdom which can only be found in play as a creative, cultural practice. To this end, this thesis combines three complimentary stages to develop a multi-faceted understanding of how authorial dialogues in games emerge between players and developers during

play. Stage 1 built foundations from game-as-text; Stage 2 understands the cultural context of play, and Stage 3 directly documented player and 'game master' participation in moment-to-moment narrative-play.

3.2.1: Explaining Collection Stages

Data collection progressed across three distinct 'stages', although the word 'stage' is not intended to imply linear temporality. Stage 1 was completed first, in its entirety. Stages 2 and 3 took place simultaneously, with data from one prompting further exploration in the other.

The sections 3.2.2-3.2.4 explain each stage's aims, methods, and purpose within the thesis. For information on how the data is labelled and stored, see section 3.3.1.

3.2.2: Data Collection Stage 1, or 'Understanding game systems'

Stage 1, conducted before the other two stages, is titled 'Understanding Game Systems'. Stage 1's purpose is understanding and documenting the artefacts' textual materiality; Premise, Gameplay mechanics, Possibility space, etc. This understanding of game-as-text is foundational to the more subjective examinations of play and culture I built upon it. Stage 1 investigation yielded referenceable, codified understandings of rules and content that can be cited in this thesis' main body when examining observations from stages 2 and 3.

This method of playing and taking notes can be regarded as a form of what Chang calls 'field notes' (2008); a method of collecting "more objective data" compared to the concept of a more subjective and personal 'field journal', which is discussed in Stage 3 (see section 3.1.3).

My anchoring question for this stage is: "What tools of authorship do this game's developers provide to the players, and which do they retain for themselves?"

Stage 1 data is referred to in-text with a standard citation with the specific appendices or source.

CRPGs

Directly observing and noting the game mechanics of CRPGs is important for a number of reasons; physical game manuals describing core means of interaction have become increasingly rare over recent decades with the move towards digital downloads; notwithstanding this, digital games often do not fully explain the full consequences of inputs to players, especially in CRPGs where the true significance of an input and its consequences may be concealed at first from the player; a 'black-box'

of hidden or uncertain authorial consequence not listed in any text or tutorial. For example, BG3 allows players to take relatively innocuous early actions that remove major characters entirely.

Direct artefact examination is thus critical to complete empirical understandings. I examined BG3 and 2077 by playing to the end of their first act whilst taking free-form notes (see Appendices A and B) which described the respective game's principal forms of player-authored narrative, including character creation, dialogue, combat, and exploration.

TTRPGs

Unlike CRPGs, TTRPG rule systems are often presented in their entirety in the form of one or several rulebooks. The rulebooks of my chosen artefacts (Crawford, 2014) (Pondsmith, 2020) are in print at the time of writing. Preparing summarising reports, as Chang suggests, is unnecessary, as primary citation from rulebooks is possible.

I did, however, write-up supplemental reports (see Appendices C and D) on the campaigns themselves, focusing on 'homebrew' content ("created by the GM for personal use; a more or less 'original' creation…" (White Et Al., 2018)). Since by nature this information cannot be cited from rulebooks. Not all aspects of a TTRPG campaign's design, be that narratively or game-mechanically, are drawn from the core 'rulebook'. TTRPG play groups very often combine core rulebooks with some 'house rules' and 'homebrew' content. Particular rules may be utilised differently from table to table, new player-authored content (within or external to the group) may be layered on top of official content.

Indeed, since this thesis aims to explore player creativity beyond 'game-as-text', observing 'homebrew' could be considered even more valuable to this thesis' particular research angle than the core text.

Referencing scheme

Stage 1 data is attached as appendices A-D, and will be cited as such.

3.2.3: Data Collection Stage 2, or 'Cultural analysis'

Stage 2 is 'Cultural Enquiry'- the examination of cultural "others of similarity, difference, and/or opposition" (Chang, 2008). In other words, Stage 2 aims to capture vocabulary, wisdom, and opinions as held by other members of RPG fandoms beyond my own play experiences, paying attention to moments where their experiences match or contrast my own.

This helped me identify social artefacts (terminology, principles, methodologies) within RPG subcultures which play active roles in dialogic authorship; this included outright facilitation, but since storytelling is perceptive/imaginative, social information that affect player (or GM) perceptions can also be implicated in authorial dialogues. Chang encourages the identification of cultural experiences such as “Proverbs…said repeatedly and upheld…to communicate…group wisdom”, “Wise and trusted guides” and general “Virtues and values” (Chang, 2008) which shape the way cultures self-mediate, survive generational handovers, and maintain a distinct identity shaped by education and best practise; all are applicable to the RPG fandom.

Stage 2 was conducted parallel to Stage 3 data collection and focuses on querying online sub-cultural discourses on topics related to RPG play, communities, and storytelling.
This meant analysing relevant fora, posts, comments, or publicly available tools, tutorials and resources. I did not participate in these conversations directly, as doing so may have limited the amount of data that could be collected and may have introduced additional subjective biases to the conversation. Instead, I was an observer to the conversations, but an insider to the subculture conducting them.

My biggest source was the forum site Reddit, a popular discourse platform in its own right which also serves as a common reference point for discussions on other platforms. For example, several social media channels on YouTube, Instagram and TikTok utilise various TTRPG subreddits to source topics for discussion, often drawing directly on specific posts as repost fodder or topical prompts (*EldritchPodBlast,* 2023) (*Crispy’s Tavern*, 2019) (*CritCrab*, 2019) (*Loot Goblin’s Marketplace*, 2023).

Due to this ecosystem of discourse, it was possible to identify which posts and discussions were gaining traction in fandom circles via a mixture of deliberate research and organically through my social media feeds; I thus organically examined trending posts with rich discussions, rather than selecting specific fora.

I also quoted from publicly-available fannish resources and broadcasters when they were noted in these discussions, especially where concepts of mentorship and values were visible (highlighted by Chang as important to autoethnographic understanding). For example, when the popular GM Matt Mercer was described as a parasocial mentor by forum users, I investigated video tutorials starring Mercer as sources of fandom wisdom, following Chang’s advice of understanding mentor figures.

In-line with ethics clearance, raw quotations from forums were not captured directly as to respect expectations of privacy. Rather, paraphrased summaries of comments and discussions were noted in a table alongside their relation to other such data (for example, posts and their comments). Published resources like Youtube videos were cited directly as a standard source, intended as they are for public consumption.

The process of collecting autoethnographic data does not need to take place within rigidly defined boundaries, steps, or methods; "you sometimes allow your gut feelings and broadly defined research goals to take a lead…" (Chang, 2008).

Referencing scheme

Stage 2 data is cited in-text with a quote number #1-#237.

3.2.4: Data Collection Stage 3, or 'Systematic self-observation'

Data Collection Stage 3 is a structured reflective journaling of play sessions within selected artefacts, guided by Chang's (2008) method of the same name (as opposed to the alternative 'Interactive self-observation', which centres discussions with peer groups). Stage 3 was conducted concurrently with Stage 2, with findings noted in one becoming springboards for investigations in the other.

My systematic self-analysis took the form of field journaling. Each entry in my field journal captured data from a specific session of CRPG or TTRPG play.
Some journal entries gathered data from play sessions on the same day as said session, I call this 'ongoing' data.
Other journal entries gathered 'personal memory data' (Chang, 2008), data gathered from my subjective recollection of past events- in this case, sessions of TTRPG or CRPG play which took place prior to the beginning of the study. I call this 'retrospective' data.

To ensure this data collection remained 'systematic', I personally created four standardised forms within which to ask standardised questions at each opportunity for data capture (that is, at each recorded play session). The motivation was not to limit what data was collected- indeed, Chang does not recommend a specific format for field journals such as to maintain an open and reflexive approach to self-analysis. Instead, these forms simply prompt with similar questions to maintain a focus on dialogic authorship, rather than other aspects of play. These forms create standardised written accounts of the session's narrative content, player (and GM) inputs, the game's (or GM's)

responses, and any relevant attitudes, tools, or novel behaviours which can be implicated in dialogic authorship.

These standardised forms are:

- [Appendix E] 'Ongoing' CRPG journaling forms
    - (for same-day data capture regarding CRPG play sessions, filled in during play)
    - An explanation of the design can be found in [Appendix I]
- [Appendix F] 'Retrospective' CRPG summary form
    - (for data capture on CRPG playthrough progress from prior to the study window)
    - An explanation of the design can be found in [Appendix I]
- [Appendix G] 'Ongoing' TTRPG journaling form
    - (for same-day data capture regarding TTRPG play sessions, filled in after play)
    - An explanation of the design can be found in [Appendix I]
- [Appendix H] 'Retrospective' TTRPG form
    - (for data capture on TTRPG play sessions from prior to the study window)
    - An explanation of the design can be found in [Appendix I]

Chang regards field journaling as "a useful vehicle for keeping ethnographic thoughts running" (2008). Field journaling is inherently a form of self-reflective, self-observational data, which "challenges the dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity" (Chang, 2008), I was able "bring[] to the surface what is "taken-for-granted, habituated, and/or unconscious matter that . . . [is] unavailable for recall"". (Rodriguez and Ryave, 2002, p.4, quoted in Chang, 2008) In doing so, I viewed the narrative play with a critical eye trained simultaneously as a participant in a hobbyist subculture and as an academic analyst, illuminating dialogic authorship methods players and GMs demonstrated as well as my understanding of how and why those interactions are conducted as they are. In doing so, this systematic self-observation is an essential catalyst for not only its own sake, but as a jumping-off point for the investigation of fandom subculture found in Stage 2 data collection.

Chang highlights the importance of 'personal memory data' calling it "a building block of autoethnography, because the past gives a context to the present" (2008). To this end, I felt comfortable capturing supplemental data from sessions that had occurred prior to the data collection phase, which I chose to call 'retrospective' data collection alongside the 'ongoing' data collection due to the temporal relationship between the two. Additional data granted chances to cross-reference and thus confirm the regularity/novelty of any pattern in my findings. Chang adds, however, that "Memory is not always a friend… it often reveals partial truth and is sometimes unreliable and

unpredictable" (Chang, 2008) To this end, Chang advises autoethnographers to "mix…personal memory data through self-reflection and self-introspection with cultural analysis" (p.81). To this end, I combined my 'retrospective' personal memory data with 'ongoing' systematic data and the 'stage 2' cultural enquiry, using direct observation of play and investigation of RPG subculture to confirm and expand upon any leads that arose from the personal memory data.

In the next two sections, I will briefly explain the details of my data capture process with regards to TTRPGs specifically, followed by CRPGs. This includes ethics clearances, how the data is cited in sections 5 and 6, how many sessions were captured, and other details regarding the process of systematic self-analysis for each specific medium.

Stage 3 for TTRPGs

I studied the TTRPGs as a Dungeon Master, notionally "the creative force behind a [TTRPG] game… (who) creates a world for the other players to explore… and runs adventures that drive the story" (Crawford, 2014). Stage 3 ascertains patterns of authorship that affected the campaign's narrative, especially where cultural values, practices, or external tools could be noted.

TTRPG self-observation was also multiplayer self-observation. I was granted ethics clearance to record written accounts of play sessions- 18 were captured in total- including the actions and statements of players, to whom I refer in this thesis by their player-character's name for anonymity. These are: March MacRuggles, Frae Hannis, Rob Anybody, Dave Ferguson, Buguthy Bifusispora, Urzul, Artemisa La Cognizi, and Gilda McNally. Chang notes that "includ[ing] others as co-participants…" is an acceptable angle for autoethnographic enquiry, given that "culture is a web of self and others" (2008). As such, my journal forms were designed to capture the participation of players, as well as myself as the DM, in dialogic story authorship, aiming to capture the interplay between both and the game itself.

The structured journaling process was as follows: Before each session, I filled in part of a standardised structured journal form of my own design [Appendix H]. Immediately following the session's conclusion, the remainder of the form was filled out. The questions on these forms and my ethos for answering them can be found in [Appendix I]

For the first TTRPG, *Dungeons and Dragons*, I examined 7 'ongoing' sessions, conducted with 3-6 players, between 1/08/24 and 29/09/24, and 12 'retrospective' sessions which took place between 09/04/24 and 12/08/24. These sessions are part of a campaign that had been ongoing since 9/04/24. Each session lasted 2-4 hours.

For the second TTRPG, *Cyberpunk RED*, I studied one weekend-length session which took place 19-20 October 2024. This is often referred to in TTRPG circles as a 'One-shot', and is a common alternative to long-form campaigns; one-shots offer the advantage of a self-contained narrative which begins, is explored, and ends within a finite period of time, allowing a complete experience in a convenient timeframe. By examining a long-form campaign in D&D and a one-shot in RED, I was able to ascertain if the differing structures manifested different storytelling methods, meanings or experiences, coming to a more complete understanding of TTRPG storytelling.

Since I was a newcomer to the RED rules system, no 'retrospective' data could be collected regarding play in this system. This did, however, offer an opportunity to observe the behaviours of myself and others as newcomers to a particular system, providing insightful contrast to D&D, wherein myself and most of my players were pre-immersed in the complexities of the system and hobbyist culture. The campaign lasted around 14 hours, with 4 participants/players, all personal friends who expressed interest in playing *RED*. As with D&D, I refer to these players by their player-character names to maintain anonymity: these are Crash_Override, Lantern, Redtail, and Knightrider.

Upon the completion of each form, the contents were fed into my ongoing reflexive thematic analysis in comparison to prior data and already-established codes (see section 3.3).

To summarise, I collected 12 'retrospective' journal entries regarding past D&D sessions (see Appendix H for form design) as well as 7 journal entries for 'ongoing' D&D sessions and 1 RED session (Appendix G).

Stage 3 for CRPGs

For CRPGs, I acted as the player, examining how I interacted with these games as a first-time player playing through the game in the same manner I would if I was not conducting research; in other words, I did not let my study affect my behaviour.

In all, I examined 7 sessions of the first CRPG text, *Baldur's Gate 3*. The first session was on 11 July 2024, taking place in a separate playthrough as the 'origin character' Lae'zel, where I followed a

hunch to investigate the limits of the game's possibility space. I studied the remaining 6 sessions in my main playthrough as the 'origin character' 'The Dark Urge' between July and October 2024, journaling my experiences on another standardised structured journal form (see Appendix E).

On a separate structured journaling form (see Appendix F), I additionally wrote up a 'retrospective' summary to gather personal memory data on play of *BG3* that took place between 13 March 2024 and 14 July 2024; and on prior play of *Cyberpunk 2077,* which took place between 20 January 2023 and 12 June 2024.

This is a single unified summary, in contrast to the 12 session-by-session 'retrospective' journal entries I produced during the TTRPG portion of the study regarding D&D; this is due to the differing density of story content that any given hour of play can deliver in CRPGs compared to TTRPGs thanks to the quick feedback a digital code-based game provides.

Since we know that personal memory data is "sometimes unreliable and unpredictable" (Chang, 2008), it is difficult to provide reliable personal memory data on dozens of hours of CRPG play, and thus a summary of the most memorable and meaningful details provides an appropriate foundation upon which to build further ongoing investigations without risking inaccuracy. Upon the completion of each form, the contents were fed into my ongoing reflexive thematic analysis in comparison to prior data and already-established codes (see section 3.3).

Since I observed solely my own behaviour, no institutional ethics limitations were placed on CRPG data collection; in the interest of my own safety and privacy, I maintained a focus on my game-narrative and fandom experiences, and less so on how this interplayed with more personal cultural experiences such as politics or identity.

To summarise: for CRPGs, I collected 'ongoing' journal entries regarding seven BG3 sessions (Appendix E) and also collected 'retrospective' personal memory data by summarising past play sessions into a single summary form (Appendix F). The design and justification for the individual questions on both of these forms can be found in [Appendix I].

Referencing scheme

Stage 3 data is referenced in-text with citations of specific journal entries the data is drawn from. These will consist of an acronym of the game title and the journal entry's number/title.

For example, '(BG3-summary)' denotes data drawn from my retrospective *Baldur's Gate 3* summary, whereas '(D&D-2)' denotes data from the 2nd '*Dungeons and Dragons*' session's journal entry.
The complete list of referenceable documents is as follows:

- (D&D 1)-(D&D-19)
    - D&D play session journal entries, numbered 1-19 in chronological order.
- (RED-1)
    - My sole RED play session.
- (BG3-Summary)
    - My summary of progress through BG3 from prior to the study window.
- (BG3-1)-(BG3-6)
    - BG3 play session journal entries, numbered 1-6 in chronological order.
- (BG3-Lae'zel)
    - A single-session BG3 playthrough separate from my main, wherein I played as the 'origin character' Lae'zel to test the limits and reflexiveness of the game's possibility space.
- (2077-Summary)
    - My summary of progress through 2077.
    - Playthrough was completed shortly before the study window.

3.3: Data Management and Analysis Methods

I have already explored how 'Autoethnography as method' (Chang, 2008) provides the main guidance for this thesis' ethos and data collection strategy. The book's third part, 'Turning Data into Autoethnography' provides guidelines for good practice amongst autoethnographers, such as appropriate labelling, data organisation, classification, and refinement. However, Chang describes a general philosophy, rather than a distinct method, for managing and analysing data.

For a more concrete methodology on data analysis, I rely on Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), as defined by Clarke and Braun (2006) and expanded upon by Byrne (2021). In simple terms, this meant conducting data analysis as an ongoing process alongside data collection, identifying patterns in data ('codes') which are further investigated in ongoing data collection. Towards the end of the collection phase, these codes are unified into a smaller set of Themes, which demarcate the key findings of the investigation.

3.3.1: Labelling and Storage

There is a high level of similarity demonstrated between the techniques of Autoethnography, as described by Chang (2008), and of Reflexive Thematic Analysis, as described by Clarke and Braun (2006) and further explored by Byrne (2021). As such I co-incorporated both methods into my research strategy, benefitting from both texts providing similar advice from differing, yet aligned, perspectives.

For instance, Chang recommends an ongoing process of sorting, labelling, and processing data; "periodical organization of data steers the subsequent collection process effectively toward your research goal…it is advisable to manage data as they are being collected" as well as a specific technique of labelling data with "organizational" and "topical" labels which quickly describe the "where, who, what, where" of the data's collection. Similarly, Byrne (2021) recommends the use of features such as spreadsheets and document comments to maintain a handle on the meaning and shifting understanding of data points throughout the research process.

Having collected and stored data, Chang recommends "narrowing the focus of data collection and furthering data analysis", a process she calls 'Data Refinement'. The ethos here is to "trim… redundant data and expand… more relevant and significant data". Chang recommends that "The autoethnographic research process is not linear… research steps overlap, sometimes returning you to previous steps. One activity informs and modifies another". In other words, the steps of collecting, storing, and analysing data should be conducted cyclically, even concurrently.

To this end, I first created organised folders for the collection and collation of my data. Stage 1 data, consisting of four standalone reports, is contained in one folder. Each report is titled after the game directly, two discuss my CRPG titles, and two discuss the 'homebrew' content prepared for my TTRPG groups.

Stage 2 data is a mixture of paraphrased/summarised discussions from forum sites and quotes from publicly-published resources such as YouTube videos. Contained in a spreadsheet, each quote/summary is given an ID number, a source (usually a subreddit or URL), a notation of which RPGs the discussion pertains to, and a note of whether the content is a 'root' post (IE, the first/primary writing in a chain) or, if not, the ID# of the root post and/or comment. (see fig. 1)

Quote #	Post or commented on?	Paraphrased Quote	Source	DnD?	BG3?	CP RED?	CP 2077?
68	53	first-time-ever roleplayers. Early on, there were moments when people just didn't know what was expected of them next. The phrase I always used was, "Give me an 'I' statement."	r/dnd	x		x	
69	Post	I'm a first time DM who is anxious about the following; A) There was silence at times, I felt the pace dropping, needed to push the players. B) They just did roleplay (which is great) but failed several investigate / survival checks which ended the scene early. How do I deal whit this? C) I felt very stuck with my notes and a possible flow that I had visualized for the game D) Players required a lot of guidance, but I felt afraid of or limiting them.	r/dnd	x		x	
70	69	DnD is improv, and that can be challenging for everybody at the table: Miss out on plot due to bad rolls, silent plauyers, & the fear of railroading can be hard to overcome; but as long as you had fun, you had a good session.	r/dnd	x		x	
71	69	You may need to restructure your notes: 'The Lazy GM Resource Doc' might help. Shift from having a rigid structure to being able to improvise and adapt to player actions. Prepare situations, but not their outcomes.	r/dnd	x		x	
72	69	I know I just said to loosen up and listen to your players, but ACTUALLY since they're beginners, you might have to demonstrate what their options are a few more times. "What do you do?" silence "well you could investigate the wrecked cart, you could look for footprints, you could climb a tree and look for any landmarks nearby, etc." It just takes time, they have to get comfortable, roleplay can be a shock to the system sometimes.	r/dnd	x		x	
73	POST	"The Lazy GM's Resource Document"	https://slyflourish.com/lazy_gm_resource_document.html#eightsteps	x		x	

Fig.1: Excerpt from Stage 2 data 'comment collection table'.

Stage 3 data, a collection of structured journal entries, is arranged into folders delineated by game and, for BG3, playthrough (since one entry was an experiment into the game's limits within a separate playthrough).

All journal entries are standalone documents titled by game title, date, and an 'ongoing' or 'retrospective' tag. Each form is headed with cells for the notation of date, session #, and artefact. For TTRPGs, there is also a register to track which players were in attendance (See fig.2). For BG3, I instead note which playthrough and thus player-character I was playing as that session. (See fig. 3)

ONGOING CRPG Story tracking chart					
Date	27/07/24	**Session #**	1	**Game**	BG3
Playthrough	1	**Character**	Thokk, The Dark Urge		

Fig.2: Example CRPG journaling form header

ONGOING TTRPG Story tracking chart						
Date	17/08/24	**Session #**	18	**Game**	DnD Hobgob	
Register						
PC Name	**Frae Hannis**	**Buguthy Bifusispora**	**March McRuggles**	**Dave Ferguson**	**Rob Anybody**	**Urzul**
Present?	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

Fig. 3: Example TTRPG journaling form header

For retrospective Stage 3 data for CRPGs, that being the summaries of my 2077 playthrough and the portion of my BG3 playthrough conducted prior to the study, forms were kept in a separate folder. (see Fig. 4)

I relied on a process of repeatedly probing 'Stage 2 and 3' data for patterns noted as codes, which were united towards the end of study into three distinct themes, the process of which is detailed below.

CRPH Retroactive Playthrough Report					
Date	26/07/24	Playthrough #	1	Game	BG3

What proportion of the game was played through prior to the study?

Prior to the study, I played through the majority of content in Act 1; the Crash Site, the Mountain Pass/Githyanki Creche, and the Underdark.

I completed every main and side quest available to me, explored what I believe to be the entire map for all three zones, and fought all the optional bosses (Hag, Spider Queen, and Grym).

I started the study in the Grymforge having just fought Grym, the final piece of content from Act 1 I thought was available to me based on my map and quest journal. I immediately progressed through the underdark exit of Act 1 to begin Act 2.

What character did you play?

Class	Fighter/Assassin Multiclass	Background	'Haunted One'
Species (if app.)	Half-orc	Gender Identity	Male
Level	6	Playstyle	Invisibility/Stealth, High Melee damage, Duel-Wielded Finesse weapons
Backstory	'Dark Urge' origin character; amnesia storyline		
Influences on character creation	I played this character as an incarnation of Thokk, a beloved Dungeons and Dragons character.		

Fig. 4; Header for BG3 Retrospective Playthrough Report

3.3.2: Thematic Analysis

"Thematic analysis is a method for identify-ing, analysing and reporting patterns(themes) within data" (Clarke & Braun, 2006). Byrne notes that use of RTA often suffers from confusion, mislabeling, or conflation with other techniques (2021). To avoid this issue. "Braun and Clarke have demarcated… three principal approaches to TA: (1) coding reliability TA; (2) codebook approaches to TA, and; (3) the reflexive approach to TA" (Braun et al, 2019, quoted in Byrne, 2021). This thesis draws upon the Reflexive Approach, which naturally aligns with Chang's cyclical data refinement strategy.

Chang also explicitly refers to 'codes', a shared term; "Initial data analysis begins with coding and sorting… used to fracture each data set into smaller bits on the basis of topical commonality and to regroup the data bits into topical categories."

This is similar to the RTA vocabulary, where codes "represent the researcher's interpretations of patterns of meaning across the dataset." (Byrne, 2021). The fact that "there should be no expectation that codes or themes interpreted by one researcher may be reproduced by another" (Byrne, 2021), in other words that the reflective approach "highlights the researcher's active role in knowledge production" (Clarke and Braun, 2019, quoted in Byrne, 2021), supports this autoethnographic thesis as a study of my own subjective understanding of a topic close to my personal experiences.
As such, my "...allow[ing]... gut feelings… to take a lead…" (Chang, 2008) is an appropriate directional guideline during the cyclical process of gathering additional data to lead into further coding; Chang's advice that "When data deficiency is noticed… steer… collection toward filling the gaps." (2008).

In practise, this meant using Stage 3 data as prompting for searches through online fora to understand the current discourse around certain behaviours, such as narratively 'railroading' players. Likewise, if I noted a discussion in Stage 2 data, the discussion topic would become more visible in ongoing Stage 3 journaling.

3.3.2.1: Using Codes and Themes

Following Chang's/Clarke and Braun's guidance, I "regroup[ed]... data… into topical categories" (Chang, 2008); when I noticed a behaviour, theme, or pattern "that might be useful in addressing the research question" (Byrne, 2021) I registered it as a code with a descriptive name and began to re-search existing data for further examples.
Byrne names this as 'Inductive' or 'data-driven' coding, as opposed to the theory-driven 'deductive' approach; "data are not coded to fit a pre-existing coding frame, but instead 'open-coded' in order to best represent meaning as communicated by [myself and my players]" (Braun and Clarke 2013, quoted in Byrne, 2021). This approach- freely analysing data outside of existing theoretical frameworks- is useful to this thesis' goal of identifying and understanding phenomena under-examined by current theory.

The codes I created are of the 'latent' style, describing a "more interpretive" understanding of their meaning "requiring a more creative and active role on the part of the researcher" than the more surface-level 'semantic' style. (Byrne, 2021). This approach to coding is likewise aligned with autoethnography, where interpretation of complex and subjective cultural meanings is essential to my data analysis; "Braun and Clarke (2012, 2013, 2020) have repeated… codes and themes do not 'emerge' from the data… Rather, the researcher plays an active role in interpreting codes and themes" (Byrne, 2021)

As per Byrne's worked example, I conducted this study in six steps. **Phase one** (familiarisation with the data) and **Phase two** (generating initial codes), as described in 3.3 "[took] place… in a cyclical process." alongside additional data collection. "Through repeated iterations of coding and further familiarisation, the researcher can identify which codes are conducive to interpreting themes and which can be discarded." (Byrne, 2021)

The process of identifying and recording codes and data pertaining to them was done in a large master spreadsheet, separately from the raw data folders. Said spreadsheet contained a table for each code, numbered 1-33. Each datum that could be considered relevant to a code was placed within that code's table, which notes the collection stage and specific source (IE, Stage 2 quote #, or Stage 3 journaling form). The table also notes which artefacts are relevant to said quote, to allow easier analysis of genre or title-specific patterns, and a 'note' which was used to note source URLs or hierarchical relationships to other quotes (such as comments left on posts). To assist visual clarity, each row was also colour-coded according to data collection stage; yellow for Stage 3 data, pink for stage 2 data (a darker hue for comments left on posts), and blue to note any Stage 1 data inserted (as reminders or comparators). (See fig. 5)

Code name	DM/Developer punishing players					Code #16	
Table14							
Data Stage	Quote	BG3	D&D	2077	RED	Source From	Notes
3	March's player seemed dissatisfied with the session's ending, humorously exclaiming "Come on man, you can't do that just because you're the DM and this is your story to tell!". In hindsight, the narrative moment might have felt more earned if I had made a player roll to notice Eruktel approach.		x			D&D-15	
2	Advice for dealing with Murder Hobos? A player of mine indescriminately attacks every character I present them with and it is severely derailing the narrative.		x		x	Quote 233	
2	Don't pre-judge their reactions, but allow the world to naturally show them consequences. Have them be bested by a powerful knight, set a warrant for their arrest. You should never punish the player, but rather you should allow the world to make sense around them and let natual consequences discourage their behaviour.		x		x	Quote 234	Ref. quotre 233

Fig. 5; Example coding table with entries for code #16

The smallest code, #25 ‘Reliance on genre/franchise conventions in absence of specific knowledge’, contains three data references; the largest, #14 ‘Improvisation as a DM’, contains 125 data references.

I did fail to follow one piece of advice from Byrne, in that I did not keep track of the evolution of my codes in a separate table; this would have assisted the clarity and direction of the meanings that were emerging from the codes. This is not an essential to RTA but would have nonetheless improved speed and clarity during analysis.

“Phase three: generating themes” began “when all relevant data items [had] been coded” (Byrne, 2021). Per Byrne’s advice, I spent some time adjusting the codes; splitting, uniting, and renaming as appropriate, though as mentioned no exact record of these exact changes was kept. In doing so, I was continuing to “construe the relationship among the different codes and examine how this relationship may inform the narrative of a given theme” (Byrne, 2021).

I created a second page in my spreadsheet which contained a number of tables which logged which codes belonged to a potential theme (as seen in fig. 5). As I read through and understood my codes, I drafted candidate themes by inferring meaningful relations within and between codes, and placed descriptive titles at the top of each. I read through codes one-by-one, tagging them as relevant to the theme if so. This process was repeated several times, with themes being rephrased, deleted, united and split until I had four candidate themes (see fig. 6).

With time spent poring over my collated data, I slowly began to understand the following main ideas, which formed the basis of my candidate themes. I did make the mistake of not noting these down explicitly, only perceiving them as patterns in my dataset; academics performing similar enquiries should be careful to document these candidate themes in a more detailed manner. As such, note these ideas are noted from memory as prompted by looking over my data retrospectively.

1. The fundamental building block of an RPG narrative is simply that a player inputs some form of information or gameplay action, and an authorial entity (such as the GM, or the game’s developer) grants a response, to which the player then responds, and so forth. However, there is a wide range of methods and mediums to these back-and-forths which warrant discussion.
2. Players hold varied desires regarding their experiences in a game, and design and ethos behind their player-character can be used to demonstrate these desires.

3. Players who are experienced and knowledgeable in a game gain additional capabilities when it comes to authoring narratives; their ability to utilise game content to create a certain experience increases with their skill and informedness on the game's rules and content.
4. Fandom subculture is an informative community which shares information, discusses and improves practise, and promotes sociability amongst players.
5. All of the above are true for both TTRPGs and CRPGs, but the details on how exactly these concepts apply, their methods, and the breadth and depth of their application varied between the two mediums and title-to-title.

Theme 3	Code #	Code Name	Theme Name >	RPGs exist within a persistantly informative & creative culture that shapes and informs large-scale and small-scale gameplay.
	1	Plot progression through dialogue		☐
	2	Characterisation through dialogue		☐
	3	Developer-intended critical path		☑
	4	Deviating from obvious critical path		☑
	5	Using pre-existing knowledge of the game from previous playthroughs or loops		☑
	6	Making story decisions on the fly as a player		☐
	7	Planning story decisions in advance as a player		☐
	8	Visual storytelling		☑
	9	Narration		☑
	10	Feeling the influence of the character's personality/backstory		☐
	11	Story content affected or unlocked by game-mechanical success/failure		☐
	12	Making use of online tools and resources		☑
	13	Planning for absent players		☐
	14	Improvisation as a DM		☐
	15	DM/Developer violating player's sense of storytelling agency		☐
	16	DM/Developer punishing players		☐
	17	Content designed to align with Player-characters		☐
	18	Influence based on companion approval		☑
	19	Using save-states		☐
	20	Plot Progression Through Combat + Gameplay		☐
	21	Ret-cons		☐
	22	Character Backstory as game mechanic		☐
	23	Voice-acting		☑
	24	Plot-holes		☐
	25	Reliance on genre conventions in absence of specific knowledge		☑
	26	Dice-rolls and other RNG		☐
	27	DM getting into difficulties		☐
	28	Slang & Turns of phrase		☑
	29	Mentor Figures		☑
	30	Characterisation through gameplay ability		☐
	31	Advice given to DMs		☑
	32	Advice given to Players		☑
	33	Players setting challenges, limits or gimmicks in advance of a playthrough		☑

Fig. 6; Example; theming table for theme #3

Phase four is a "recursive review of the candidate themes".

I carried the aforementioned candidate themes into phase five which is understood as the process of defining and naming themes. I initially organised these points into four themes, as follows;

1. RPGs contain features designed to facilitate a variety of experiences to different players, typically delivered through player-characters who provide distinct versions of the game's core identity. Players expect Developers to facilitate this freedom of expression.
2. Developers And Players Cyclically Respond To Each Other's Authorial Influence via gameplay and role-play. In multiplayer games, there exists best practice, but single-player games are at the player's whims.

3. Knowledge grants authorial power; more experienced players can plan more story in advance and are more likely to take on developer-like behaviours
4. RPGs Exist Within A Persistently Informative and Creative Culture That Shapes And Informs Large-Scale And Small-Scale Gameplay.

Phase five is the process of finalising the names and definitions of each theme. During this phase, I decided that theme 3 was less a standalone pillar of my findings and more an underlying truth that could be seen in parts of the other three. As such, I removed this theme and refocused the interplay between experience and authorial capacity into other themes.

During rewrites, it became clear that my phrasing of the theme names was not in keeping with the correct naming scheme and level of generality/specificity that quality RTA requires; as such, the themes were re-framed as their current names. The underlying meaning was similar, but the names were changed to concise titles.

Phase six is that act of 'producing the report', which can be found here as sections 4-6.

4: Exploration of themes

The methodology described in section rendered 33 specific codes; the smallest (Code #25) contains three data points, whilst the largest (Code #14) contains 125 data points. The codes are named as follows:

1. Plot Progression Through Dialogue
2. Characterisation Through Dialogue
3. Developer-Intended Critical Path
4. Deviating From Obvious Critical Path
5. Using Pre-Existing Knowledge Of The Game From Previous Playthroughs
6. Making Story Decisions On The Fly As A Player
7. Planning Story Decisions In Advance As A Player
8. Visual Storytelling
9. Narration
10. Feeling The Influence Of The Character's Personality/Backstory
11. Story Content Affected Or Unlocked By Game-Mechanical Success/Failure
12. Making Use Of Pre-Made Tools And Resources
13. Planning For Absent Players
14. Improvisation As A DM
15. DM/Developer Violating Player's Sense Of Storytelling Agency
16. DM/Developer Punishing Players
17. Content Designed To Align With Player-Characters
18. Influence Based On Companion Approval
19. Using Save-States
20. Plot Progression Through Combat + Gameplay
21. Ret-cons
22. Character Backstory As Game Mechanic
23. Voice-Acting
24. Plot-Holes
25. Reliance On Genre/Franchise Conventions In Absence Of Specific Knowledge
26. Dice-Rolls And Other RNG
27. DM Getting Into Difficulties
28. Slang & Turns Of Phrase
29. Mentor Figures
30. Characterisation Through Gameplay Actions

31. Advice To DMs/Developers
32. Advice To Players
33. Players Setting Challenges, Limits Or Gimmicks In Advance Of A Playthrough

These codes contain data from both TTRPG and CRPG sources, with the aim of creating themes which facilitate a cross-examination of the two mediums.

Theme 1, 'Varied Experiences From Variable Avatars', examines the ways that RPGs are fundamentally designed to grant broad possibility spaces to fit each players' narrative and gameplay preferences; it is in this way that players are able to enter into authorial dialogue to create unique narrative experiences. I particularly focus on the process of creating and inhabiting playable avatars.

Theme 2, 'Cyclical Authorial Dialogues', examines the granular, moment-to-moment process of participating in authorial dialogues, particularly the ways in which the social format of TTRPG play or digital format of CRPG play shape the possibility space and the players' means of navigating said space.

Theme 3, 'Informative Discourse Culture', examines the ways that fandom subculture are implicated in dialogic authorship by creating best practices, frameworks of understanding, tools and resources which players and DM draw upon whilst participating in authorial dialogues, which come to change and expand upon the ways players (and DMs) perceive and navigate the game and its possibility space.

I now discuss each theme from the perspective of TTRPGs (section 5) and CRPGs (section 6).

5: Analysis: Tabletop Role-Playing Games

5.1: Theme 1 - Varied Experiences From Variable Avatars.

I argue that dialogic story authorship of RPGs is fundamentally framed by player-characters (PCs). RPGs provide highly variable experiences to different players in different times and contexts, as highlighted by Bowman and Schrier (2018), Bailey (2010, as cited in Bowman and Schrier, 2018), and Hall (2015).

Thus, player-characters are a primary medium through which players and developers collaborate authorially. They are a conduit between players and developers which facilitates the player's desired experience. In this way, player-characters are declarations of game-authorial intent made by players, directly expressing code #7 (Planning story in advance as a player). The studied artefacts demonstrate different approaches to prompting, noting, and representing player-characters, which come to shape how those characters are constructed and inhabited. In other words, the underlying philosophies of game's rules affect how player-characters relate to and affect the fiction to come.

5.1.1: Philosophies of rulebooks

Bowman and Shrier observe that player-avatar relationships "[vary] depending on the game, and … [because] player[s]... perform… a type of "alternate self" (2018): different TTRPG titles are designed to facilitate the authorship of different kinds of stories, apparent by the ways that they guide the construction of player-characters, their protagonists. In this section, I use player-character creation as an example of how the ethos of TTRPG rulebooks direct player-creativities.

Rulebooks detail game-mechanics, game-narrative information, and guidance, which intersect with players' individual and collective approaches to shape the character-creative process. As will be discussed in 5.1.2 and 5.1.3, such game-mechanical and game-narrative structures affect how player-characters mediate dialogic authorship, so the underlying philosophies of the character-creation playspace will have knock-on effects into the feel and direction of the story.

For instance, D&D's player-handbook asks: "before you dive into step 1, think about what kind of character you want to play… If you don't know… look at the illustrations… see what catches your interest." (Crawford, 2014, p11). This is a story-first, creatively-oriented approach observable in journaling (D&D-1); our player-characters began largely as high-concepts- "inspired by… Terry

Pratchett", "travelling Wizard… selling snake oil" or "simple… local alcoholic" (Appendix C) before we fleshed them out into gameplay avatars using the game's rules. By orienting player creativity towards fantastical protagonists… "set apart from common people" (Crawford, 2014, p37), the D&D rules system arguably manipulates players and DMs to author stories of classical heroism rather than everyday mundanity.

Conversely, rather than beginning with high-concept character ideation, the *RED* core rulebook provides only a small amount of context for character aesthetics, stating: "Style over substance, attitude is everything, live on the edge, break the rules" (Pondsmith, 2020, p28). The rulebook then immediately explains options for character creation with a prescribed, game-mechanical system for determining narrative details about one's player-character. Rather than forefronting the player's imagination, the rulebook implies that the first step a player should take in creating a character is to select or randomly generate granular details of their life, firstly with a 'Role' (largely comparable to *D&D*'s classes), and secondly the 'lifepath' system, which generates a backstory and situation for the character using dice-rolls.

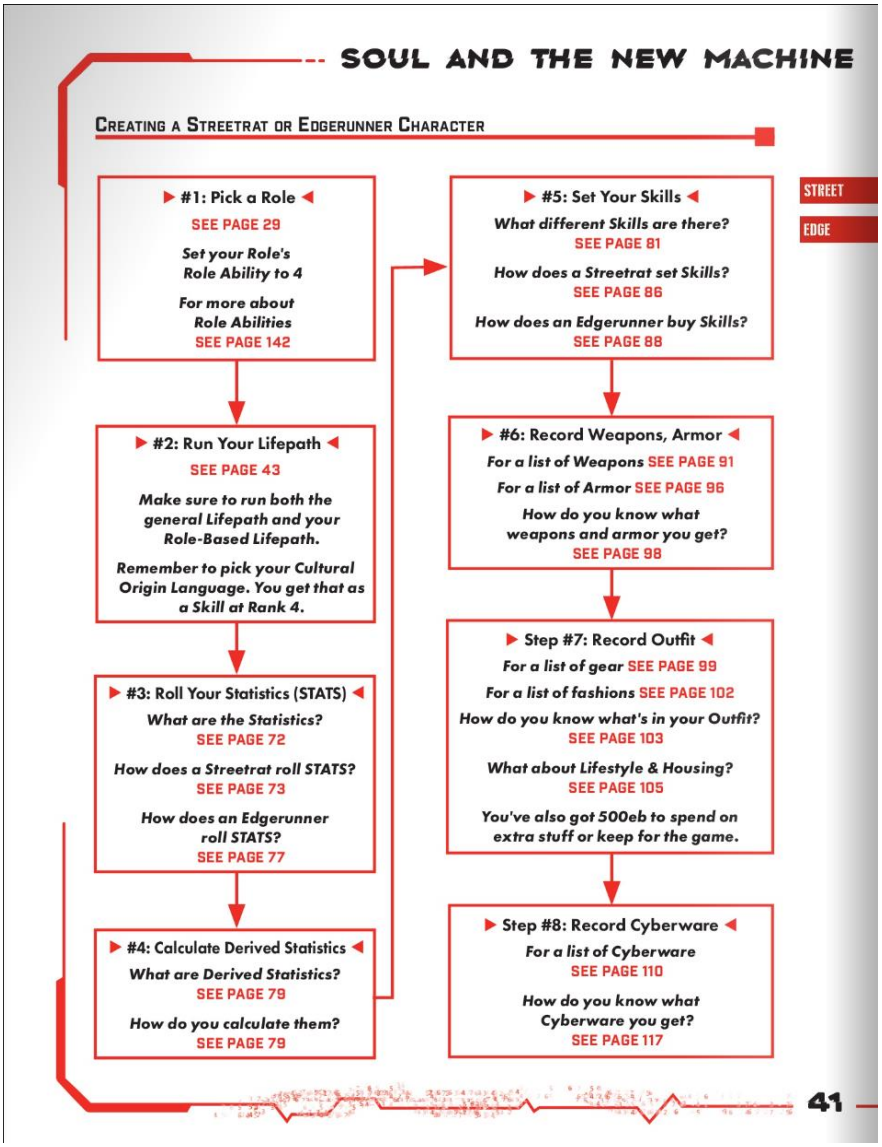


Fig.7: The steps of 'Edgerunner' character creation in 'Cyberpunk: Red', as seen in the core rulebook (page 41)

RED's rulebook lists three methods of character-creation with functionally similar outputs. In my study, we used 'Edgerunner' (i.e. "create a character quickly… without … painstaking detail" (p40)) (see Fig. 7).

Said 'Edgerunner' method begins with base characteristics such as cultural origin or dress sense, and role-specific details such as clientele. Players may optionally abdicate authorial control to dice-rolls against tables, expressing a preferred balance of creativity, effort, and surprise. Only after base characterisation can players begin constructing gameplay strategies via equipment selection.

Players may imagine characterisation beyond these base characterisations, but the rules-system emphasises relatively mundane, rather than high-conceptual, characterisation, resulting in grounded player-characters.

This is not to say RED does not provide stimuli for imagination; the rulebook contains 100+ art pieces depicting 'Night City' and the desperate cyborgs that live there. Game-rules prompt the table to incorporate rent payments, diet, and day-job, which combines with the artwork to communicate the ethos of the RED setting: "Survival is a personal thing… If you can do some good… great. But don't count on it."(p28). Such aesthetics tie into stories of survival- "Heroes of a bad situation" (p28)- rather than of whimsical adventure, and such stories express RED's intended variety of narrative-play. This aligns with Juul's observations; "[game] fiction… cues [players] into understanding… rules… and… the rules can cue the players to imagine the fiction" (2005).

We can make the link here, then, to the MDA framework; the 'ethos' these rulebooks describe can be seen as communicating the game's intended aesthetics to readers; this then guides the players' understanding of the underlying dynamics and mechanics, establishing a narrative and aesthetic context for **why** the game's systems are designed as they are and what sort of narrative or strategic experience the player is intended to use them to author (Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek, (2004).

It is worth noting that the 2014 D&D Player's Handbook 4th chapter also provides resources to guide character creation, including dice-roll tables for PC personality or backstory values, such as weight, flaws, bonds and ideals. The text also gives creative prompts, such as "think about how your character does or does not conform to the broader culture's expectations…" (p.121) or "give your character two personality traits…" (p.123). Much of this chapter does not describe essential game mechanics, but optional resources; my table did not utilise them. (D&D-1).

These rulebooks, then, were not prescriptive of play experiences; any element could be ignored, disregarded, not utilised, or subverted to suit house preference- Mizer notes that at TTRPG conventions, isolated table cultures become exposed to one another to reveal that "none… are actually playing the same game… rules" (2019). I extrapolate; TTRPG rulebooks are a supplement to player and GM creative dialogues, not an authority.

My D&D rulebooks were not utilised as play-by-play guides to character creation; the 'primary' source for the steps of character-creation was the table's collective interpretation of the process; the true 'rulebook' was the table's collective understanding of the rules, disseminated by peer-to-peer mentorship (see 5.3.1) and the physical rulebook was relegated to reference material.

Conversely, as first-time players, RED table delegated heavily to the rulebook text itself; my journaling notes that players spent significant time rolling dice against tables (RED-1) and that players and I spent significant time reading from and collectively interpreting the rulebook, which was taken as the definitive. Salen and Zimmerman have denoted a difference between 'Ideal Rules'- the "official

regulations" and 'Real Rules'- "the codes and conventions held by a community". They observe that as they are the ruleset which is actually actioned during play, so-called 'Real rules' "reflect a consensus of how the game ought to be played"(2003)- my data notes an example (D&D) where 'real rules' deviated from 'ideal rules', and an example (RED) where the two were similar.

Tying all of these points together is the following conclusion; the general ethos of TTRPG character-creation is a product of the table's unique interpretive understanding of said process. This understanding begins as reading; replicating steps and advice from the text which ingrains the underlying philosophies into newcomers. Over time, individuals and groups develop intuitive understandings of the rules and underlying principles of a given TTRPG, with their collective understanding becoming the primary reference point for the text; the game-as-text has been superseded by localised fandom discourse; play-groups modify the process beyond the written ruleset.

Creating player-characters is a form of authorial dialogue between GM and players, with the output being a distinct avatar. Additionally, corroborating a character-creation process is, in and of itself, an authorial dialogue amongst playgroups and larger fandoms, wherein the output is a set of processes and understandings regarding the act of character-creation.

The artefacts-as-text imparted not just rules, but ethos, which survives beyond actual references to the text amongst experienced players, continuing to shape ongoing authorial dialogues within developer intent, even after the guidebook is largely discarded.

Players eventually excise rulebooks from play, but the ethos continues to shape authorial dialogues.

Having explored how these rulebooks influence the underlying philosophies of player-character creation, the next section examines said process more directly.

5.1.2: Creating player-characters

Both *D&D* and *RED* had players select attributes - such as 'class'/'role' or background - which then came to form the basis of their narrative and gameplay experiences. In both instances, players and I engaged in conversational collaboration throughout this process. In this section, I outline how my players reconciled this information into their understanding of avatars during character-creation in collaboration with the GM.

My journaling illuminated two parallel player-creativities. On one hand, they selected attributes as game-mechanics, regarded as strategic gameplay elements, with potentially no eye for storytelling.

Secondly, these attributes are associated with storytelling information in the core rulebooks, which players can optionally regard as base elements of characterisation, where game mechanics were metaphorical of narrative information, and vice-versa (as mentioned in previous section). In such cases, storytelling information granted narrative significance to game-mechanical actions.

Which perspective a player takes can be linked to their conscious or unconscious framing of the avatar's purpose; "One's relationship to one's character… depends… on one's relative creative agenda and player motivation" (Bowman and Schrier, 2018). Banks (2015) delineates four possible relationships MMORPG players can have with their characters ("Object, Me, Symbiote, Other"), whilst Bowman (2) delineates nine categories based in how avatars intersect players' self-identity (doppelganger, idealised, repressed, etc), drawing on Jungian psychology. Similarly ideas are explored in TTRPG discourse. Designer Ron Edwards' (2001) 'GSN' theory roughly splits TTRPG player behaviour/goals/motivations into the categories of 'Gamist' (playing with strategy in pursuit of victory conditions, especially in a player-versus-player setting), 'Simulationist' (Exploration, with strong logical consistency) and 'Narrativist' (playing to create fiction). In the latter Edwards acknowledges "The characters are formal protagonists… and the players are often considered co-authors"

We therefore understand that for some of my players, creating a character was primarily a gameplay-strategic exercise, with little eye for storytelling: Crash_Override was one such character, with little development beyond what was necessary to access RED's 'Netrunning' mechanics; a 'gamist' mindset. For others, the narrative information attached to these gameplay attributes held equal or greater importance, and selecting attributes was as much a narrative-creative act as a gameplay experience. For instance, one player selected the 'Harengon' race and 'Barbarian' class, which granted them specific gameplay abilities (larger jumps, powerful attacks) and characterisation (a hare-like wildsman). They united these attributes with their preconceived ideas of a gentle Scottish adventurer to create the character of March MacRuggles (Appendix C).

This is not to say that only narratism-leaning players co-author narratives; we can refer to Pearce's discussion of narrative operators to deduce that even strategy-oriented play experiences create an "Experiential" narrative which "develops out of the inherent 'conflict' of the game…" (2004). In the company of other players, who may regard these experiential narratives and translate them into more recognisably fictive narrative moments (such prompting a player to narratively 'flavour' a game-mechanical action, as between Frae and Buguthy in D&D-17), it is clear that even gamist players must be considered narrative co-authors through their player-characters.

Players are perfectly capable of constructing their own characters, provided they understand the often complicated rules of how to do so. However, the majority of my players collaborated with me as the GM to ensure their player-characters fit within the fiction and ethos of the campaign. Both artefacts invite this collaboration; The *RED* rulebook states: "Finding a reason for your Nomad to be in the city shouldn't be difficult…Talk to the GM, talk to the other players. You'll figure it out." (p69) Likewise the *D&D* Player's handbook advises: "Talk with your DM about an appropriate origin…" (p47).

For instance: "Artemisia's... player wanted... a french/italian feel, so I… interpret[ed]... Astral Elves to match this in terms of accent, climate and culture" I edited 'official' narrative information attached to rules to match player creative desires, carving my world to fit specific player-characters into it (code #17). Cover notes similar interactions being described to her by the GM Monte Cook; "...players… wanted to create a character with an Arabian… background, so Cook incorporated a setting where this was possible" (Personal Communication, 2009, quoted by Cover, 2010)
This process of changing or adding to official content is called 'Homebrew' (Nations, 2020).
Wee highlights that the relationship between players and rulebooks is "creative, appropriative, even irreverent" (2024), making direct links with Jenkins' 'textual poaching' (1992)- the official sourcebook for the 'Astral Elf' playable race "Spelljammer; Adventures In Space" (Perkins, 2022) describes them as immortal spacefaring wanderers, often "prone to melancholy". Artemisia, a practically-minded futurist with a passionate personality, did not fit this description, nor did the earthbound 'Astral Empire' I wrote as her homeland. Without ever directly consulting the lore present in the official text, we took the gameplay elements and general concept of the Astral Elf and used it as the foundations for our creative dialogue- indeed, I never looked at the official rulebook myself, instead referencing online fan-made databases to access the content. This once again highlights that TTRPG rulebooks are the foundations, not authorities, on the authorial dialogues of play; creative authority is enshrined in the social bonds between players, not the game-text.

The social contract of TTRPG play does not empower players to ignore rules like a GM is, and as such the GM must subvert rules on the player's behalf. I observed I often facilitated player authorship, by doing so, with 'the rule of cool' often being observed as a cultural virtue. For example, I allowed Knightrider to sleep at his workplace without gameplay penalty, despite the rulebook stating "a player's workplace [never] count[s] as housing" (Pondsmith 2020, p.59), since Knightrider's player did not describe Knightrider as compass-mentis; the concept of a psychotic biker living in a garage was a more entertaining concept that the rules, applied strictly, would have allowed.

I noted the negative moniker ‘rules lawyer’; “If it's funny and makes sense, let the players do it. The 'rule of cool' should be at the forefront- no-one likes a rules-lawyer” (quote #140). These two turns of phrase align to demonstrate a clear cultural philosophy where TTRPG ‘rules-as-written’ exist purely to facilitate enjoyable play- GMs can and should disregard them if doing so better facilitates the players’ sense of authorship.

One novel from of co-creativity was discusses creating character appearance (Code #8). Several means express visual identity, chiefly the portrait box on official character-sheets or physical or virtual miniatures. I conversed with players as I designed… virtual Minis. As I noted: “Each player discussed their character with me, I would… model a virtual miniature… going back-and-forth… until we were both happy”. (Appendix C) My data identified no fandom discourse regarding this practise.

To divide the power dynamics of the character-creation dialogue, as the DM my choice of TTRPG and authorial intent towards plot and world (e.g. Scottish-inspired setting, morally good characters, etc.) defined a possibility space for player-character creation; players then explored this space creatively using the rulebooks and my homebrew world as tools, but invoking my authority to bend or ignore aspects of those tools if doing so better facilitated player-character expression.

Ultimately, the process of creating a player-character is a declaration of the player’s agenda, goals, and motivations regarding their future interactions with the game and its fictional world. It is culturally accepted that the GM’s role is to judge appropriate moments of bending or subverting the rulebook to facilitate a coherent, balanced creative experience for all players.

When the final player-character is rendered, they are simultaneously an embodiment of the gameplay strategies the player intends to utilise, and an embodiment of the type of contributions they wish to make to the authorial dialogue. The player-character is the player’s avatar, “A delegate, a tool or instrument allowing an agency to transmit signification to a parallel world.” (Little 1999)”, Since they embody both gameplay and narrative player-attitudes, they can be considered simultaneously as what I call ‘avatars of strategy’ and ‘avatars of persona’. These are two layers, gameplay mechanic and fictional character, which complement each other yet appeal to different mindsets- gamism/silulationism and narrativism respectively.
Different players place different emphases on these two sides of their avatar, yet the final ‘player-character’ is both, simultaneously, and can be perceived as such by the player in question, the GM, other players, or the larger fandom. The process of creating a player-character is the process of

creating an embodiment of intent, including preferences towards gameplay or narrative play, as well as the more discrete approaches within these umbrellas.

As demonstrable by both artefacts' optional diceroll-based character creation, it is entirely possible for a player to create a player-character without mentally participating in strategisation or narrative planning; both features can be abdicated on the player's whims.

Once a player character exists, created, however, a general schema for player behaviour has been set, the player now has a definitive personality, a backstory, and a set of gameplay strengths, weaknesses and game-mechanical capabilities that define their experience of the game. Players can then rely upon this schema to guide their decision-making and thus their contribution to the authorial dialogue, inhabiting the strategies and persona embedded in their avatar. In the next section, I discuss how this inhabitiation was observed during my recorded play sessions and how this commented on the relationship between GM and Players.

5.1.3: Inhabiting player-characters

I have already discussed how the character-creation process is a declaration of intent regarding a player's preferred means of interaction, strategy, and narrative. In this section, I explore how these schemas translate into contributions to ongoing authorial dialogues during play.

The varied experiences players can get from playing a TTRPG depend on their methods of engagement, and from both the perspective of narrative and strategy, the player's avatar acts as a palette of easily accessible options for potential actions. I here examine how the inhabitation of avatars affects and facilitates each players' desired experiences.

Whilst I have already explored the academic difficulty behind defining 'Role-playing', the colloquial understanding adopted in fandoms tends to revolve around pretending to be, or inhabiting the mindset of, a character, and letting this shape narrative and gameplay contributions. In other words, acting- hence Matt Mercer's recommendation that 'improv' classes can improve one's ability to role-play in a group (Mercer, 2016)- Mercer's role as a mentor and exemplar to TTRPG fans is explored in section 5.3.

This generally involves voice-acting, character interactions through dialogue, and generally inhabiting the character as an 'avatar of persona' whose backstory and personality take a lead in deciding player actions; this is what Banks refers to as 'Avatar-as-other', where "the player considers the character a distinct social agent" (2015). These activities often offer no palpable rewards in terms of gameplay or progress towards story goals;

> Frae's player had… establish[ed] that Frae hated technology and modernity… when faced with [a scene of modernity], his player narrated… grabb[ing] a… [local]... and demanding answers... [they] then turned to… the DM, and declar[ing] "You have three turns before I finish my rant" (D&D-19).

This demonstration of a character flaw had potential to disrupt progress. It was, however, played largely for comedy. Entertainment value was more important to Frae's player than victory conditions; they suspended the ludic perspective of strategic play to engage in the authorship of an engaging story. Frae's player's behaviour is notable due to how it reflected the relationship I as DM shared with them; they communicated intent to express the uniqueness of their character as an avatar of persona to me. Such conversation demonstrated the underlying social dynamic that they trusted me, as the arbiter and author of the game's rules and world, to cooperate with them as authorial agents.

Indeed, towards the end of the RED one-shot poor planning on my part had left the player-characters no motivation to continue with the story I had planned- a plot hole (code #24). The same player resolved this issue using details of their avatar of persona.

Per my notes: "The players.. briefly felt… there was no reason to continue… The logical thing… was… to go home...". This was a moment where I as a DM was faced with an urgent need to improvise (Code #27)-"(we) had failed to establish a clear motivation for the party". Said player, as Lantern, interjected – "I may have found a motivation!", presenting the "kidnapped lover" (RED-1) listed on his character sheet allowed me to retroactively add details to the canon- that his partner was kidnapped by the villains and may be potentially rescued- presenting a worthy motivation and resolving the plot-hole.

This detail had been randomly generated by dice-rolls during character creation, and was not a part of the player's deliberate creative or gameplay schema; however, it served as the source of new creative ideas for the player, the GM, and the rest of the table when one was urgently needed. In this, we see that the rulebooks' influence on player-character means that said avatars are not mere

vessels for player action, but can also utilise rulebook content to exert a kind of influence of their own; the varied experiences of play can be afforded to the variance in player-characters themselves, not merely the goals and perspectives of those players which inhabit them.

Bowman and Schrier comment that "[e]ach player engages with their characters in unique ways at different points during… play, according to their motivations and modes of immersion." (2018, p397) Indeed, the *D&D Dungeon Master's Guide* presents a taxonomy breaking modes of engagement into Acting, Exploring, Instigating, Fighting, Optimising, Problem-Solving, and Storytelling, inviting DMs to "keep the players interested and immersed in the world" by "...tailor(ing) adventures that satisfy your players preferences" (Crawford, 2014 p6).

These differing preferences can be observed by contrasting Frae and Lantern's player to Crash_Override and Redtail's players, who, per my notes, "were less interested in role-playing… instead, they were interested primarily in the complex rules, the maths behind dice-rolls, and the use of their unique class abilities. They did not make efforts to project a vivid character…" (RED-1). In other words, these players seemed more preoccupied by the narrative of conflict with gameplay challenges than with emotional, characterful storytelling. Juul's (2004) wisdom that "game fiction is ambiguous, optional, and imagined by the player in uncontrollable and unpredictable ways" (p162) is applicable here, as this is not to say these players did not engage with the fictional world. Redtail's Russian heritage, for example, was used as means to privately ask information from a Russian Merchant NPC; the player did not "project a vivid character" (talk in-character, explore her emotional world, act in-line with her complex motivations), but they did understand their character within the context of the fictional world the game-narrative projected, and act accordingly.

We can see, therefore, that Redtail's player viewed the authorial dialogue not as a collective effort to create dramatic action, but as a series of solvable premises, which additionally rendered drama in the process of being solved; a gamist's approach to narrative conflicts. Gaining information was a social puzzle, and utilising Redtail's ability to speak Russian was a solution; Redtail was an avatar of strategy, but those strategies only worked because of the simultaneous understanding that Redtail was an avatar of persona.

Failing to engage with both layers of one's player-character can lead to uninformed decision-making; "Crash_Override's player asked to hack [the NPC's] brain… [the NPC] was fried, but I had established that the area was full of dangerous-looking locals…" (RED-1). By flattening this game-narrative scenario to a gameplay challenge ('defeat the NPC'), Crash_Override's player had neglected the peril

present in the narrative scenario, and I was forced in the name of coherent fiction to respond appropriately. (RED-1)

From this analysis, I deduce that the narrative nature of these artefacts necessitates that players must engage with the narrative aspects of the game on some level as a means of sense-making. Even those players who lean towards gamism or simulationism, who view their player-character primarily as avatars of strategy, some nominal engagement with the avatar of persona, with narrativism, was necessary to engage with certain content.

This is due to the fact that there is no game-mechanical layer formally logging, tracking or mediating these narrative-based scenarios; in each artefact's combat system, players have a defined toolset of attacks, spells/abilities, weapons, which involve dice-rolls interacting with quantified variables. However, much of each game's playtime takes place in an environment where elements exist that are not quantified within the game's rules system- such as the Russian merchant, who had no statistics, inventory, or game-mechanical capabilities. This means some elements which exist within the shared narrative experience are not reflected in the formal game-mechanical experience; there is therefore no 'game' and thus 'strategy' that can interact with said element. These elements only exist on the level of narrative, and so can only be interacted with by engaging with them narratively; by using one's player-character as an 'avatar of persona' within the fictional world.

These elements, which exist only within fictive imagination, separate role-playing games from 'wargames', the parent fandom of early TTRPGs. Such titles mediate strategic gameplay "through rules, chance, and human intervention" (Mizer, 2019) in the form of an 'umpire'. These games lean towards gamism and simulationism, but notably rarely if ever encourage this umpire to perform the narrative-creative role associated with TTRPG GMs.

The above discussion of inhabiting player-characters as gameplay experience is predicated on the fact that specific player-characters provide varied access and relationship to game mechanics. To this end, the majority of entries in (code #30) refer to skill-checks. In both studied games, skill-checks are dice-rolls to succeed on a given action (code #26) with odds affected by the statistical attributes of the character performing them. The *Dungeon Master's Guide* explains; "Every character and monster in the game has capabilities defined by six ability scores… roll the die… apply circumstantial bonuses and penalties… If the total equals or exceeds the target number, the ability check… is a success." (Crawford, 2014, p7)

These ‘chance-based mechanics’, based as they are around “Uncertainty” (Costikyan, 2013) could appear to reduce player-character’s specific capabilities to gambling odds; however, since these TTRPGs are multiplayer experiences, the party includes multiple varied characters. Often, the character most likely to succeed performs a given task, as I noted “...lockpicking the gate seemed… a great way to pass the room and characterise Artemisia… I set a reasonable threshold… [which she] pass[ed] with a sleight-of-hand roll.” (D&D-4)

Since a given manner of challenges is often delegated to a specific character, that character’s role in the diverse party becomes characterised by their proficiency in that skill. These characterisations go beyond skill-checks, which are commonly nestled into the role-play of dialogue and exploration, and into combat.

My notes continued: “...Artemisia could provide significant healing, which trivialised some… combat… but did… characterise Artemisia… this felt like good storytelling that empowered my players.” (D&D-4) As before, the guiding principle is the ‘rule of cool’ to generate effective moments of character-action, allowing Artemisia to thrive as an enjoyable fictional character. Conversely, since “Crash_Override’s… player [was] more interested in gameplay than story” (RED-1), Crash_Override was primarily an Avatar of Strategy, an ‘Avatar-as-object’ (Banks, 2015). I thus reflected the player’s wants by explicitly planning "Netrunning challenges” for them to complete using her unique skills. "Embrace the GM's Truths;”, says the Lazy GM’s resource document, “Players don't care as much as you think / Players want to see their characters do awesome things / The GM is not the enemy of the characters / Be a fan of the characters" (Shea, 2023, np).

In other instances, I planned characters and scenarios that linked to the player's backstories and allowed them to decide their character's reaction. For instance, “I… prepared a character moment for Dave; his father has died… defending the town” (D&D-15). Dave’s decision to pursue revenge indicated the newcomer player was beginning to learn the usage of ‘Avatars of Persona’, and leads to another fundamental point. In TTRPGs especially, which are predicated on improvisation, the above modes of gameplay and role-play do more than merely characterize. They also drive plot progression, per codes #1 & #20.

Player actions often shunted the narrative in another direction from my plans, to which I then improvised a response. For instance, I note an instance in which players made creative use of their abilities to capture an enemy NPC- I responded by allowing the party to feel relief, before revealing the remainder of an ambush. (D&D-5)

Frae and March's unique abilities, originally chosen from the rulebooks and applied creatively by their players, generated this emergent story beat, prompting me as the GM to respond. As such, the scene resulted from authorial decisions the players made during character-creation. By inhabiting their characters as both gameplay and story entities, and relying upon the DM to understand that "players want to see their characters do awesome things" (Shea, 2023, np), the three of us had engaged in a gameplay-based dialogue that resulted in the authorship of a satisfying narrative beat.

Ultimately, though, no matter what gameplay outputs the system gives, the guiding principle is that the DM can always re-position the narrative to put players back into a favourable situation for the story to continue, even if the players didn't succeed the first time: "It's all about crafting a great story, so fudge a roll if you need to" (Quote #138). When it comes to inhabiting characters, the DM's role is to facilitate the player's character-fantasies through game mechanics and story malleability.

The minutiae of these back-and-forths between player and designer are the fundamental building blocks of RPG authorial dialogues; Theme 2 explores this process in greater detail.

5.2: Theme 2 - Cyclical Authorial Dialogues.

The core of dialogic agency in TTRPGs comes from the myriad ways in which players and DMs engage in literal dialogues passed back and forth across a table (or virtual equivalent)- “Role-players are conditioned to respond to a continuous, Aristotelian narrative” (Mackay, 2001), here referring to situations where the “author puts the words into the mouth of a fictional narrator, who addresses a narratee with whom the real reader identifies” (Aarseth, 1997)- a traditional narrative as “found in… comic books, novels, and movies” (Mackay, 2001)

Each TTRPG’s specific rules-systems exist to mediate character actions against a chance of failure for the sake of dramatic tension, to clearly define the possibility space, and (as discussed in 5.1.1) grant a sense of direction to what kinds of characters exist in this world. Within this theme, I granularly examine these conversations to understand how authorial dialogues unfold, how TTRPG fandom advises they are treated, and how they form ongoing narratives by aggregation.

5.2.1: The building-blocks of TTRPG stories

The literal, verbal authorial dialogue of TTRPG can be broken down into a rough cyclical back-and-forth between players and GM, and is described consistently between both artefact handbooks. The *Player's Handbook* explains: “Dungeons & Dragons unfolds according to this basic design; 1. The DM Describes The Environment… 2. The players describe what they want to do… 3. The DM narrates the results…” (Crawford, 2014, p6). Similarly, The *RED* core rulebook explains a similar concept through a long-winded anecdote (Pondsmith, 2020, p22).

This is not uncommon; “Most TRPGs contain a stylized example of play to demonstrate the process…” (Mizer, 2019). However Mizer reminds us that “the actual process is often more confused than [these] excerpt[s] suggest.”- such ‘confused’ methods are captured in journaling and discussed within this section.

I consider these back-and-forths to be the TTRPG’s method of expressing an ‘Action > Outcome event’ described by Salen and Zimmerman (2004)- a “basic unit out of which interactive meaning is made” (p.69)- building blocks of player inputs and game system responses which stack up over time to form the back-and-forth of gameplay. Accordingly, these events progress across five stages:

1. “What happened before the choice,

2. How the possibility of choice was conveyed to players,
3. How the player made the choice,
4. The result of the choice, including how it affects future choices,
5. How the result of the choice was conveyed to the player" (p.63-64).

By aligning the concept of an 'action > outcome' event with the TTRPG back-and-forth described in the core rulebooks, we can understand that we can break each TTRPG narrative into blocks, each built from the following steps:

1. The DM describing the fictional world to begin the scene,
2. The players requesting to take an action in it,
3. The DM mediates the outcome, optionally invoking rules
4. The group returns to step 1, with the DM describing the fictional world to respond to player action.

Fundamentally, this means that all social and/or gameplay actions in a TTRPGs are moments of collaborative authorship; this section analyses each of these steps in tandem, as observed in journalling.

As a DM, Step 1 during play was to present a situation for the players.
Since I am making the first move, it is important to begin with some plan for story direction - code #3. 'The Lazy GM's Resource Doc', a free online fan-made guide for GMs, advises: "With a strong start in hand… outline a short list of potential scenes… This step… make[s] you feel as though you have [control] before you start." (Shea, 2023, np). As such, each D&D session began with a quick recap of the previous, which would begin the chain of repeated back-and-forth with players.

Players benefit from a detailed description of the locations, characters, and scenarios they are being placed alongside; a vividly projected story world was an essential part of gameplay, not simple set-dressing, since the social context or geography of a given scene could also be converted into gameplay objects at the players' will. Even if the GM intends an element to be a narrative detail only, players can choose to interact with said detail however they see fit, and so all described details automatically become potential springboards for play; by providing a vivid description of the scene, the GM is also allowing players a more extensive list of potential interactions; this aligns with Sierra's observation that "...perceived… freedom or openness, is better understood as careful worldbuilding" (2021, p173). In other words, in TTRPGs, imagined spaces demonstrate the interactive properties of gameplay spaces, so more detailed imagined spaces create more greater avenues for gameplay.

I, the GM, was aware in advance of who the player's PC were, so I factored them into my scenario-making, as shown in code #17. One attitude discussed in forums explained "it is okay to explicitly describe things the player-characters would implicitly know or understand" (Quote #98). Therefore, I link my narration of the scene to the worldly knowledge of the player-characters to create a more vivid and character-grounded description; for example, explaining on-demand how certain machinery works because Artemisia, the party's inventor, would likely know this information (D&D-4).

However, since the creation and progression of a scene is accepted to be a dialogue, the DM must be careful not to intrude on the player's means of input by over-prescribing details about player-character. I noted this mistake twice in (D&D-1), during Gilda and March's introductions, where I imagined my own version of the characters' introductions- I noted in my journals that "both were mischaracterizations… I regret the improvisation… I should have instead asked the players to narrate their character's actions." (D&D-1) Ultimately, the role of the GM is to properly contextualise the surroundings and situation of the player-characters, so that players can make informed actions during step 2; doing so necessitates vivid descriptions, but is hindered by the GM interfering with player-characters.

When the DM finishes describing the story-world, Step 2 has players improvise (code #6) scene-relevant inputs. Some inputs have long-term ramifications for the story. Others only affect the story and gamestate within a moment, scene, or session.

Players act individually and as a group in response to the GM's descriptions; this may be a reaction to a clearly stated invitation to take a certain action, or players may respond in ways that surprise the GM, be it by incorporating details the GM did not expect to be invoked, acting in creative and unexpected ways, or taking actions that are completely disconnected from the events that have just been described. On some occasions, players deliberated before taking action (D&D-3) (D&D-17) (RED-1), and in others they acted immediately without involving one-another; players are both individuals and a collective as participants in authorial dialogue.

Some player inputs within moment-to-moment gameplay read as solutions to narrative or gameplay obstacles, where players (regardless of their GSN leanings) make use of their abilities and resources to navigate rules and progress towards a goal. Other actions pursued storytelling; expressing character, creating rousing scenes, etc., even when unrelated to succeeding within game-rules; "Frae… took some of the spreadsheets… and finished them, for no apparent reason other than a

stated enjoyment of mathematics." (D&D-4) These align with my earlier discussion of player-characters as avatars of strategy and persona.

However, some actions cannot be accurately described as strategy or storytelling; they are whims, autotelic inputs that express player wants, humour, or otherwise allow players to take satisfying actions within the fictional world. For example, players expressed affection for certain NPCs and performed kindnesses towards them, such as "Buying a new outfit for Hobgob", which I noted as "[un]expected, but I did welcome the affection…" (D&D-3)

It is important to note that both of these activities can be considered 'gameplay', which "consists of the actions performed by the player when involved in a challenge. It emerges from the emotionally-charged interaction between the player and the game components" (Guardiola, 2019). In spite of some author's definitions of games including a "Quantifiable Outcome" (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003), I argue that this does not necessitate strict 'win-conditions'. A creative task like embodying a character can, for many, be a challenging prospect, as so it is important to note that the act of merely responding to fiction in a constructive manner is a form of gameplay in and of itself, especially in a TTRPG context where game mechanics and fictional social challenges (as in (D&D-3), convincing an NPC to hand over an important item) are positioned in proximity to this otherwise creative task.

Players do not rely solely on improvisation to tell their part of the stories of TTRPGs. Often, players rely on a level of pre-planning of their actions - code #7.
Pre-planning story as a player can be done during character-creation using narrative-mechanics like class, backstory and bonds- such as Rob Anybody's home being defined by his Pixie (a homebrewed re-skin of a fairy) race in (D&D-1) and eventually found by (D&D-19).
Alternatively, the pre-planning of story can be drawn from organically formed goals responding to the ongoing narrative, such as the *D&D* player-characters asking their mayor for a personal secret to use as proof of the time-loop they were stuck in.

Some pre-planning is executed in the short-term, most often with strategic gameplay; In (D&D-17), the party created elaborate ambush tactics: "...enter combat with an advantage… create an ice-sheet… float down-river, using the large rock as cover… surprise-attack...".
Of course, players struggle to properly plan gameplay inputs if they are not properly informed on the situation or the relevant game-rules; the aforementioned plan utilised spells in 'illegal' methods "...[both] players had misread the rules… they decided on a new plan."

The ability to ‘re-play’ a given TTRPG campaign is not as widely observable as the equivalent behaviours in CRPGs (discussed in 6.2.3 and 6.3.3), since many campaigns are wholly unique, devised as ‘Homebrew’ and played once only; as such, it is impossible for a player to truly plan their route through a campaign in its entirety; they must instead plan philosophies, strategies, and goals, and use on-the-fly decision making and collaboration with the GM to steer towards their longer-term goals.

Pre-written TTRPG campaigns are available on the market and popular, but since this study does not examine their use, the use of knowledge to pre-plan a ‘run’ through a TTRPG campaign cannot be examined in detail by this thesis beyond my own campaign’s time-loop mechanic. Since ‘Help Hobgob Home’ is a time-loop story similar to the movie ‘Groundhog Day’ (1993), where the story-world often resets to a certain point in time, the behaviour of using knowledge from previous playthroughs (Code #5) relates to my D&D campaign. As such, players are able to replace their improvised reactions to unfamiliar scenarios with planned responses to familiar scenarios. For example, recalling an ambush from a previous time-loop, players approached stealthily- relying on knowledge of game content, players pre-authored an approach which could be considered gameplay and character-drama simultaneously. In other words, knowledge of what game content is to come allows players the ability to make informed strategic and narrative decisions with an eye for long-term planning rather than in-the-moment improvisation.

Sometimes, player actions are obvious hooks for the DM to incorporate into the story and world during step 3- “The interests of the players and the questions they ask… affect the world in… detailed ways” (Cover, 2010). For instance, the NPC Thokk was intended as a low-level enemy, but the party’s increasing affections towards him during interactions indicated that they wanted Thokk to change allegiances and become a heroic character; players are aware of the fact that they share a goal of a satisfying narrative with the GM, that the two parties are collaborators; as such, my players had no qualms about asserting genuine effort to influence the story’s direction by their actions and reactions in the game, of placing elements in my view with trust that I would notice and incorporate them.

Ultimately, these back-and-forth exchanges across the table are the most visible form of dialogic authorship this study identified- they involve both DMs and Players negotiating a story situation to come to a decision as to what might happen next; step 3 then adds the fun of uncertainty by mediating this decision through game mechanics.

Step 3 is the using narration and game mechanics to mediate outcomes; gameplay is often used to represent the player-characters' resolution of conflict, typically physical and especially in combat scenarios.

Stories often reach a point where achieving a gameplay goal results in one outcome, while failure results in another (code #11). In both my example games, all actions which the DM ruled held a possibility of success and failure are resolved through dice-rolls, which can generate emergent narratives (code #26). For instance, “Dave’s player (rolled) a critical hit, which players noted as an improvement on Dave’s poor rolls early on in the campaign" (March’s player stated “Now that’s character development”)”- merely rolling the dice more favourably was interpreted as Dave as a character improving at a skill, even if game-mechanically, nothing of the odds of success had changed. (D&D-16)

Gameplay actions creating story beats can also be tied to a character’s backstory. For instance, game mechanics like ‘Classes’ in *D&D* and ‘Roles’ in *RED*, as discussed in section 5.1.2, act as both a set of gameplay abilities and the narrative justification for the character having access to and practising with those abilities. Similarly, ‘Clerics’ in *D&D*, such as Urzul, gain access to their magic from worshipping of a chosen deity, while a ‘Nomad’ in *RED*, such as Knightrider, can summon a variety of vehicles due to their membership of a modern nomadic clan. Thus, performing class/role-specific actions, even solely as a strategic act, is an expression of character backstory and personality. As such, by trying to succeed at gameplay using the tools available, players simultaneously author characterful dramatic action. It is the DM’s job to mediate the application of game-mechanics, and as such these dice-rolls are a moment where DM, Player, and Rules all simultaneously author narrative moments.

‘Step 4’ is returning to step 1. Since the DM is cyclically responding to player actions and decisions, especially ones with uncertain outcomes, the critical path will quickly be deviated, per code #4. One piece of advice from Reddit states: "Your players will surprise you with things that you never thought of, that you're not prepared for. Instead of trying to force them back to the things you had planned (i.e. railroading), try to improvise/adapt as best you can…”, also per code #14 (Improvisation as a DM).

Arguing the merits and demerits of railroading, popular broadcast DM Brennan Lee Mulligan discussed ‘railroading’ with fellow creator Zac Oyama:

> Sandbox play invites the players into a rich, engaging, multifaceted world where they are not pinned down to a prefabricated plot. They are not mere passengers on the voyage of their dungeon master's fancy, they are at-cause and in the driver's seat of the adventure that is unfolding." (Mulligan and Oyama, 2024, np)

DMs mustn't prepare story beats completely in advance - 'railroading'. Step 4 is all about responding on the fly to player actions in a spontaneous and causal manner. These responses could be rewarding, neutral, or punishing reactions to player actions or the determined success or failure the game system has produced.

When responding improvisationally, DMs must consider imparting a negative outcome. However, there is a line between fairly demonstrating that a player-character has not succeeded in their efforts, and actively punishing a player with an unpleasant experience - #16 (DM/Developer Punishing Players). Negative outcomes of an action should be proportional and should progress, rather than derail, the story (as exemplified by the proverb 'Fail Forwards'). One example of a negative outcome embodying the 'fail forwards' proverb from my journaling describes "[a hostage interrogation which] dragged out for over half an hour… in real-time role play…" my players had clearly not formulated a plan of what to do or what questions to ask the enemy leader they had captured. There was a sense of confusion around the table regarding what to do- a proper sense of a dramatic back-and-forth had ceased, and as the facilitator of the game I knew I needed to do something to add drama back into the session. "It made sense to 'punish' the players' tardiness by revealing that Kordak [the villainous hostage] had successfully played for time long enough for backup to arrive"- A logical narrative consequence of a poorly conducted capture and interrogation was that the hostages ally, a known powerful enemy, arrived to help, an combat ensued. This outcome progressed the plot, did not result in an unpleasant outcome for the players (the ensuing combat was engaging gameplay, not a punishment), and was logically consistent within the world; I had punished the fictional characters, but provided engaging narrative and gameplay to the players. Thus, I had restarted a stagnant authorial back-and-forth by properly applying the 'fail forwards' mantra.

I have already mentioned Mizer's (2019) observation that the actual process of taking action in a TTRPG is 'confused' compared to the defined steps described in rulebooks; players often talked back-and-forth instead of directly to the me, there was often disagreement or confusion regarding what actions the party were taking, and I observed a general attitude that the current perception of the fictional elements were never definitive. Instead, game-fiction was constantly being overwritten, reestablished, edited and renegotiated, with no event truly 'set in stone'. In several sessions, players asked me to ratify edits to prior events, usually for convenience or to rectify rules-violations; for

example, in (D&D-18) Rob Anybody is established to have taken a plot-relevant item with him when he split up from the main party, despite the fact that several real and in-game hours had passed since he did so. In (D&D-13) Buguthy's player "realised… they were not a high enough level to wildshape into a Giant Eagle… they jokingly invoked the 'rule of cool' and retconned …they had instead wildshaped into a giant wasp"- this humorous remark also expressed the notion that Buguthy's player had performed an illegal action; the table accepted this anomaly, silently agreeing that Buguthy's fictional actions mismatched with game rules, and as such his capabilities changed without in-universe explanation.

This 'retroactive continuity' or 'retcon', noted as Code #21, is a phenomenon observed in many fictional forms, such as comics (Sartain, 2025), and describes "revisiting… past stories, told in previous installments of a long-form narrative, and adding a new piece of information… literally rewriting the past." (Friedenthal, 2017). My TTRPG table, and indeed anecdotally each table I have played alongside, utilised this technique as a more immediate and granular tool, overwriting previous actions within the same 'installment' (session) as well as previous ones; this can be considered akin to editing a written story such as a novel, a process of optimising the narrative's details and avoiding tedium or bloat; in other words, rather than destabilising the game's canon by overwriting established context, these ongoing ret-cons work as an actively stabilising force for the game's story and game-rules, allowing players to reevaluate and rewrite canon to be clearer, more coherent, and more convenient for ongoing play. It is in this way that we ascribe editorial power to the GM, on the understanding that this power is usually used to collaborate with players, with the GM acting more as a mediator and referee than an authorial dictator.

To conclude, TTRPGs can be seen as a conversation of authorship especially when examined by the fundamental building blocks of how gameplay constructs narrative moments. Each moment of gameplay, and thus of story, is a back-and-forth negotiation of character-action and world responses conducted between players and DMs; this is considered a basic truth explored early in all examined rulebooks. I understand that these steps are less strict in practice than often described in rulebooks, and that ultimately these steps are a way of organising the ongoing negotiation process of how narratives unfold in a way that is easy for a newcomer to understand. Experienced players and GMs understand that this back-and-forth is fluid, and intuitively trust one another to perform their role in the conversation, resulting in an ongoing dialogue of authorship which invokes the game as a means of organising possibilities and resolving uncertainties whenever appropriate.

5.2.2: Discussion, dialogue, role-play

It is important to note that much of the above analysis examines player actions within the gameplay of exploration, problem-solving and combat, but misses a large portion of the story content seen in TTRPGs; verbal role-play. Role-playing ('RP') is difficult to define; it can be considered "A whole spectrum of activities" (van Mentz, 1981), and yet, as the genre's name suggests, it underpins much of the experience of RPG play. I have already explored how expression of characterisation and utilisation of abilities appear to allow players to experience "immersion into an outside consciousness (a 'character') and interacting with its surroundings" (Pohjola, 2003)
Here, I am referring directly to moments of dialogue, narration, and voice-acting as constituent parts of verbal RP- directly embodying said 'outside consciousness' as a shared performance of story.

Such dialogue can be delivered directly through some level of voice-acting, or it can be narrated indirectly; often voice-acted dialogue is combined in a run-on manner with narration of action, which one Reddit user called "hybrid role-play"- they suggest "Us(ing) narration to convey a scene, but then use a choice line, phrase, or word to bring it to life". This technique is equally available to players and DMs, who take it in turns to speak, creating an improvised dramatic scene- an example from my journals would be when March MacRuggles' player voice-acted a conversation with a merchant, before narrating that they bought a cloak and gifted it to Thokk.

Examples of verbal RP are listed in code #2 from D&D sessions 1, 3, 4, 7, 13, 14, 15, 18, and 19- it is a ubiquitous technique that places DM and Player on equal footing in terms of authorial power. Since both parties are acting in-character in an immediate conversational manner, these moments of role-play can be seen as the most literal form of authorial dialogue available to TTRPG participants; and yet, it is the moment where the game itself is the least prominent. During these moments of RP, gameplay systems temporarily vanish for periods of time as a stream-of-consciousness approach to authorship takes its place. Whilst it is true that some RP is interspersed with gameplay artefacts such as skill-checks, this is by no means a necessity; players and GMs temporarily shed their hierarchical relationships with one another and the formal back-and-forth described above to participate in a phenomenon more resembling improv theatre than traditionally recogniseable gameplay.

As such, Matt Mercer, Voice-actor and DM, is identified in code #29 as a mentor figure in the community due to his role as the GM in the popular TTRPG 'Live-play' series Critical Role (2015). Mercer answers the question "How can I improve as a DM" with "Improv classes! ...The idea of quick thinking, of 'yes, and', and working with other people to make fast decisions, and listen very well…"

(2016, np). As in any other medium, dialogue writing and vocal performance deliver characterisation and plot. Mercer recommends “If you're doing silly voices, like I do, keep note of what kind of vocal texture, tone or accent you have for that character so if they come back later you can quickly remember the ballpark of where you had them…” (2016, np).

Mercer’s ‘Critical Role’ show is discussed in code #23 - Reddit users stated "I… watch a lot of Critical Role, so I used to equate good voice acting with good role-playing.” (Quote-) This demonstrates that the high standards such role models encourage can be exclusionary- another use replies “It took me a while to realise that… you don't need to deliver a… speech, it's just as impactful to describe… the speech…”.

While excellent verbal role-playing can heighten narrative moments, “...TTRPGs are all about being able to live out a character meaningfully; nobody should be at a disadvantage when it comes to that." (Quote #48); role-play, and thus authorship of meaningful character-drama, can instead be expressed through narration- “This goes for players and GMs alike."

Here we see that TTRPGs do not exclusively rely on game-mechanical play to operate as a storytelling medium; the four-step process is one of two modes of collaborative authorship. With **ludic role-play**, the DM is a referee, on an authorial layer above players- but with **theatrical role-play**, the DM brings themself down to an equal role with players, as they co-author stories through a process similar to improv to voice act and/or narrate interactions between characters in the projected fictional world. These two modes, gameplay and role-play, are rapidly swapped between on the fly by players and DMs alike in any given TTRPG session, forming an authorial dialogue between them.

5.3: Theme 3 - Informative Discourse Culture.

TTRPGs do not solely exist amidst the social groups who play together- TTRPGs are the center of a hobbyist fan culture, long-examined by fandom studies and ethnography beginning with Fine's 'Shared Fantasy' (1983).

The TTRPG fandom is expansive; its members mingle in designated fandom-spaces, such as local game stores, rented community spaces, conventions, or in one-another's homes (Fine, 1983).

In the digital age, online spaces such as forums, Discord servers, and so-called 'Virtual Tabletops' have also become popular, connecting fans across spatial and temporal barriers. (Wee, 2024)

These physical and virtual spaces can act as playspaces, platforms for discourse, and/or distribution points for mentorship, 'Homebrew' content, equipment and so forth.

Experienced, knowledgeable players often become mentor figures to others, be they newcomers or more tenured (Code #29), sometimes creating informational and practical resources to improve the experiences of others through advisory or direct means.

In this section, I discuss cultural contributions in the context of (5.3.1) Mentorship within playspaces, (5.3.2) Mentorship outside of campaigns, and (5.3.3) The use of pre-made tools and resources.

5.3.1: Tableside Mentorship

I understand that this culture of mutual mentorship nurtured improved practise across three layers; Firstly, the table's average level of understanding of rules-as-written, secondly the practice of applying those rules and their ethos, and thirdly the development of a distinct idioculture which diverged from some of the rules-as-written.

Regarding 'understanding rules-as-written' the character-creation process demonstrated several examples of experienced players helping newcomers navigate the game's rules; "Gilda and Artemisia's players were very experienced players who… mentored Dave's player through the process"(D&D-1); similarly, Frae's player assisted Urzul through character-creation; "they did most of the work between them, but I helped figure out details specific to my story world". In both examples, players stepped up as mentors, leaving me free to perform my role as referee and story-world author; the labour of mentorship naturally dispersed across the table. Similar behaviours are noted by Fine (1983).

Notably, I did not request the mentoring behaviour, it evolved naturally from kindness and teamwork- Frae and Urzul's players are partners, but GIlda and Artemisia's players had never met Dave's player prior to the session- this was not a familiar act, but a value of assumed mentorship manifesting as kindness to a stranger. Such mentorship demonstrates an understanding that while the DM is considered the table's lead creative and adjudicatory force, the success of the table is not theirs alone. TTRPGs are a group effort, and experienced players were, in my data collection, always willing to share the work of making sure the game ran smoothly and everyone had an enjoyable experience.

Regarding the 'continual development of practice', moment-to-moment gameplay often consisted of strategic discussion amongst players during combat or other conundrums. In doing so, players developed their strategic approaches and skills at gameplay (D&D-3) (D&D-17). However, a more relevant example of this behaviour to dialogic authorship came from more experienced players mentoring me, the DM; March Macruggles' player was especially good at helping me reflect on my strengths and weaknesses as a DM (code #27), they help develop my skills in establishing a vivid story world. Reflecting with them, "I plan[ned]… [more] detailed descriptions of locations and characters… to make the image of the action more vivid... ". March's player continued this mentorship by asking prompting questions like "What kind of environment is this?" and "What's the in-universe explanation for [X] mechanic?". This mentorship directly improved the vividness of the story world in player imagination, and thus story quality. I conclude that improvement of the group's ability to participate in authorial dialogues was itself a component of the dialogue; the conversations self-improved through mutual mentorship.

Finally, regarding 'development of idioculture', players often share and incorporate specific practises which shape the overall play culture and experience of the table. For example, my table utilised the 'exploding dice' method of calculating critical hit damage, a mechanic not found in D&D 5E (2014) which involves adding additional dice when calculating critical hit damage.

Seemingly none of us were aware of where this mechanic came from- it seems to be sources from other TTRPG systems such as 'Savage Worlds' (Hensley, 2003) the techniques had been inherited from participation in the larger fandom, taken from different systems, redistributed as a technique through fandom spaces unknowingly separate from its origin, and rooted itself in an unrelated title as an idiocultural practise.

5.3.2: Community tools and resources

There is a wealth of fan-made or fan-assembled resources (code #12) available in digital or physical media which supplement the use of official TTRPG materials. Examples include 3D modelling and printing service 'Heroforge', 'pirated' handbooks, and transcribed databases, and the *RED* companion app, which was especially helpful to us as first-time players in that system.

Said app "Randomly generated [NPCs]...Night market…NET architectures.. helped to tutorialize me, the GM, into Netrunning" and assisted in dice-rolling for the complex combat rules (RED-1).
The app compensated for my unreliable knowledge of *RED's* systems and mechanics.
However "Lantern's player commented that they weren't fond of.. the app … their belief was that… rolling… dice was a moment of dramatic tension, and… digital tool[s] removed.. emotional weight" (RED-1).

The app is therefore implicated in narrative authorship; by generating gameplay material, the app was a source of emergent narrative; since it "Did not automatically assign ammunition… Herod Smith was given a grenade launcher and no grenades… he wasn't able to take a… shot." (RED-1). By abdicating game mechanics to a digital tool, I as the GM had also abdicated some authorial control, allowing me to be surprised (a comedic moment that nonetheless derailed plans for a climactic finale) by combat encounters I would normally have planned myself. By providing freely available resources, TTRPG fandoms reached into my group and facilitated, even emergently authored, my campaigns; by conversing through tools, they participated in the dialogic agency from outside the table.

Wee (2024) notes the use of messaging/conference calling app Discord (2015) to communicate amongst playgroups; I myself used Discord to host a database of PC and NPC character portraits I had made in Heroforge (Appendix C). Fannish tools include appropriation of non-fandom tools, not just the creation of exclusively fandom tools.

5.3.3: Subcultural Mentorship

My table's position as a subset of the larger TTRPG fandom also invited mentorship from the subculture, via models of good or poor practice and direct advice. While "[e]arly RPG theory evolved from small press" (Torner, 2018, p194)- mentioned extensively by Fine (1983)- in the 21st century, much of this theorising takes place online. Torner (2018) continues: "[RPG fandoms] often form discourse communities… [which hold] autotelic social and intellectual gratifications" (ibid). These

discourses express the subcultural affinity for mentorship, where “most… theorising comes [as] advice”.

I note that code #31 (advice to DMs/Developers) is one of my largest codes with 119 data points, most of which are sourced from Stage 2 data of cultural enquiry. Torner discusses that “While advice usually presents itself as objective and universal, it is useful to remember that any advice entails some normative notion of how RPG's should be”, and this is important to note- my data on mentoring advice seemed internally consistent, but as Torner states, “it comes from a specific play culture at a specific moment and presumes a specific target audience with specific tastes, interests, and capacities (p.201). As such, the specific combinations of advice gathered and internalised by the members of my play-groups form a unique combination of perspectives, methods and practises which grant the group a specific idioculture, nestled as one of many within the larger subculture.

Fine (1983) explored how community spaces with multiple tables playing TTRPGs simultaneously, wherein “regular members know each other”, provide what Thibault and Kelley (1959) call a ‘Comparison Level For Alternatives’- that when players experience a variety of styles of play, the overall ‘sophistication’ of play within that community increases. In other words, the sharing of collective experience allows the fandom group to hone its idiocultural practises and thus improve the quality of gameplay; in this section, I examine how my own tables interacted with modern forms of this mentorship and community.

Positive role models

The ‘Big Name Fan’ is a concept first introduced by Hills (2002) and linked to RPGs by Stewart & Trammell (2018); it refers to “fans who have become embedded in the industry and as a result in the fandom”. Typically, this refers to fans who have become formally employed at the companies who produce the media of their fandom. This meaning is implicated in the RPG industry; “early proponents of the genre were fan and amateur developers or writers first and grew the industry because of their own fannish desires” (Stewart & Trammell, 2018).

However, Stewart & Trammell also link this concept to streaming and video-sharing; ‘Actual play’ is the popular act of broadcasting TTRPG play sessions, exemplified by Matt Mercer’s ‘Critical Role’ (Critical Role Productions, 2015-) and Brennan Lee Mulligan’s ‘Dimension 20’ (Dropout, 2018-). These two are reputable, popular DMs whose work is often taken as exemplary- their presence as role models and mentor figures can be felt even at tables that never mention them or their games (Duddy & Rosnau, 2024).

Some commenters expressed distaste for the high standards such role models can bring; “"I feel… Critical Role are doing more to misrepresent the hobby than to engage people in it" (Quote #49).

Specifically, this post discusses the high standard for voice-acting, with another commenter replying "...TTRPGs are all about being able to live out a character meaningfully; nobody should be at a disadvantage when it comes to that" (Quote #48). The so-called 'Mercer Effect' is noted by Duddy & Rosnau (2024), whose participants "indicated… dissonance in new player expectations" due to "expect[ing] the home game to function similarly to Critical Role…", and this included an over-emphasis on "role-play[ing] endlessly while avoiding the overall adventuring mechanics". We see that actual-play series perform fannish mentorship and new-member induction- "more people are playing than ever before, at least partly because of shows like Critical Role"- by means of advertising and exemplifying the hobby. This can cause controversy when mismatches emerge between this perceived ideal and the idiocultural methods of 'ordinary' TTRPG playgroups, but the presence of mentor behaviour is regardless notable and welcomed by some.

Examples of poor behaviour

Fandom discourse on acceptable behaviour takes place in zines, meeting places, and conventions (Fine, 1983), and online in the modern day; some forums are explicitly dedicated to exemplifying poor behaviours.

I noted a number of anecdotes of poor behaviour (Quotes#1-10, #11-15, #16-27, #28-30) with subsequent discussions explaining why the behaviours are considered poor conduct (Quote#14 "The DM had a 'the DM vs the players' mentality…") or disagreement with the negative judgement (Quote#29 "What's the horror story here?").

Channels including EldritchPodBlast (2023), Crispy's Tavern (2019), CritCrab (2019), and Loot Goblin's Marketplace (2023) use these forums as discussion points on Youtube and Tiktok. Whilst these videos are ostensibly autotelic entertainment media, by exemplifying (even mocking) poor conduct the content similarly defines good practice. These "Fan-produced works respond to the perceived tastes of their desired audience and reflect the community's generic traditions"- and in doing so, participate in fandom as "institution of theory and criticism" (Jenkins, 1992). Jenkins notes that fangroups often 'gossip', and these anecdotes exemplify this; through participation in this niche gossip, fans negotiate social norms and propriety which comes to form the basis of good practice amongst participants. The discussions I noted discussed punishing or 'cruel' GMs who derailed back-and-forth authorial dialogues; these anecdotes implicitly warn GMs and players to avoid and discourage such behaviours.

Direct advice

The most widespread form of mentorship I noted in my data collection was directly-stated advice shared primarily on forums and Youtube, the majority of which was aimed at DMs (code #31).

Sometimes, those in need deliberately reach out to the community (Quotes #33, #55, #71, #103, #130, #133, #171, and #235) with broad or specific calls for advice like “Is Cyberpunk RED worth playing?” or “Advice for dealing with Murder Hobos?”.
YouTube and TikTok channels like Ginny Di (2014-present), DnDshorts (2021-present) and JonJonTheWise(2018-present) also publish video guides and advice that supplements the core rulebooks with tutorialisation and discussion, replacing or extending tableside mentorship; JonJonTheWise’s videos, for example, helped me to understand the often dense or unclear RED rulebook. As well as mechanical advice, guides and discussion clarify title ethos (section 5.1.1) and impart cultural values similarly to the aforementioned gossip.

This often includes proverbs, including ‘Fail Forwards’- “The plot moves on, but at a cost” (Quote#130), the RED-specific "Talk before you Glock" (JonJonTheWise), and the ‘Murder Hobo’, “A player [who] indiscriminately attacks.. derailing the narrative.” (Quote #233)

This discussion proves that TTRPG play does not take place in cultural isolation; during play, TTRPG players like myself rely on accumulated wisdom and resources granted by a deliberate or passive engagement with a pronounced mentorship culture, which empowers players and DMs alike to make better, more enjoyable gameplay and creative choices. As such, the conversational dialogue between players and developers is the result of, mediated through, and spoken in the vernacular of its subcultural context.

6: Analysis: Computer Role-Playing Games

This section discusses my three themes and relevant findings with regards to computer RPGs, utilising my prior analysis of TTRPGs to contextualise and inform my discussion of the unique narrative qualities of CRPGs.

CRPGs are based on human-computer interaction, not human-human social interaction- as such, player interactions are mediated by hard mathematical code which is rigidly designed to create a specific response through one or several rules, which fundamentally reshapes the formatting and delivery of narrative content; entire texts such as Howard's 'Quests' (2008) are dedicated to uniting narrative and game design theory with software/code-based practice. Events, responses and content in a digital game are scripted- both in the sense that they are pre-designated and that they are enshrined within a 'scripting language' utilised by a computer programmer. In other words, the code-based format means that the on-the-fly adjudicative processes performed by GMs in TTRPGs are instead automated, decided via pre-designated mathematical processes run by software, which is ultimately ignorant as to the narrative and social significance of its outputs. This software is ultimately performing adjudication/calculation and responding to player input on the behalf of the developers who produced it.

CRPGs therefore largely limit players to the rigid structures developers have pre-designated, unlike TTRPGs, where rules and their application can be negotiated on-the-fly. As explained by Jose Reta, "By their very nature, CRPGs provide an illusion of an expansive reality, but CRPG players cannot move past the limitations placed on the game through time, ability, resources, and developer choice. TTRPGs have no such limitation." (2020, p.6)

I do disagree with Reta's assertion that players "cannot move past the limitations", although I do agree with their assessment that there is a rigidity to CRPGs in comparison compared to TTRPGs due to the fact that all gameplay elements, lines of dialogue, visual elements etc in a CRPG come pre-made before the player acquires and starts the game (disregarding the future possibilities presented by generative AI, which I will not dignify with further exploration).

My disagreement comes from my recognition that CRPGs do, in fact, allow players to expand upon the text through use of imaginative storytelling, which we understand in TTRPGs to be a fundamental form of narrative construction and delivery. When Reta says that players "cannot move past the limitations" the CRPG places on them, they are referring to elements that are presented within the audiovisual presentation of characters and worlds that can be observed on-screen, elements that are

‘in the game’. However, this thesis has established that imagining, understanding, and interpreting narrative elements is, indeed, a form of narrative authorship, indeed a fundamental one when discussing TTRPGS. My data illustrates several examples of this imaginative authorship appearing during my CRPG play sessions as well.

There is a distinction, then, between the narrative elements that can be observed by the game’s code or displayed by the computer’s audiovisual elements, and the narrative contributions created and stored within the player’s imagination. Throughout Section 6, I call these the **‘formal’** and **‘imaginative’** layers, and will use this terminology to explore these distinct yet coexistent forms of player involvement in dialogic authorship. I take the word ‘formal’ from Salen and Zimmerman’s concept of a ‘formal system’; the game as a “mathematical and logical” system of rules, divorced from its cultural (or fandom) context (2003, p.51), or the player’s experience of experimenting within it.

In this section, I explore ways in which this rigid possibility space overlaps with imaginative play to create experiential stories resulting from a different, yet related, authorial dialogue to TTRPGs.

6.1: Theme 1 - Varied Experiences From Variable Avatars.

CRPGs, like TTRPGs, provide a broad possibility space of exploration and plot outcomes, where players are offered a form of input on what kind of gameplay experiences, protagonists, and storylines they wish to experience. Depending on the player’s choices, BG3 can be a heroic fantasy of overcoming trauma to save the world, a tragic tale of succumbing to hate and the allure of power, or a wholly villainous story of wrecking woe upon the innocent, with innumerable possibilities within or outside of these umbrellas; it is up to the player to determine which outcome they will ultimately experience.

This section aims to explore the ways that the player's formal inputs (pressing buttons, selection options, ‘playing’ the game) and imaginative inputs (interpreting, sympathising, ‘role-playing’) contribute to dialogic authorship, creating distinct experiences tailored to the player’s approaches and desires. As with TTRPGs, I focus on the initial process of creating player-character, and will discuss more ongoing forms of authorship in theme 2.

6.1.1: Pre-defined versus custom characters, and inciting incidents

As I discussed in section 5, TTRPGs forefront player imagination and the facilitation thereof when it comes to player-character creation. Their boundaries are negotiable; human DMs can adapt or ignore game content to facilitate player creativity. DMs and players engage in direct on-the-fly dialogic authorship. However, CRPGs are a more rigid structure; their pre-defined formal content cannot be negotiated with, they can only be explored as a possibility space (ignoring modding, which is outside of this thesis' scope except for one instance discussed in section 6.3.4).
Perhaps because of this, the personas of player-characters in CRPGs are often (but not exclusively) relatively pre-defined, often sporting fixed names, personalities, and/or appearances.

This style of player-character is featured in *2077*, and optionally in *Baldur's Gate 3*- where "Players can choose to play as a custom character or as one of 7 'Origin Characters'" (Appendix A); all of these options regardless offer the same levels of freedom to develop this avatars 'as-strategy', as discussed in section 5. However, even with a custom player-character, there are certain details that are non-negotiable. The CRPG's writers can rely on these truths about their personality or backstory and align the core narrative with them (code #3). Examining both stories' 'inciting incidents' helps to illuminate this alignment between protagonist and plot. Sometimes called the 'catalyst', these events "knock… down" (Blake, 2005) the protagonist's status quo, propelling them into the story's core conflict.

In *2077*, this is the 'Konpeki Plaza Heist' which ends the game's first act- the player-character 'V' and his ally Jackie naively accept an obviously dangerous contract, witness an assassination, and are chased from the plaza by armed guards. Jackie is killed, and V narrowly survives but is rendered terminally ill.
This inciting incident defines the game's remaining plot; V searches for a cure or, failing that, a meaningful use for what limited time they have left. The game's plot, which can be considered a 'tragedy', is predicated on the developer's firm control over essential details of V's personality. V's flaws as a person, and the mistakes they make within the context of the fictional world, are fundamental to the narrative's core conflict; the plot only works because V is young, ambitious, and naive, and as such the player is powerless to prevent V from making the mistake of accepting the Konpeki Plaza contract if they wish to progress the game's plot (although it is entirely possible to simply avoid the main quest and explore the game's setting ad nauseum instead, a radical reimagining of the game's intended meaning).

BG3 facilitates greater freedom in player-character creation. Players choose between pre-defined 'origin characters' or a custom player-character more resembling the open-ended *D&D* system. Custom characters pick from largely the same options as 5th edition D&D, but 'Origin' characters have a predefined identity, backstory, and specific relationship to the core narrative and access to unique side content (Appendix A). Players are thus able to choose the extent to which they claim authorship versus enjoying content specifically designed for their player-character. No matter the choice, however, I observed that all playable characters are privy to the same inciting incident- they escape abduction, infected with 'mindflayer tadpoles' for which they must seek a cure.

For all their varied possibilities, all possible experiences within both artefacts contain the same core plot- 'find a cure to my affliction', the logically consequential conflict of these predefined inciting incidents. This demonstrates that inciting incidents are a primary means of justifying developer-oriented authorial control over a narrative; by placing an unnegotiable start point to the story outside of the player and player-character's control, the developers decisively point the plot in the direction of the resolution of this incident. In other words, the game's inciting incident is an axle around which the player-developer authorial dialogue revolves; each inciting incident adds dramatic action, premise, and direction, and simultaneously aims and narrows the breadth of narrative possibilities.

As a player, I intuitively accepted these premises as supplementary to the story-world the game-narrative takes place in; the developer declares "here is the world you'll be exploring, and here is what you'll be doing in it" and then, by presenting the character-creation screens, asks "now, who will you be as you do it?". Both formal and imaginative contributions to the ongoing authorial dialogue of any given playthrough respond to these inciting incidents.

I also observed that *2077*'s inciting incident, reliant as it is on the developer-ordained decisions of the player-character, takes place after some hours of gameplay- in BG3, on the other hand, player-characters are varied in personality, and thus their abduction is something that could happen to anyone- therefore, developers chose to place this incident at the very beginning of the narrative, before character-creation begins, so that it does not violate the ongoing authorial agency of the player.

Choices made during player-character creation will still shape the player's experiences, but they are granted no options that will exempt them from the story's central dramatic question. Tim Cain, lead developer on *Fallout* (Interplay, 1997) and other renowned CRPGs explains "I prefer [players] have a blank-slate player character, or as close as you can get it; [but] frequently, there has to be some event

that explains why they're here, like in 'Fallout' it was "you drew the short straw, you're leaving the vault")... There's one pin put in to explain why the game is starting this way, but everything else is up for the player to choose" (Cain, 2024).

Even in games like *Baldur's Gate 3*, which are built to allow player actions to affect the plot in myriad overlapping ways, to respond with specific formal elements to niche emergent narrative outcomes, there is a necessity to decide a single starting point that all characters- predefined or custom- adhere to; the narrative justification of the narrower-than-life possibility space of player authorship. This way, it is solely the actions players take during play that drive narrative variation.

To conclude, I observe that 'pre-definition versus customisability' in player-characters can be expressed as a spectrum, with each end representing differing usages of formal vs imaginative storytelling and differing levels of participation in authorial dialogues on the part of the player and developer.

> Relatively **predefined** player-characters allow the developer to rely on the presence of specific details which can be used to create formal in-game narrative beats. The player is allowed fewer formal inputs into the character's initial state, but as a result, the formal content they encounter throughout the game is tailored specifically to align with said character, which allows development resources to be dedicated to specific, complex character drama and development. 2077 lands on this end of the spectrum, with V being relatively pre-defined so that their specific character traits drive the game's dramatic action. This end of the spectrum grants the developer greater emphasis in the authorial dialogue.
>
> Relatively **custom** characters allow the player to utilise a wider range of imaginative inputs into the protagonist's backstory & personality, but with this wider range comes a proportionally smaller amount of character-specific formal content. The plot must be designed to accommodate a greater variety of characterisations for its protagonist, which both increases the necessary budget and results in a plot which is less predicated on the specific details of the protagonist's persona. Thus, the engagement comes from the player's engagement with narrative creation by seeing their inputs result in different formal outcomes across the game's playtime. BG3 leans towards this end, although more so when playing as a custom character than an origin character. This end of the spectrum grants the player greater emphasis in the authorial dialogue.

It is important to observe that there are no absolute positions on this spectrum; completely custom protagonists are impossible in a pre-coded digital product, as producing infinite formal variations of who a character may be would require infinite development time and resources to create. Similarly, there is no such thing as a completely predefined player-character, as it is impossible to strip a player of their ability to utilise the imaginary narrative layer.

No matter what level of customization the player is offered, as demonstrated by my journaling and pointed out by Tim Cain, the finite nature of CRPG possibility spaces demands an explanation of what the player-character's specific aim is, a detail set in stone by the developer to delineate what stories the formal narrative elements will explore; the story's inciting incident is this detail.

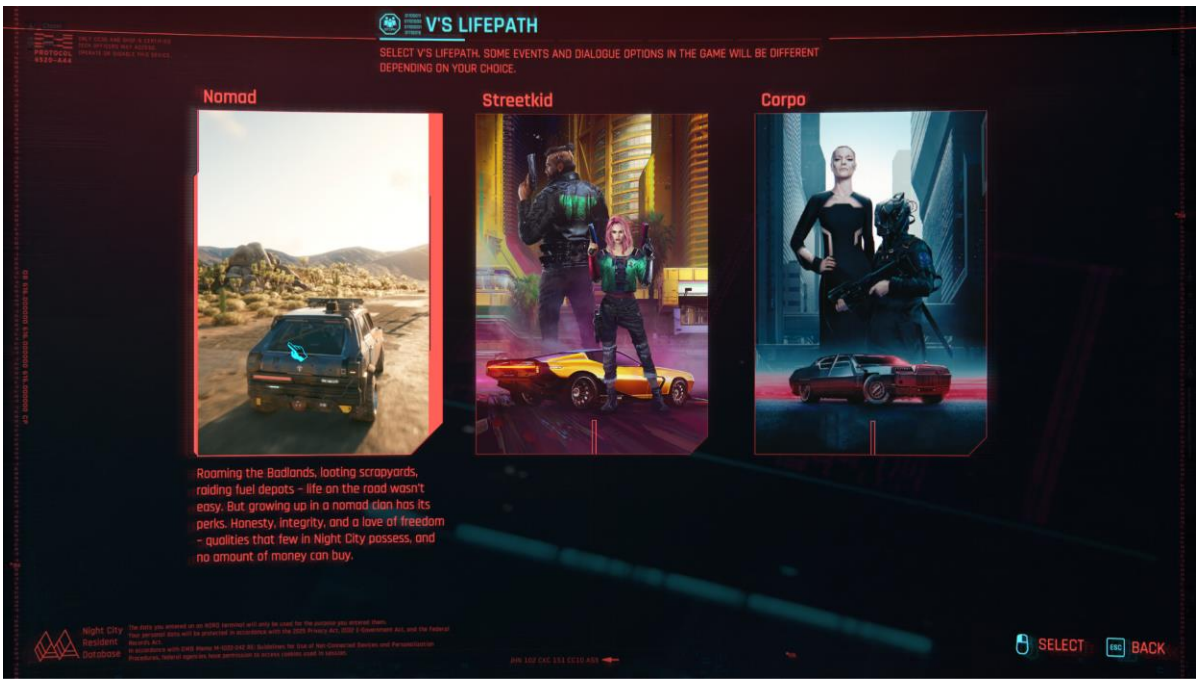
6.1.2: Narratively contextualised character-creation

Like TTRPGs, both of my exemplar CRPGs began with player-character creation. However, there is a difference in that, for both CRPGs, the player is shown a cutscene before reaching the character-creator. In *Baldur's Gate 3*, we see a woman and an unseen POV character being held captive by an alien being, who places a tadpole-like creature into their eye socket, whereas *2077* delivers a morning news broadcast introducing the setting, Night City, and the protagonist 'V'.

Opening cinematics are a deliberate creative choice on the part of developers; by establishing narrative context before any act of character-creation, the authorship of a player-character feels like a response to aesthetics and dramatic questions raised within these cutscenes. I understood implicitly when creating my V in *2077* that V has form and context- between the cutscene, the name 'Cyberpunk', and their thumping theme tune playing during the character-creator, I understood that V is a rebel in a technological dystopia, and this narrative information guides character-creation on a cosmetic and imaginative level. This guidance aligns the player's character-authorship with the plot and themes the developer will soon deliver for them to explore.

In TTRPGs, I gave only the vaguest of instructions for character-creation and proceeded to author the story in large part to reflect the players' character concepts- CRPGs, as rigid pre-authored possibility spaces, must instead dedicate effort towards communicating the direction and identity of the story before the player creates an incompatible authorial intent- *Baldur's Gate 3* is a grand adventure to fight monstrous aliens, the player must be informed of this before they develop intentions/desires to play as someone other than a mighty adventurer.

Both games also grant additional narrative information in the first screens of the character-creator; *2077*'s first step in character-creation is to select one of three formal backstories ("Lifepaths") for V (see Fig. 8); before customising V's appearance, gender, abilities etc, a player must understand and choose at least one narrative context for the person they are molding in front of them- "As a 'Nomad' character, [my] V's backstory is defined by the game itself…"(2077-summary) "[his] connection with vehicles… distrust of authority were forefronted by my choice of clothing"- code #8 (Visual Storytelling). Since each lifepath also begins the story with a unique prologue, players are arguably given a taste of said backstory before they committed to the decision long-term.



(Fig.8) 'Cyberpunk: 2077's lifepath selection screen (Appendix B)

As already mentioned, *Baldur's Gate 3* offers a choice between a custom character, six predefined 'origin' characters, or the 7th, 'The Dark Urge', a largely custom character, but with a unique amnesia storyline where the character feels an inexplicable desire to murder. All of these except custom characters have an introductory monologue. Since "6 of the 7 Origin Characters are present in the story no matter who the player chooses to play as" (Appendix A), these monologues contextualise them as companion characters as well as primary player-characters. The player can then, as I did, create a player-character who compliments the supporting cast the developer has provided.

As a DM I wove player-characters into the narrative as I constructed it, creating plot arcs and NPCs to facilitate the stories players, implicitly or explicitly, communicated they wished to experience. CRPG decision trees, however, are complete when handed to the player- this is one of the inescapable limits of CRPG Reta (2020) mentioned. Thus, it is important that developers grant players sufficient

information on the formal possibility space they are authoring a character for, especially considering that CRPG stories are more specific and pre-planned than TTRPGs. The player's creative choices must fit the formal possibility space of the game, as code cannot be rewritten on-the-fly to facilitate novel player-creative inputs.

6.1.3: Modular player-characters and player imagination

All of this is not to say that player-characters in CPRGs are universally out of the players' hands- both of my artefacts allow for differing character builds which, like in TTRPGs, act as a declaration as to the player's authorial intent towards characterisation, plot variation, and gameplay strategy.

Similar to *D&D*, *BG3* allows players to select overlapping attributes, modules of the character's persona that are also strategic gameplay elements- the choice of these formal modules, while non-negotiable in their gameplay effects, are regardless open to imaginative interpretation and contextualisation. Appendix A describes that these include;

- Background (Soldier, Noble, Acolyte, etc.)
    - "formally defined in-game backstory" (Code #22)
- Race (Elf, Orc, Human, etc.)
    - "Each…has… abilities… as gameplay objects"
    - "a distinct place in the… world… race… affect[s]... story in… small ways… gives… new dialogue options"
- Class (Wizard, Cleric, Monk, etc.)
    - "representing… primary skills… it is possible to… combine several"
- Ability scores and skill proficiencies
    - "Universal… statistics"

Appendix A describes my creation of a custom character in *BG3* by selecting formal modules such as the 'Forest Gnome' Race, 'Ranger' class, and 'Outlander' background, and combining them with an imagined personhood which unites these elements in a coherent narrative, resulting in an old knight-protector named "Grendel" (Appendix A). Creating Grendel was an exercise in simultaneously balancing the selection of modular attributes for their gameplay effects and simultaneously for their narrative functions, before imagining a more vivid persona which unites these elements- similar to the process used to create the D&D player-character March McRuggles in section 5.1.2.

Likewise, my summary of *2077* recounts “V felt like a very set character that I was interpreting, not a character I was designing”- they are universally abrasive, American, young, naive, and ambitious, but within those confines I was able to select attributional modules that formally expressed my preferred interpretation of V and guided my continued inhabitation of him as an avatar of persona- his Nomad lifepath invited association with vehicles, while his high Intelligence and Technology stats demonstrated a practical nature. V’s broad appearance- hair colour, hairstyle, facial hair- were based upon my own appearance, perhaps aligning with Bowman and Schrier’s concept of avatar as ‘Idealised self’ (2018) and thus Banks ‘Avatar-as-symbiote’ (2015).

These formal details can be expanded on within the imaginative layer- for example, I imagined my V as queer (again, reflecting my actual identity), and expressed this using makeup, a cosmetic marker without formal narrative consequences. (See Fig.9)

(Fig.9) My ‘V’s appearance

I use the example of imagining a character as queer due to the significant history of this practise in fandom- queer headcanons and readings are popular and broadly applicable in game-narrative discourse; Alex Henderson points out that such ‘queer reading strategies’ are sometimes opposed in fandom spaces, “seen, often, as defacing or devaluing the work” (2019). Yet, usage of the imaginative layer to apply queerness to (amongst others) CRPG player-characters, even in spite of a lack of developer intent, is not uncommon.

The concept of 'ClosetShep' discussed by Todd Harper (2017) refers to the protagonist of the original 'Mass Effect' (Bioware, 2007-2012) trilogy of CRPGs, Commander Shepard. In his first two outings, the male Shepard is able to romance a number of female characters- tapping into the spacefaring womanising of Star Trek's Captain Kirk (1966-1969). Yet, a male Shepard never formally expresses any form of homosexual desire until the series' third entry. The introduction of queer love interests invites the exploration of why Shepard did not express such desires beforehand; the player is able to make use of the imaginative story layer to overwrite the implied heterosexuality performed in the first two games, creating a new version of the 'Mass Effect' story wherein Shepard is a closeted gay man.

V is not bound to heterosexuality- indeed, two of the three formal romance options for male V are men. I mention this specific queer angle to establish that differing sub-fandoms, in this instance queer fandom, make differing uses of the imaginative and formal narrative layers. The opposition to 'queering' the objects of fandom, the "knee-jerk against "reading too much into things" … sometimes… means the dissenter… hasn't had to employ those close reading strategies" (Henderson, 2019).

I therefore frame the use of the imaginative story layer as an idiocultural practise, an optional lens of understanding and constructing/reconstructing narrative that is only employed by some members of the RPG fandom, yet potentially shunned by others. This practise is thus a deliberate declaration of authorial autonomy on the part of players who choose to engage with texts in this way.

My consequent understanding is that when designing a formal persona for my avatar, creative expression of character-authorship was more interpretive than the constructive process observed in TTRPGs, due to the rigid and finite modules that exist within the game's code, and the need for the game to be pre-programmed to respond to these modules rather than generating custom responses on the fly as a TTRPG GM may. Yet, there is significant space for imaginative extrapolation or addition to these limited or outright prescribed character details. Playing as partially pre-defined characters like V and The Dark Urge involved delineating what my version of this character was, using clues from the aforementioned narrative and aesthetic context.

6.2: Theme 2 - Cyclical Authorial Dialogues.

Like TTRPGs, CRPGs can be considered a back-and-forth dialogue between the player and the game-state, wherein the game presents a scenario, the player provides an input, and the game-state reacts

and adjusts to create specifically pre-ordained or emergent responses. Game designers, fandoms and commentators often refer to this cyclical process as a 'gameplay loop' (Guardiola, 2016).

When presenting these gameplay loops in the context of this thesis, we can regard them as similar to TTRPG verbal back-and-forths, with some key differences to make room for the medium. A GM is ever-present to author stories directly and in real-time. With CRPGs, however, the formal game must be trusted to mediate the game's narrative and mechanical experiences in the developer's absence, and as such the game must be loaded with pre-prepared content designed to automatically appear in response to specific triggers in the game's possibility tree; rather than 'DM'ing' the game's narrative on the fly, the digital device is loaded with complex instructions which allows the game engine to, in effect, become a virtual game-master, a developer-by-proxy, applying rules to render scripted or emergent outcomes. Thus, formal content becomes the conduit through which CRPG players and developers dialogue.

This section examines the moment-to-moment experience of participating in ongoing authorial dialogues in my CRPG artefacts from my perspective as a player.

6.2.1: Critical paths and limited possibility spaces

CRPGs are decidedly more linear than their TTRPG cousins. After all, a finite yet final number of narrative elements such as that can be produced under a finite budget should by all means produce only a finite number of combinations and thus consequent narratives. As such, it is possible to take the stance that players' powers of authorship are limited to carving a specific path through a formally defined possibility space. This section focuses on the extent to which formal game content of both artefacts allows players to interact with and change the game's core plot, whilst the next will expand into player inputs including those in the imaginative layer.

Both artefacts have a strong critical path that is broken down into episodic chunks of narrative and gameplay called 'quests'- some are critical-path 'main quests', others are optional 'side quests' containing content supplementary to or separate from the critical path. Howard (2006) uses the term 'quest' thus, uniting concepts of narrative and gameplay into a single, cohesive unit.

The artefacts differ in the breadth of possibilities that can be considered the game's core narrative; I noted that in *2077*, "Only the most macro of choices affected the plot… smaller choices were sometimes reflected… but with no long-term impact…" (2077-summary). *BG3*, on the other hand, has

been designed to reflect and react to novel player inputs through the inclusion of failsafes. As catalogued by Youtuber Proxy Gate Tactician (2023), These include backup NPCs who appear in case the original is incapacitated, dialogue that only appears to reflect niche conditions, and a core plot that is not predicated on the survival of any characters other than the protagonist, who may hold any moral alignment or backstory.

Through careful design and great effort to include content only a fraction of players will see, the game feels as if player actions have a genuine effect on the world and narrative- and thus, players wield significantly more authorial power. In other words, the wider the gamut of distinct variations a particular scene, quest, or title has, the greater the sense of authorship the player feels regarding the outcome they experience; this can be seen as designing for a greater sense of emergent narrative, and links with Salen and Zimmerman's concept that meaningful play "resides in the relationship between action and outcome" (2003).

When taking the BG3 approach of preparing tailored formal outcomes, for even small narrative or gameplay decisions, developers must be careful not to expand beyond their monetary and time budgets; The more possible branches there are in a game's decision tree, the more responses (and thus animations, dialogue, programming, etc) must be created.

It is "a monumental task" (Polydin, 2023) to account for every outcome "without breaking the narrative flow or creating inconsistencies", and indeed I did encounter at least one seemingly important narrative beat (accidentally killing Lae'zel) "did not seem to be accounted for by the game" (D&D-2). Indeed, BG3's development time spanned "nearly seven years of development" (Polydin, 2023).

Put simply, whilst TTRPGs allow for new content to be created with little barriers besides the table's collective creativity, CRPGs as a digital product require massive amounts of time, money and skill to respond to such a wide range of potential player-actions with specific formal content- indeed, these are three of the four "limits" Reta (2020) mentioned as being limiting factors on the player's interactions. The limited possibility space of a CRPG, then, is less a fundamental part of the digital medium and more a practical constraint based on limited time and money on the developers' part. Indeed, 2077's planned scope was much larger, with the final product being pared-down compared to the initial pitch given by developers CD Project Red, due largely to practical rather than creative concerns (Hogeweg, 2020).

6.2.2: The player's toolkit.

Potential digital inputs by players in both games could be reduced to a rough taxonomy of Dialogue, Combat, Exploration, and Inaction. That is, players can talk, fight, navigate, or do nothing. Gameplay introduces uncertainty to authorial decisions- a player often does not choose, but instead aims for, certain outcomes- predicated on some form of gameplay success.

Salen and Zimmerman comment that RPGs, explicitly including single-player CRPGs, lack a 'Quantifiable outcome', but this rings false with regards to my journalled gameplay of 2020s CRPGs. In both, actions either progress towards some kind of goal- a quest marker, an area to explore, a reward to be earned, or are registered as an undesirable outcome and thus result in a 'fail-state'. These include gameplay failures resulting in character death, or even a small number of narrative decisions (such as the suicide endings in 2077 or for Gale in AC2 of BG3 specifically).

Less examined in current academia is the fact that players also have the ability to declare a 'fail-state' of their own. Since both artefacts allowed players to decide at any point to restore an earlier formal gamestate, whilst retaining the aspects of narrative embedded in their memory; I have often seen this practise referred to as 'Save-scumming'. This describes the use (or, as the negative phrasing implies, overuse) of saving and reloading game-states to change the outcome of an action or series of actions.

This phenomena is an optional yet widely utilised tool, and controversial within gaming subcultures. Some consided the practice unfair, improper, or not within the spirit of gameplay (). Others believe that since opportunities for save-scumming usually appear in single-player or cooperative games (online or competitive games often do not utilise save-states), there is no need to consider fairness or sportsmanship, and players may 'save-scum' if it is their preference (Quote #103).

However, one of the only mentions of this phenomenon that appeared in my readings was by Schules, Peterson, and Picard (2018), whose definition only discusses save-scumming's use "to hedge against permadeath" (p.109), a niche game mechanic. Otherwise, save-scumming was under-examined as a common narrative tool.

Save-scumming interacts with several other codes; it is essentially an exploitation of game mechanics to nullify the presence of chance-based mechanics (code #26)- when a player is willing to save-scum, chance-based mechanics lose their dictatorial power over outcome; they devolve into time barriers,

tests of a player's willingness to endure repetition of loading screens and game content until their desired outcome is manifested. It can also be used to ascertain the outcome of an action before committing (see 6.2.3), although I did not note myself doing so.

Save-scumming is an authorially empowering act for players. When considering game stories in this context, players are empowered to rig any decision point, gameplay, or otherwise uncertain scenario to a specific possible outcome. Thus, they reclaim authorial control of the scene, nullifying any challenge or chance at play and instead reducing that scenario to a list of options. Essentially, this process grants players the authorial power of ret-con, and with this tool the player is able to author absolutely any specific narrative within the game's possibility space.

I must therefore consider the use of save-states to be a core method of engagement just as with Combat, Exploration, and Dialogue; the prominence of 'save-scumming' in my data shows that it is a core tool of authorial control a player can wield at any point to veto the outcome of a scene or action, and as such I understand that, just like TTRPGs, CRPG stories are the product of consensus, where the player submits willingly to the outcome of a game event in order to accept the resultant path through the narrative; if they do not submit to the outcome, instead choosing to try for a different one, then that outcome does not happen. Developers can only limit this behaviour by limiting the save-game system or by limiting the number of potential outcomes in the first place.

In some instances, I was distinctly aware that I was navigating a decision tree. Dialogue is a good example, with both titles replacing true verbal role-play with the selection from a list of dialogue-fundamentally finite possibility space in terms of outcome. Notably, 2077 authorially empowered me by colour-coding the consequences of dialogue options; "yellow… progress the conversation... blue flesh out characters and conversations, or are opportunities for role-play" (Appendix B). And yet, this is where my use of the imaginary layer and sense of authorial control felt greatest; my choice of dialogue option expressed my player-character's personality, changed the direction of the plot, progressed or damaged formally logged in-game relationship statuses, and generally came across as moments where I was asked to choose what happened next in the story. Naturally, this invited a great deal of imaginative role-play. For example, I noted that "I… treat the "Attack" options… like they represent… 'Dark Urges', even though I know they appear on non-Dark Urge characters", and extended this role-playing in a pivotal scene where the player-character can perform cruelty to avoid detection by a villain; morally 'good' companions disapproved of the action, and whilst I selected dialogue options which *suggested* the cruelty was an act, I knew that 'The Dark Urge' did, indeed, enjoy succumbing to his cruel nature (BG3-4). This shift away from trying to perform exclusively

‘good’ actions marked a distinct narrative beat for my player-character as well as a permanent change in my own strategic and narrative approaches.
I willingly created narrative information which is extraneous to the text- selecting a formal dialogue option but imagining that my character is lying- enriching my story experience through the deliberate application of creative imagination.

In other instances, my focus shifted to strategic gameplay with a lesser eye for narrative meaning; however, as explored in my literature review, navigating gameplay challenges is narrative conflict (Juul, 2004, p18), and so the inherent dramatic tension. Combat is a key example, relying on the strategic use of various character abilities in pursuit of victory conditions. Such a mindset is more closely tied to emergent narrative, especially with regard to emergent systems like those seen in BG3, wherein supporting cast members, such as Halsin, can live or die in various fights, affecting their continued presence in the story (D&D-2).

In combat and elsewhere, Baldur’s Gate 3 makes use of virtual dice-rolls to determine an action’s success or failure in (Fig.10). Depending on their statistics, characters are more or less likely to succeed at specific actions; This is tied to gameplay strategy and can be read as characterisation (from my journals; “...rolls on various skills characterised Thokk’s skill in lockpicking…”). *2077* replaces this uncertainty with statistical thresholds, upholding character skill expression but removing the tension and conflict of potential failure. I noted imaginative layer expansions of this characterisation, for example noting that I pretended the ‘guidance’ spell was actually just the effects of being accompanied by a trusted friend, rather than actual magic Shadowheart was using (BG3-2).

(Fig. 10) Dice-rolling to pick a lock- note the multiple advantages my character grants.

Inaction is itself a consequent action; narrative information the player does access or complete is absent from that story iteration, and consequently the characterisation, worldbuilding, or plot it would have delivered is lost. Furthermore, in some instances story content can be affected by the completion or non-completion of other content. For example, certain side-quests in *2077* are prerequisites for Panam's romance and the "Star" ending I chose. Thus, deliberately or accidentally abstaining from an available action is in and of itself an act of authorship.

6.2.3 Improvisation versus planning: knowledge and decision-making

Since the outcomes of certain choices in CRPGs- dialogue choices, for instance- are predetermined, choice differs in meaning if the player knows that set outcome. As an 'Ignorant' first-time player, however, I was influenced by several factors, rendering choices a form of educated guesswork. I observed a balance between developing long-term narrative plans, and making novel on-the-spot decisions.

CRPG players, especially on a first playthrough, may feel a gravitational pull towards the/a 'true' experience. One commenter's "I only play the majority of games once, so I want to get the 'correct' path…" aligns with my own noted perspective "If I like the game enough to replay it, it is good to have an idea of the 'core' experience to give meaning to the kinds and gravity of variance I can create by deviating from it" (2077 summary). To this end, I generally aim to complete all available side content, recruit all relevant characters, and get a morally 'good' ending on my first playthrough of a game if possible. Regarding that final point, 92% of players on the 'Mass Effect' series mentioned in 6.1.3 sided with the morally good 'Paragon' side of the game's binary morality system, according to cinematic director John Ebenger (2020) perhaps indicating that players in CRPGs tend to view heroic actions as the proper, intended, or most desirable path.

This affirms the rigidity of CRPG stories; whilst TTRPGs rely on improvisation, as a CRPG player I understood that there was a pre-planned core narrative experience that it is possible to miss out on or experience an inferior version of. While DMs were expected to facilitate player whims, CRPG developers create narratives that players accept comparatively less authority over; I thus understand CRPG developers as having a distinctly larger share of authorial power than TTRPG DMs.

Having defined my player-character's broad personality and observed that he most aligned with certain companions (Astarion, Lae'zel, Shadowheart), I made story decisions on the fly (code #6) that felt in character (code #10), or which would win me the approval of my chosen companions, such as to access content and dialogue that suggested bonds between the characters (code #18). These twin decisions guided most of the actions I made as a player primarily interested in the artefacts as narratives rather than challenges.

However, there were moments where my interest in making characterful on-the-fly decisions was trumped by long-term planning, although as an individual I was still chiefly planning a narrative rather than a gameplay strategy. I ultimately felt a strong desire to not deny myself significant story elements such as companion characters. For example, having heard from a friend that it would make her recruitable later, I kept Minthara alive, even though as the 'Dark urge' killing her would have been a more fitting decision in the moment- my desire to access Minthara content, predicated on my awareness of it as a possibility, trumped my desire to characterise Thokk.

During the study, I grew curious to what extent *Baldur's Gate 3* would allow differing narrative choices as opposed to 'railroading' the player. I conducted a one-session experimental playthrough of *BG3* as the 'Origin' character Lae'zel. Here, I rejected all possible followers or distractions and directly

followed Lae'zel's stated goals- seek her people at a nearby Creche and be purified of her infection. Here, I planned a storyline in advance making use of my knowledge of gameplay content and rules a first-time player would not have; I was aware I was breaking from the game's critical path (code #4) by ignoring plot hooks and deliberately avoiding fights that are intended as roadblocks against underleveled characters. Such preconsiderations of outcome demonstrates the role of knowledge on my ability to preconceive and then execute a narrative, especially one outside of the developer-intended experience. Whilst *BG3* has many explicitly pre-programmed failsafes for many novel player inputs, this scenario was not one of them- I ended up 'softlocked' by an impossibly tough fight and ultimately used imaginative play to decide that Lae'zel died at the creche, spurned by her people; thus, I had pre-planned and attempted to execute a full playthrough, but my lack of knowledge of this part of the game prevented me from knowing what the ending would be as a result- in order to craft a completely pre-planned narrative, a player must understand the long-term consequences of each choice they make. This can tie into the informational culture in which RPGs exist (see section 6.3.3).

6.2.4: Developer-unintended outcomes

In Section 5, I explored how TTRPG players are "At-cause and in the driver's seat" (Mulligan, 2024). CRPGs are the product of digital code, they cannot adapt to the player on-the-fly. If a scenario is reached that the game's rules have not been designed to account for, the ludic contract can break.

This can involve taking advantage of unintended edge-case inputs, commonly called 'exploits'. This loyalty to the letter, rather than the spirit, of the game's rules can expand gameplay and narrative possibility spaces- for example one BG3 exploit involves retrieving powerful items from a merchant's inventory without paying (Toyhouze, 2023).

Whilst this would appear to rob the game of meaningful challenge, it also changes the player's relationship with the choice to 'purchase' items from a gameplay act to an authorial one- the obstacle of struggle has been removed by the exploit, and so the player has freedom to access whichever items they deem appropriate, and thus freely author any narratives or characteristics predicated on ownership of those items. Creative authorship, or perhaps a mere desire for strategic advantage on the player's part have here replaced the desire for gameplay challenges like budgeting.

Imaginative play is always possible, so a player could also invent narrative justifications for the change not found in the text, such as pretending the merchant was a friend of the player-character in an imagined backstory.

This can also result in negative outcomes such as 'softlocking'. This is a phenomenon that I observed once in each game. These are instances where based on the current situation, the positioning of variables, the game cannot continue, and the player is forced to reload a save or even abandon a playthrough entirely to continue. Yet, the game has not declared a failstate- thus, we can see that certain novel player inputs can result in unintentional suspension of the game's ability to continue- an emergent failstate. For an example, see my Lae'zel playthrough (Lae'zel-1).

In another instance, I noted that I very nearly denied myself access to formal narrative content by missing or misinterpreting the developers' signposted 'proper' order of events, as completing the 'Gauntlet of Shar' dungeon turns the 'Moonrise Towers' space hostile. However, the game's narrative had led me to believe that Moonrise was **already** hostile, since it was the villain's base of operations, and so I planned to leave it until last. It was only from referencing fandom resources that I save myself from the mistake of missing the chance to explore Moonrise Towers and talk to the characters there; we can infer, then, that developers do indeed often assume a specific approach, and the player's failure to fulfil this prediction can combine with the malleable nature of emergent narratives like BG3 to create sub-optimal narrative experiences for the player: in other words, poor informative communication between player and developer hamstrings the quality of the output of their authorial dialogue.

6.3: Theme 3 - Informative Discourse Culture.

It is easy to dismiss the importance of fandom subculture when discussing CRPG narratives; after all, the combination a rigid formal content which players cannot bend, and the lack of a social element in single-player titles, can give the impression that each titles' fandom is less implicated in moment-to-moment narrative-play. After all, "...whatever a person does when playing by themselves is their business" (Quote #103), and the computer will handle any and all responses to their actions without human input. Perhaps this is why there is such a lack of ethnographic research on CRPGs compared to TTRPGs, LARPs, and MMORPGS. Thus, it is easy to assume that fandom contributions to CRPG titles, outside of 'modding' the game code with external tools, only ever fits into the realms 'textual poaching' described by Jenkins (1992), wherein fandom subcultures claim finished texts and reappropriate them in fan-fictive contexts such as feminist reimaginings (Jenkins gives examples from the 'Star Wars' (Lucas, 1979) fandom) or the queer readings aforementioned in section 6.1.3.

My data, however, found that numerous resources, functions, and discourse practices were present in my journaling of moment-to-moment narrative-play- that fandom had a palpable presence in the

ways I participated in authorial dialogues, even if my play did not take place within a fandom space or see direct discussion within a fandom discourse. This section dissects ways in which fandom-made tools and resources changed my relationship with and methods of participating in dialogic authorship during my CRPG play sessions.

6.3.1: Advice given to players

In contrast to my analysis of TTRPGs, my data collection did not identify a prominent culture of inducting newcomers into 'best practices', at least regarding single-player titles- this seems to be reserved for more massively-multiplayer titles, discussed by myriad scholars including Ask (2016) and Taylor (2006). There is room for further exploration of the reasoning behind this, but a logical answer may be found in one reddit commenter's statement: "Play the game in whatever manner you wish; it doesn't affect anyone else, so anything goes" (Quote #102).

In lieu of discussing 'best practise', single-player RPG enthusiasts tend to advise each other on game content (see 6.3.2) and strategy. These resources are innumerable, and are found in a multitude of formats, including forum posts, forum comments, short-form video content, and longer-form video content, as well as conversational advice between peers; I sometimes performed certain actions "Having heard from a friend…" that certain outcomes were possible (D&D-Summary).

I logged an example of this advice in the form of a Youtube video by user 'Toyhouze'. They list 13 'hidden interactions' in *BG3*, niche pieces of content or applications of game mechanics that some players may be unfamiliar with. The first is an exploit that allows a player to extract free money and items from merchant NPCs, others include niche applications for game mechanics, or ways to trigger rare lines of dialogue (Toyhouze, 2023). This advice does not impart values, does not induct a viewer into a certain way of understanding, performing, or socialising. Instead, Toyhouze informs the player as to the true breadth of their options, giving recommendations for powerful gameplay strategies, and in the case of the exploit, outright allows the audience to subvert the spirit of the game to change gameplay challenge into authorial choice. Toyhouze's choice to share this knowledge is an act that empowers the viewer to play the game in niche ways, but does not explore whether a player should or should not utilise these methods.

Generally, informing a player as to the options in front of them, niche outcomes they may not predict, or exploits in the game's systems allows the player to exercise greater authorial control over the narrative and gameplay they experience. For example, an uninformed player may believe that BG3's

first act gives them a binary choice- side with the evil NPC Minthara, or defeat her in combat and become her faction's enemy. However, some players like myself are aware that defeating Minthara by non-lethal means allows them to access her as a playable character in the second act without siding with the villains in the first; a third option which is not clearly signposted.

Players who are more informed about the reaches and details of a title's possibility space are empowered to use that knowledge to guarantee a certain narrative outcome; as such, this culture of information-sharing is implicated in the moment-to-moment authorial dialogues which take place even in single-player games. An uninformed player can only guess at what will happen as a result of their actions, strategies, behavioural schemas and decisions. An informed player can predict with certainty what the outcome of any given action will be- their choices are informed- and as such the player is selecting which narrative outcome they prefer; they are performing an act of storytelling authorship, not an act of uncertain gameplay.

The next section discusses the choices I as a player made to utilise these fandom resources to change the meaning of my interactions with BG3's narrative web.

6.3.2: Checking the wiki

As discussed in 6.2, I generally held some authorial intent towards the game on a narrative level; however, the difference between playing a CRPG and, say, writing a book is that there are obstacles- gameplay, more specifically- that mean that intent does not translate directly into the intended outcome; gameplay provides strategic and narrative uncertainty- good games provide reasonably predictable outcomes, not completely predictable ones, and in this difference lies much of the core fun of playing a story-rich game, especially for the first time; the dramatic tension of uncertain outcomes. For example, a BG3 player might wonder; will siding with the devil Raphael serve me well, or will he betray me?

However, several times during my journaling, I found myself referring to guides and wikis, informational resources which upended my relationship with the game's developer by revealing the outcome of decisions and strategies, and in the process eliminating this dramatic tension.

By contextualising the game alongside these detailed, freely available resources, the game goes from being an experience which withholds information from the audience- for the sake of dramatic tension, ethical dilemma, or mystery-to something more closely resembling a game of 'Perfect

information' (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004), where the players "share all knowledge in the game" openly (this is usually applied to multiplayer games, but in this context I reframe it as reflecting the player-developer relationship). With this context in mind, we can see that players hold the authorial power of self-spoilership; they can easily and willingly fill gaps in their knowledge to make informed decisions, better understand story and gameplay content, and develop concepts of narrative choices and gameplay strategies far in advance by checking an informational guide, in the process stepping out of the limitations of their own knowledge and instead drawing on the collective knowledge of player communities.

Ultimately, the use of informational resources grants authorial empowerment to a player, at the expense of dramatic tension and surprise. A player who is ignorant of some or all of the outcomes a developer has planned for a certain scene gets to enjoy exploration- they can tensely select inputs such as dialogue options not knowing which will bring their desired outcome, or if their desired outcome is even possible. However, if they wish to recontextualise this decision-making process as choosing from a list of outcomes, a more authorial relationship to the fiction, the availability of online guides consistently makes this possible.

A more informed player is a more authorial player; experienced players who may have already completed the game once or more, or at least studied fanmade resources to gain a similar understanding, may begin to exhibit the behaviour of pre-planning the game's narrative beats long before the relevant decisions are presented to them; a playthrough of a game with a pre-planned beginning, middle and end is often referred to as a 'run' by fandom communities; the following section discusses this idea in detail.

6.3.3: Player knowledge and Pre-planned runs

Each playthrough of a given CRPG is a unique permutation on the game's core narrative- different formal choices are made, different cosmetics and imaginative layers are applied, different gameplay strategies and levels of success against gameplay challenges are enjoyed. Especially amongst players who play the same title beginning to end repeatedly, the word 'run' is used to describe a playthrough with a specific aim, philosophy, or identity within fandom discourse. (Quotes #142, #200)

Within each individual title's fandom, terminology regarding archetypes of 'run' begin to emerge over time; for example, my *BG3* playthrough falls into the 'Resist Durge' archetype discussed in BG3-specific fandom spaces. 'Resist Durge' refers to any run in which the player selects the 'Dark Urge'

origin character and selects peaceful options, 'resisting' The Dark Urge's murderous instincts. This is not an exact map dictating every single choice- indeed, only a small number of choices actually formally contribute towards the Dark Urge's formal character arc. Instead, 'Resist Durge' depicts both a general philosophy of formal decision making ('Try not to kill') and an imaginary layer which aligns with formal content ('The Dark Urge rejects their nature; they struggle against it, they apply willpower to resist their urges'), ultimately aiming at an ending wherein The Dark Urge's individual plotline resolves with cutscenes and dialogue that indicate a redemption arc. Players, especially ones knowledgeable of the game's possibility space- through personal experience or with checking resources (see section 6.3.2)- can make use of these terms to frame, describe, or pre-plan their narrative experiences.

Expertise from prior playthroughs and/or participation in fandom are not necessary to create a plan for one's 'run', and indeed these plans are not binding and are open to reconsideration whenever the player sees fit. When caused by story details, these reconsiderations can even be a source of narrative enjoyment in and of themselves, with the influencing narrative details being an influence on both the player and their avatar; a dramatic parity emerges between the two. In BG3-

The concept of a 'run', especially when framed as a roughly pre-planned path through the game's story possibilities- "This run I'm doing XYZ"- speaks to the increasingly authorial capacities that knowledge and experience within a game's possibility space grants players. Players who know, broadly or specifically, what to expect can devise a 'run' in advance of actually playing through it.

These are sometimes associated with some challenge or gimmick attached which require strategic or novel reinterpretation of the game, an arbitrary set of rules or aims the player applies to their run for novel challenge or experimentation; these often discard the game's core narrative as a form of engagement and replace it with a view of the game as a puzzle to be cracked open and solved. I noted several examples, such as when youtuber LarsBurrito (2024) tried and failed to beat *2077* without installing any cyberware, experimenting with the game to try and avoid or subvert an early cutscene where the player is asked to install their first piece. Another, Bouch (2024), successfully completed the entirety of *BG3* within strict stealth, never being spotted by an NPC. To do so, he built a character specifically as an avatar of strategy (focusing on stealth and utility magic), with seemingly no eye for narrative, and also made use of several glitches and exploits, such as warping through a wall in the game's opening moments to avoid supposedly mandatory cutscenes.

Here, the game's actual story has been deliberately sidelined in favour of the narrative of conflict between the game and the challenge predicated on an expert understanding of the game's content and how the rules can be applied in novel ways to subvert the usual experience.

All of this is to say that whilst inexperienced players strategise or improvise their way through a given title based on broad aims and educated guesswork, experienced players begin to more clearly map the game's narrative and gameplay possibilities, and often set out on a new 'run' with a specific plan for their experience already in mind; they are able to author a version of the game's core narrative without necessarily even interacting with the game; the act of playing the game is therefore less an on-the-fly authorship, and more an attempt to execute the pre-ordained narrative the player intended.

This process of planning a general outline of the game's narrative is evident in the presence of named archetypes and philosophies towards specific runs, such as 'Resist Durge' in BG3.

This pre-planning of CRPG narratives represents a player's mastery of the formal narrative content, the player's ability to participate in dialogic authorship fully realised; an approach where the player selects their narrative options as if from a menu, customising the narrative like a dish with their favourite ingredients.

The fact that players the engage in broadcast and discourse regarding the results of their 'runs' demonstrates that CRPG fandom spaces do, indeed, contribute to their members' narrative experiences, that this dissemination of wisdom helps other players access the ability to create and enjoy specific and/or preferable versions of the title's core narrative. Discourse amongst experienced players of a given title, then, takes on some of the social-creative qualities that were initially observed at TTRPG tables.

6.3.4: Fixing a broken game

During my playthrough of *2077*, I encountered a game-breaking bug where a plot-essential item did not appear. I noted downloading a fan-made mod which re-enabled the developer's debug console

Whilst this is the only example of this phenomenon identified in my data, it speaks to a greater sense that even on the level of code, the RPG fandoms can step up from context into outright facilitation- that is, the developers had failed to provide code that properly mediated the narrative it was intended to, and the input of other players stepping up into a developer-like role helped me solve this deficiency by creating and freely sharing a tool that allowed me to 'fix' the game/developer's 'mistake'. Phenomena such as these suggest that player communities do not simply surround the title; they are direct contributors to the game's meaning, function, and continued existence.

7: Conclusions

Having discussed my findings regarding authorial dialogues in TTRPGs and CRPGs separately in detail, I here conclude by uniting these discussions into a coherent view of the fundamentals of RPG authorial dialogues.

I framed player-characters as simultaneously 'avatars of strategy' and 'avatars of persona', whilst my CRPG analysis differentiated between 'formal' and 'imaginative' story layers. Aligning these lenses reveals a common set of principles which underpin all RPGs:

Strategic elements of player avatars- the ways that their attributes interact with ludic challenges- are aligned with **formal** game content- attributes, rules, combatants, positions, conditions. This is not to say that these elements are not implicated in narrative or authorial dialogue- all gameplay challenges are narrative conflict (Juul, 2005). Rather, it is that this frame of understanding avatars focuses on their impact on the game's mechanics and dynamics (which can then form the basis for narrative interpretation) more so than their impact on the shared imagined narrative. I associate this with gamism (Edwards, 2001) and the avatar 'As-Object' (Banks, 2015).

Furthermore, 'avatars of **persona**' reflect the **imaginative** narrative layer, interacting more with fiction than gameplay dynamics. Since role-play elements such as voice acting and dialogue need not implicate any game rule or system, often for minutes at a time, it is possible to engage with 'avatar of persona' solely within the imaginative narrative layer. It can, however, serve to generate in-fiction motivations for formal actions, such as rolling dice to deceive an NPC or entering combat because the player-character is upset. I associate this frame with narrativism (Edwards, 2001) and framing the avatar 'As-Symbiote' (Banks, 2015).

Different players hold different desires and affinities for kinds of experiences, and their relative affinities and skills in utilising the formal and imaginative layers of the game's narrative and gameplay come to exact these desires; players therefore design and mentally frame (Bowman, 2018: Banks, 2015) their avatar to align with and therefore facilitate these desired experiences. Informative culture is an essential component of storytelling in this medium; proper participation in the authorial dialogue of a RPG requires an understanding of a complex rule system as well as an understanding of how best to utilise these rules; there is therefore an informational barrier to entry. CRPGs often tutorialise, but TTRPG subculture provides this mentorship at the tableside (especially for basic elements) as a means of inducting newcomers. Online subculture allows all participants to hone their skills and knowledge over time, allowing a productive, high-quality participation in authorial dialogue

(that meaning participation which renders engaging fiction). I can draw a straight line, then, between expertise (of formal content, established strategies, and best practise) and the breadth, quality, and predictability of player's participation in authorial dialogues. Therefore, the presence of a persistently informative fandom which develops wisdom (through repeated discourse) and disseminates it amongst its members is an essential component of all the play cultures I observed during this study.

Overall, this thesis has developed the concept of authorial dialogues, which in the case of RPGs are;

1. Understood as a back-and-forth between player and a prime authorial entity, both of whom hold authorial capacities which differ in type and magnitude.
2. Include both a formal and an imaginative layer. Often, elements of the fiction exist in both layers, with their total meaning being the combination of their implications on both layers. Juul (2005) observed that rules prompt understanding of fiction and vice versa, and the formal/imaginative dichotomy reflects this.
    a. The formal layer describes elements implicated in game-rules, IE character-abilities, statistics, gameplay information imparted by visuals, narration, and dialogue.
    b. The imaginative later describes elements originating in subjective understanding and interpretation of game-fiction, which do not relate to game-rules, IE characters' emotions, storytelling information imparted by visuals, narration and dialogue, the sense of coherent narrative and story-world.
3. Framed by players' desires and approaches embodied by their avatars.
4. Reliant on player's ability to utilise the relevant skillsets which form their interaction with the prime authorial figure (developer/GM).
5. Reliant on the prime authorial figure's ability to create engaging narrative and gameplay scenarios and respond, directly or by proxy of computer code, to player inputs in predictable, rewarding, and engaging ways.
6. Reliant on clear, good-faith communication between 'player' and 'developer' participants, who trust one another to support narrative construction.
7. Molded by the social and material methods of said communication (IE, directly through verbalisation or indirectly through the pre-preparation of code-based game content).
8. Originate from the prime creative force. Players acquire authorial capacity with increased knowledge and skill of the game's materiality.
9. Are therefore influenced and facilitated by subcultural knowledge-sharing networks.

The fundamental difference between multiplayer TTRPGs and single-player CRPGs can be understood as:

1. CRPGs generally put greater emphasis on audiovisual storytelling, whereas TTRPGs typically rely more on theatre-of-the-mind (although they can optionally incorporate some visual or audio elements depending on the table's idiocultural methods and preferences).
2. The verbal nature of TTRPGs mean that elements from the imaginative layer can be transformed into formal gameplay content with relative ease. CRPGs as a code-based medium cannot facilitate this on-the-fly incorporation. Therefore, TTRPGs enjoy a greater variety of formal content that can emerge moment-to-moment from authorial dialogues.
3. CRPGs cannot be negotiated with, but cannot ensure the player is behaving in a manner intended by the developer. As such, players can utilise exploits and glitches to manipulate the game beyond developer intent. TTRPGs, conversely, feature human referees who understand intent and the faith of interaction, but who can be negotiated with. CRPG players can subvert developers, but TTRPG players can influence them on-the-fly.

7.1: Future research opportunities

TTRPGs remain highly examined in narrative studies and ethnography, and this thesis continues this legacy. This thesis provides a jumping-off point for new enquiries in narrative studies; CRPGs 'as cultural practice' and 'as story-authorship method' remain critically under-examined. I have attempted to elucidate some starting points for studies of authorial behaviours perceptible during CRPG play, but it is important that these ideas are further examined by other academics; TTRPGs and MMORPGs enjoy a wealth of examination, yet despite the booming critical and commercial popularity of western RPG series like Baldur's Gate (Bioware/Larian Studios, 1998-2023), Mass Effect (Bioware, 2007-2017), Fallout (Interplay Entertainment/Bethesda Game Studios/Obsidian Entertainment 1997-2016), The Elder Scrolls (Bethesda Game Studios, 1994-2011), and The Witcher (CD Projekt Red, 2007-2015), the single-player CRPG medium is under-examined in ethnography, and would benefit from additional direct observation to further examine the behaviours and psychological processes which underpin player authorship. On that note, this thesis did not examine any examples of the JRPG subgenre of CRPGs, exemplified by series such as Shin Megami Tensei (Atlus/Nex Entertainment/Lancarse, 1987-2021), Final Fantasy (Square/Square Enix, 1987-2023), and Dragon Quest (Chunsoft/Heartbeat/Level-5/Square Enix, 1986-2018). Since these titles draw on a different cultural heritage, and thus have a different set of conventions and design contexts, ethnographic exploration of these titles would be a valuable addition to the discussions within this thesis.

Word Count (Including citations and headings): 37816

Appendices

Appendix A: Report on 'Baldur's Gate 3'

Story genre + premise

Baldur's Gate 3 (BG3) takes place in a 'high fantasy' setting, Faerun, which is heavily based on/implied to be the same as the Faerun described in the lorebooks of 'Dungeons and Dragons'; the various locations, factions, characters, races, magic, religions etc. of BG3 are familiar to a sufficiently experienced D&D player.

Baldur's Gate 3 takes place in sequence with Baldur's Gate and Baldur's Gate 2, taking place 124 years after the latter, although prior knowledge of the series is not necessary to understand the story; I have not played the first two games, so this report and the larger thesis is written from the perspective of a newcomer to the Baldur's Gate series.

The player character in BG3 is abducted by alien 'Mindflayers' at the game's beginning and infected by means of a tadpole inserted through the eye socket. The tadpole will, eventually, cause the player character to transform into a Mindflayer themself (a process named 'ceremorphosis'), a fate considered worse than death. The principle plot of BG3 involves searching for a cure to this infection whilst fighting off interference from various factions; each companion character also has their own character arc which must be explored, all of which flesh out different aspects of the world and naturally introduce conflict into the party's direction and decision-making.

Ultimately the game is a swords-and-sorcery grand adventure about curing the player characters of their tadpoles, defeating the cult of the absolute and saving the Faerun- but given the game's openness, it is also possible for the game to be an adventure about embracing the tadpole's psychic powers, taking over the cult of the absolute, and subjugating Faerun. The game famously has so many endings that in the year since the game's release, some have been seen less than 50 times.

Genre

In terms of gameplay, Baldur's Gate 3 is a very direct adaptation of Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition; the player controls a party of adventurers, each belonging to a Race (elf, dwarf, half-orc, etc.) and Class (Wizard, Bard, Rogue etc.), the combination of which gives them access to a unique set of abilities which can be applied in combat, in exploring and puzzle-solving in the overworld, and during dialogue; this can take the form of having or not having access to a specific ability (for example, Warlocks being able to weild an Eldritch Blast, while Barbarians can enter a Rage), or being more or less likely at passing certai ability lchecks (for example, half-orcs have stat advantages which make them more likely to pass Intimidation checks, meaning they care more likely to successfully leverage intimidation to gain an advantage in conversation).

Up to four characters can play together at any time in the main ‘party’, and this can be a combination of custom player characters and developer-made characters. The game can be played in single-player or multiplayer up to four players, but I will exclusively be analysing Baldur’s Gate 3 as a single-player title for this study.

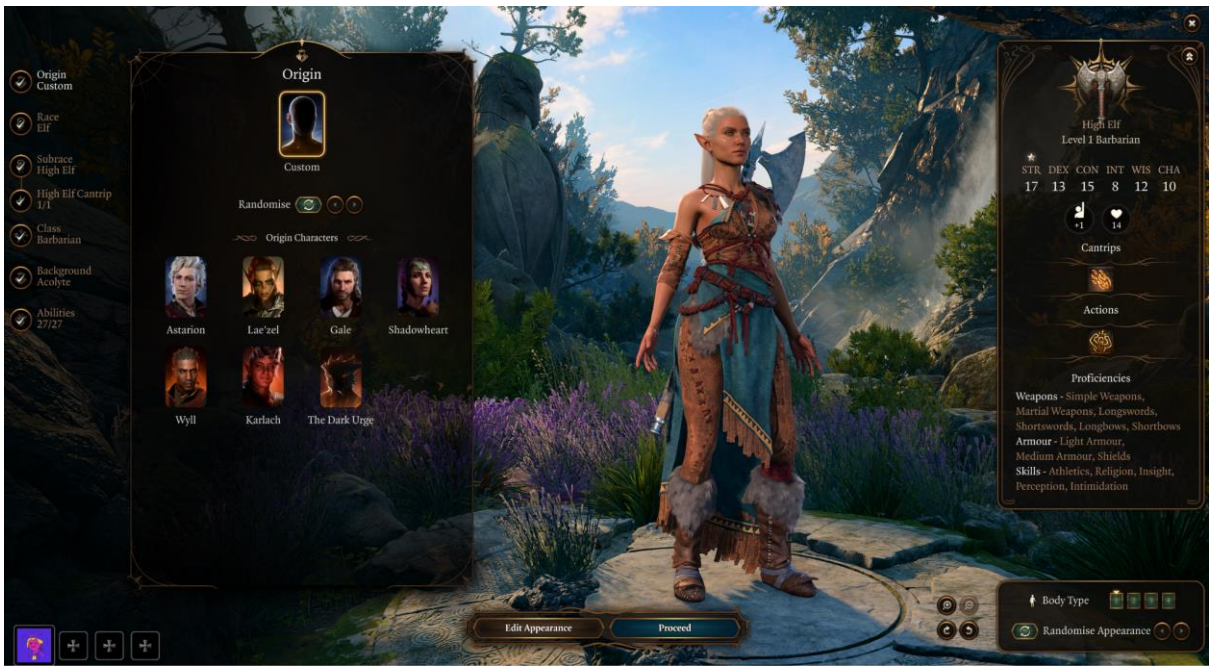
Character creation

At the very beginning of the game, the player sees a cutscene of a battle between Mindflayers and Githyanki in the sky above the city of Baldur’s Gate. Various unnamed characters are kidnapped and imprisoned by the Mindflayers, and presumably also infected with tadpoles; all playable characters, no matter what, are victims of this fate. As such, this forms the base premise of the game’s story.

Players can choose to play as a custom character or as one of 7 ‘Origin Characters’. These are Lae’zel, Astarion, Gale, Shadowheart, Wyll, Karlach, and ‘The Dark Urge’.

Customising a Custom Character or ‘Tav’

Custom characters are similar to Dungeons and Dragons characters in that they can be of any race, class, background, etc. and have a backstory that is authored by the player; the formally defined in-game backstory is reduced to the ‘background’ trait (a criminal, an artisan, an outlander, a soldier), and much beyond that is left up to the player's imagination.



Each race in Baldur’s Gate 3 has one or several special abilities that define their identity as gameplay objects.

For example, Half-orcs gain ‘Darkvision’, allowing them to see without light in dark environments,‘Savage Attacks’, meaning their melee weapon ‘critical hits’ do extra damage, and ‘Relentless Endurance’, meaning they can shrug off an otherwise deadly hit to survive with 1hp. Meanwhile, Githyanki are proficient in Light and Medium armour regardless of their class, and gain access to the “Astral Knowledge” and “Githyanki Psionics: Mage Hand” abilities, allowing them to gain temporary proficiency in any skill and interact with objects at a distance respectively. These are gameplay enhancements, but also work as storytelling, describing the inherent strengths and abilities of each race in a way that is woven into their backstory; Tieflings do not gain a resistance to fire damage arbitrarily, they do so because they are “Descended from devils”.

Since each species has a distinct place in the game world, the player’s race will also affect the story in some small ways and give access to new dialogue options- for example, the Goblins encountered in the ruined village in Act 1 usually respond with hostility, but if the player-character is a Drow, the goblins assume they are a lieutenant of their army and allow them to pass peacefully; similarly, Githyanki are known for being insular as a culture and hostile to outsiders, so Githyanki player-characters gain access to myriad additional dialogue options when interacting with Githyanki NPCs, often appealing to their culture’s internal belief system.

Although there are only a few examples, some races have specific interactions with class selection; for example, when playing as a Llolth-sworn Drow, the only Deity a cleric may pick is Lloth; similarly, Githyanki can pick from the usual list of deities but also gain the additional option of Vlaakith, the lich-queen of the Githyanki people. These limitations- only Gith may worship Vlaaktih, Llolth-sworn drow may only worship Llolth- seem squarely aimed at preventing the creation of character who do not make sense within the game-world, such as Llolth-sworn who is not sworn to Llolth.

The player can choose from the following races;

- **Elf**
    - “With ethereal countenance and long lifespans, Elves are at home with nature’s power, flourishing in light and dark alike”
    - **High Elf**
        - “Heirs of the mystical Feywild, High Elves value magic in all its forms, and even those who do not study spellcraft can manipulate the Weave”
    - **Wood Elf**
        - “These elves spend their reclusive lives in Faerun’s forests. Decades of training in archery and camouflage are enhanced by an otherworldly swiftness.”
- **Tiefling**
    - “Descended from devils of the Nine Hells, tieflings face constant suspicion in Faerun. Thankfully, their arcane abilities make them natural survivors.”
    - **Asmodeus**

        - “Bound to Nessus, the deepest layers of the Hells, these tieflings inherit the ability to wield fire and darkness from the archdevil Asmodeus' infernal bloodline.”
    - **Zariel**
        - “Tieflings from Zariel's bloodline are empowered with martial strength, and can channel searing flame to punish their enemies.”
    - **Mephistopheles**
        - “Descended from the archdevil Mephistopheles, these tieflings are gifted with a particular affinity for arcane magic.”
- **Drow**
        - “Driven to the Underdark, most drow have adopted a ruthless pragmatism. While the Lolth-sworn delight in the goddess' evil tenets, the Seldarine reject Her attempt to overthrow the leader of the elven pantheon.”
    - **Lolth-sworn Drow**
        - “Raised by Lolth's cult in the city of Menzoberranzan, these drow extol the virtues of their corrupt and merciless goddess. Lolth marks her followers with bright red eyes so the Underdark will learn to fear drow on sight.”
    - **Seraldrine Draw**
        - “Seldarine drow can be found seeking allies from all over Faerun, aiming to settle their conflict with Lolth - and each other - by any means necessary.”
- **Human**
        - “The most common face in Faerün, humans are known for their tenacity, creativity, and endless capacity for growth.”
- **Githyanki**
        - “With a ruthlessness borne from Mindflayer enslavement, Githyanki ride the astral sea atop red dragons, bringing their silver swords and psionic might to bear against any trace of the illithid menace.”
- **Dwarf**
        - “As durable and unyielding as their homes of stone, dwarves are some of the finest warriors, miners, and smiths of faerun”
    - **Gold Dwarf**
        - “Gold dwarves are known for their confidence and keen intuition. The culture of their Deep Kingdom values family, ritual, and fine craftmanship.”
    - **Shield Dwarf**
        - “Shield dwarves survived a long fall from grace, surrendering many of their ancient kingdoms in wars with goblins and orcs. These losses have lead to a cynical mindset, yet shield dwarves will endure anything to restore their ancestral homelands.”
    - **Duergar**
        - “Once enslaved by the eldritch Mindflayers, Duergar adapted to freedom with a harsh practicality. Their cold demeanours and gift of stealth are well-known throughout the Underdark.”
- **Half-Elf**

        - "Curious, ambitious, and versatile, half-elves are welcome everywhere, but struggle without a community to call their own"
    - **Half High Elf**
        - "A touch of the Feywild remains in half-elves of this bloodline, and even those untrained in magic possess a hint of wild power"
    - **Half Wood Elf**
        - "Like their woof elf parent, these half-elves have a quickened stride and an eye for stealth. Yet many break away from isolation in Faurun's forests to explore the rest of the realms.
    - **Half Drow**
        - "Most half-drow result from liaisons between Seldarine Drow and surfacers. While half-drow inherited a few magical gifts, they aren't usually raised in the underdark.
- **Halfling**
        - "Small yet capable, halflings prefer the comforts of home and hearth-but their natural luck and dexterity makes them fine adventurers."
    - **Lightfoot Halfling**
        - "Stealthy but social, these Halflings travel all over Faerun to make names for themselves."
    - **Strongheart Halfling**
        - "Legend has it that Dwarvern Blood gave stronghearts their hardiness. Resistant to poison and wellsprings of endurance, these halflings easily hold their own."
- **Gnome**
        - "Small, clever, and energetic, gnomes use their long lives to explore Faerun's brightest corners and darkest depths."
    - **Rock Gnome**
        - "The most commonly seen Gnomes on Faerun's surface, Rock Gnomes are named for their hardiness and affinity for Metal."
    - **Forest Gnome**
        - "Even smaller than their cousins and twice as reclusive, forest gnomes are a rare sight in Faerun. They master magic and craftsmanship in their distant, idyllic groves."
    - **Deep Gnome**
        - "More guarded than their surface cousins, deep gnomes survive in the Underdark with darkvision and skillful stealth."
- **Dragonborn**
        - "A proud race that values clan and skills above all else. Once enslaved by dragons, they strive to be self-sufficient, not wanting to be beholden to anyone, not even the gods."
    - **Black/blue/brass/bronze/copper/gold/green/red/silver/white**
        - "Despite no ancestral links to the mighty creatures, these dragonborn share the (physical traits) and (breath weapon) of (colour) dragons."
- **Half-orc**
        - "Creatures of intense emotion, half-orcs are more inclined to act than contemplate - whether the rage burning their bodies compels them to fight, or the love filling their hearts inspires acts of incredible kindness."

Class

The player can choose from several classes, representing their primary skills. Classes expand further on these choices as they level-up, and it is possible to 'multiclass' and combine several different classes at the cost of not being able to reach the top-level features of any single class (the level-cap is 12, and these levels can be spent on as many or as few classes as the player wishes). There are the following classes at level 1:

- **Barbarian**
    - "The strong embrace the wild that hides inside - keen instincts, primal physicality, and most of all, an unbridled, unquenchable rage.
    - **Berzerker**
        - "Violence is both a means and an end. You follow a path of untrammeled fury, slick with blood, as you thrill in the chaos of battle, heedless of your own well-being."
    - **Wildheart**
        - Your attunement with nature and its beasts inspires your rage, empowering you with supernatural might.
    - **Wild Magic**
        - "The wild influence of magic has transformed you, suffusing you with arcane power that churns within you, waiting to be released."
- **Bard**
    - "Bards know music is more than idle fancy- it is power. Through study and adventure, these travelling troubadours master song, speech, and the magic within."
    - **College of Lore**
        - "You pursue beauty and truth, collecting knowledge from scholarly tomes to peasants' tales, and use your gifts to hold both audiences and enemies spellbound."
    - **College of Valour**
        - "You wander the land to witness and relate the deeds of the mighty, keeping alive the memory of heroes of the past and inspiring heroes of the future."
    - **College of Swords**
        - "Bards of the College of Swords are called blades, and they entertain through daring feats of weapon prowess."
- **Cleric**
    - "Clerics are representatives of the gods they worship, wielding potent divine magic for good or ill."
    - **Life Domain**
        - "Tasked with the holy edict of preserving the body, mind, and soul, your god grants you a plethora of healing magics"
    - **Light Domain**
        - "Gods of primordial flame bathe you in resplendent light, providing magics to dispel darkness and immolate enemies"
    - **Trickery Domain**
        - "You wield the unorthodox divine tools of deceit and illusion in worship of your chosen deity"
    - **Knowledge Domain**

        - “Adaptable and adroit in all manner of languages and skills, your mind is an intellectual cup brimming with exquisite knowing.”
    - **Nature Domain**
        - “You embody the vast viridian power of the natural world, an avatar of the subtle divinity of fruitfall, avian migration, woodland silence, and the landslide’s mighty roaring fury.”
    - **Tempest Domain**
        - “Your faith has made you the very thunder that quakes the black firmament, the lightning coursing through your veins of a terrible storm.”
    - **War Domain**
        - “Fortified by holy zeal, you brandish an arsenal of sacramental savagery to use against those you deem unrighteous.”
- **Druid**
    - “Druids channel the elemental forces of nature to share a deep kinship with animals. Master of Wild Shape allows them to transform into beasts from all over the realms”
- **Fighter**
    - “Fighters have mastered the art of combat, wielding weapons with unmatched skill and wearing armour like a second skin.”
- **Monk**
    - “Some reach enlightenment by languid meditation- others do so in the heat of battle. Monks manipulate Ki to empower their own strikes and debilitate their foes.”
- **Paladin**
    - “A promise made so deeply that it becomes divine in itself flows through a Paladin, burning bright enough to inspire allies and smite foes.”

    - Oath of the Ancients
        - “You fight on the side of light in the cosmic struggle against darkness to preserve the sanctity of life and the beauty of nature.”
    - Oath of Devotion
        - “Following the ideal of a knight in shining armour, you act with honour and virtue to protect the weak and pursue the greater good.”
    - Oath of Vengeance
        - “You have set aside even your own purity to right wrongs and deliver justice to those who have committed the most grievous sins.”
- **Ranger**
    - “Rangers are unrivalled scouts and trackers, honing a deep connection with nature in order to hunt their favoured prey”
    - Favoured enemy
        - Bounty Hunter
        - Keeper of the Veil
        - Mage Breaker
        - Ranger Knight
        - Sanctified Stalker
    - Natural explorer

        - Beast Tamer
            - “You have cultivated a strong bond with animals…”
        - Urban Tracker
            - “An expert in navigating the wild within the city…”
        - Wasteland Wanderer: Cold
            - “You have spent endless days surviving desolate tundras…”
        - Wasteland Wanderer: Fire
            - “You have spent endless days surviving forbidden deserts…”
        - Wasteland Wanderer: Poison
            - “You have spent endless days surviving fetid swamps…”
- **Rogue**
    - “With stealth, skill, and uncanny reflexes, rogues’ versatility lets them get the upper hand in almost any situation”
- **Sorcerer**
    - “Sorcerers are natural spellcasters, drawing on inherent magic from a gift or bloodline”
    - Wild Magic
    - Draconic Bloodline
    - Storm Sorcery
- **Warlock**
    - “Bound by a pact to an all-powerful patron, warlocks trade their loyalty for supernatural abilities and unique magic.”
    - “The Fiend”
        - You have pledged your soul to the Hells or Abyss in return for a deadly arsenal of fiendish arcana.”
    - “The Great Old One”
        - You pledged something unthinkable to an unspeakably ancient entity-which in return furnished you with powers of cerebral entropy and control.”
    - “The Archfey”
        - “Graced by a lady or lord of the fey, you are imbued with all the sumptuous and scary qualities of your patron’s extraordinary realm.”
- **Wizard**
    - “Wizards master the arcane by specialising in individual schools of magic, combining ancient spells with modern research.”

The player can choose from the following backgrounds;

- **Acolyte**
    - “You have spent your life in service to a temple, learning sacred rites and providing sacrifices to the god or gods you worship. Serving the gods and discovering their sacred works will guide you to greatness.”
- **Charlatan**
    - “You’re an expert in manipulation, prone to exaggeration and more than happy to profit from it. Bending the truth and turning allies against each other will lead to greater success down the road.”
- **Criminal**

    - “You have a history of breaking the law and survive by leveraging less-than-legal connections. Profiting from criminal enterprise will lead to greater opportunities in the future.”
- **Entertainer**
    - “You live to sway and subvert your audience, engaging common crowds and high society alike. Preserving art and bringing joy to the hapless and downtrodden heightens your charismatic aura.”
- **Folk Hero**
    - “You’re a champion of the common people, challenging tyrants and monsters to protect the helpless. Saving innocents in imminent danger will make your legend grow.”
- **Guild Artisan**
    - “Your skill in a particular craft has earned you membership in a mercantile guild, offering privileges and protections while engaging in your art. Repairing and discovering rare crafts will bring new inspirations.”
- **Noble**
    - “You were raised in a family among the social elite, accustomed to power and privilege. Accumulating renown, power, and loyalty will raise your status.”
- **Outlander**
    - “You grew up in the wilds, learning to survive far from the comforts of civilization. Surviving unusual hazards of the wild will enhance your prowess and understanding.”
- **Sage**
    - “You are curious and well-read, with an unending thirst for knowledge. Learning about rare lore of the world will inspire you to put this knowledge to greater purpose.”
- **Soldier**
    - “You are trained in battlefield tactics and combat, having served in a militia, mercenary group or officer corps. Show smart tactics and bravery on the battlefield to enhance your prowess.”
- **Urchin**
    - “After surviving a poor and bleak childhood, you know how to make the most out of very little. Using your street smarts bolsters your spirit for the journey ahead.”

Ability Scores and Skill Proficiencies.

Characters in Baldur’s Gate 3 have a list of universal Ability scores; every player-character, non-player character, monster, and construct has a number assigned with the following stats;

- **Strength**
    - “Muscles and physical power. Affects your effectiveness with melee weapons. Also determines how far you can jump and how much you can carry.”
- **Dexterity**
    - “Agility, reflexes, and balance. Affects your effectiveness with ranged and Finesse weapons. Also affects your Initiative and Armour Class”.
- **Constitution**
    - “Stamina and physical endurance. Affects your Hit Point maximum”
- **Intelligence**

    - “Memory and Mental power. Improves spellcasting for Wizards.
- **Wisdom**
    - “Senses and Intuition. Improves spellcasting for clerics, druids and rangers”
- **Charisma**
    - “Force of personality. Improves spellcasting for bards, paladins, sorcerers and warlocks. Influences traders’ prices”

In addition to this, each humanoid character has a list of the game’s skills, each giving a modifier which is calculated using the character’s main attributes. Each character is proficient in a selection of these skills, granting a bonus to the modifier. When a character attempts an action related to a skill, the modifier is added/subtracted from a dice roll and compared to a threshold value to determine success or failure. The skills are as follows;

- **Athletics**
    - “Stay fit. Perform physical stunts. Helps you shove and resist being shoved.”
- **Acrobatics**
    - “Keep your balance. Land on your feet. Helps you resist being shoved.”
- **Sleight of Hand**
    - “Wield nimble fingers. Steal stuff. Helps you pick locks and pockets, and disarm traps.”
- **Stealth**
    - “Stay out of sight. Melt into the shadows. Helps you with hiding.”
- **Arcana**
    - “Recognise magic. Interact with enchanted items.”
- **History**
    - Remember the past- of the world and its people”
- **Investigation**
    - “Analyse clues. Solve mysteries.”
- **Nature**
    - “Recognise plants and animals. Hug trees.”
- **Religion**
    - “Recognise deities. Understand holy rites.”
- **Animal handling**
    - “Influence animals. Pet all of the dogs.”
- **Insight**
    - “Read people and situations. Detect lies.”
- **Medicine**
    - “Recognise symptoms. Diagnose disease.”
- **Perception**
    - “Observe your environment. Spot hidden details.”
- **Survival**
    - “Stay alive in the wilds. Track prey.”
- **Deception**
    - “Lie and cheat. Manipulate the truth.”
- **Intimidation**
    - “Be a bully. Threaten and induce fear.”
- **Performance**
    - “Entertain audiences. Command the stage.”
- **Persuasion**

- “Turn on the charm. Coax and cajole.”

Example character

Here is an example of a finished custom character. I was guided by the idea of a character who is a knight-like kind-hearted warrior wielding a bow and accompanied by animals.

The character I created is a Forest Gnome, giving him advantage on Charisma, Intelligence and Wisdom saving throws, as well as access to the Speak With Animals spell and Darkvision for seeing in the dark.

He is a ranger, meaning he specialises in hunting and tracking; I chose “Beast Tamer” as my natural explorer trait, giving me the ability to summon animal familiars, and “Ranger Knight” as my favoured enemy trait to gain proficiency in Heavy armour and History.

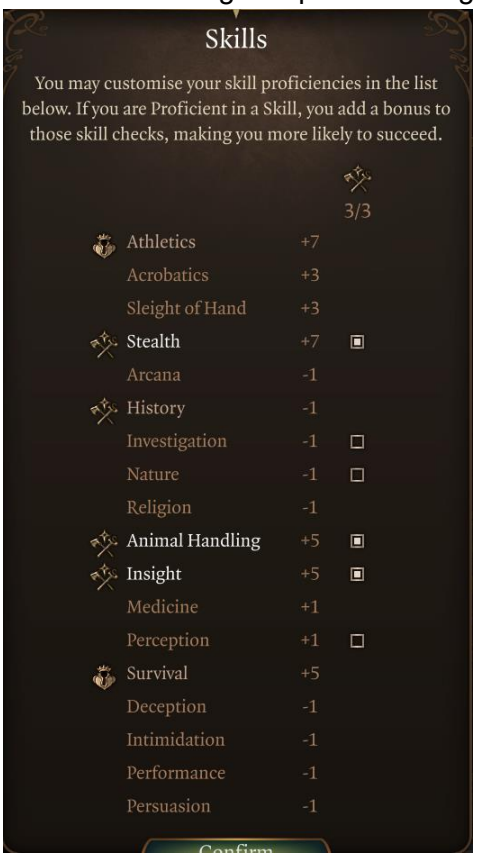
The result of this combination is a character who can use both ranged and melee weapons, does not primarily use combat magic, is able to use heavy armour and can interact with animals; this works as a useful gameplay style but also very clearly works to characterise the build as a person, a character with a backstory.

I then chose the ‘Outlander’ background, imagining a character who has lived much of their lives in the wilderness amongst beasts. I imagined that the character was loyal to their homeland and saw themselves as its protector, hunting monsters and evil people before retreating to a peaceful solitude.

Bearing all this in mind, I chose to focus on ‘Strength’, ‘Dexterity’, and ‘Constitution’ as the character’s main stats; these stats focus on using ranged weapons and melee weapons in combat while being quite resilient to damage. I left ‘Intelligence’ and ‘Charisma’ very low, knowing that I will not need to use them offensively and when they are used defensively I have advantage on saving throws to help mitigate my character's weakness in this area.

However, I chose to take some points from ‘Constitution’ and instead put them in ‘Wisdom’, arguing that this character is an older man who would naturally have gathered some wisdom from his travels; it was not until I made this decision that I noticed rangers also use Wisdom as their spellcasting stat, so any spells I did acquire along the way would be more likely to succeed as a result of this decision.

Next, I chose my skill proficiencies; my class and background had already given me proficiency in Athletics, History, and Survival; from the options provided by my class I then picked Stealth, Animal Handling and Insight, imagining a wise and stealthy hunter alongside an animal hunting companion as a guiding concept.



Finally, I edited my character’s appearance to match the build I had created for him.
I chose to give him tan skin and freckles, reflecting his lifetime spent in sunlight, and a scar, which I assume was given to him by some beast or monster. I chose voice #7 on instinct that it fits an older, assured character.

I added a subtle facial art and eyeshadow, both in green to reflect a connection with nature and a degree of self-decoration. His eyes were brown as this aesthetically matched his tanned skin-tone. A set of fang-like earrings tie him further to animals.

The character’s hair was the “Piranha tooth mohawk”, a wilder hairstyle that was created by braiding rather than trimming the hair- a character out in the wilds has less access to a barber, after all. I then chose a black hair colour with a greying and a subtle green highlight, implying the character to be an older man who has either intentionally camouflaged his hair or accidentally dyed it by rolling around in the grass too much. Finally, a beard tied in a simple knot made the character appear straightforward and practical; this person cares for their appearance, but does not cut their hair or shave often.

Finally, it came time to name my character; given his connection with beasts and his home far away from civilization, I chose to name him Grendel, after the monster from 'Beowulf'.

Origin Characters

6 of the 7 Origin Characters are present in the story no matter who the player chooses to play as, as they appear are recruitable companions from during the game's opening act, and will follow the player until the story's end; in other words, the narrative is written to assume that no matter what, the player will be accompanied by at least some of these characters, although it is possible that the player will choose not to be accompanied by any of them; this would be an interesting experiment to run.

Origin characters each have a special monologue that can be played within the character editor; this monologue introduces the character's personality as well as some information on their personal predicaments; Astarion is the spawn of an evil vampire lord bent on revenge, Lae'zel is the soldier of a god-queen who has travelled the astral plane and is seeking to kill a mindflayer as proof of her devotion, etc.

It is important to note that if these origin characters are instead recruited as NPC companions, parts of their backstory that take time and a positive relationship before they are revealed can actually be spoiled by these monologues; for example, Astarion does not immediately reveal that he is a Vampire spawn, and takes even longer to reveal that he is on a revenge quest. As such, playing through these monologues is an optional introduction to the character's inner self, to things that they won't necessarily share with others they do not trust.

Origin characters each have their own unique story moments that do not appear if they are instead chosen as companion characters; Gale, for example, has a pet Tressym (a cat-like magical creature) named Tara who will appear during act 1 if Gale is chosen as an origin character; if not, Tara does not appear at all until act 3. Mapping all of these moments would be incredibly time-consuming, so instead we will focus our attention on 'The Dark Urge' as an example.

The Dark Urge

'The Dark Urge', sometimes nicknamed "Durge" by the player community, is special amongst Origin Characters; they are not present in the game as an NPC (although a corpse resembling their default design can be found in act 3 if they are not selected), and they are fully customizable in terms of race, class, appearance, voice and name.

They have a unique side-story of their own, similar to other Origin characters. Specifically, The Dark Urge suffers from amnesia, a common story trope especially in RPGs, and also feels an unnatural desire to kill which the player can choose to resist or indulge, which can affect the story in ways with within and outside the player's influence; for example, during Act 1 Durge will awaken to find they have slaughtered the Tiefling Bard Alfira in their sleep. Even if a player attempts to avoid this by knocking Alfira unconscious or some other means, a backup was planned in the form of Quil, a Silver Dragonborn who appears in Alfira's stead and is murdered all the same; this moment of slaughter is as involuntary for the player as it is for Durge.

From here, The Dark Urge's storyline manifests parallel to the main quest; a demonic butler named Scleretas Fel will often appear at long rests and urge the player to commit acts of murder, rewarding them with unique items for doing so; one example comes in Act 2 where the cleric Isobel is marked as a target of Durge's urge to murder; killing her is listed as a quest to be completed, even though this presumably results in very negative outcomes for the innocent NPCs under her protection.

Thus, The Dark Urge projects a set of choices for the player; do you resist The Dark Urge, and create a version of the story about overcoming one's evil nature, or do you give in to the urges and commit to a murderous playthrough that will surely doom your relationship with several characters and ultimately ensure an 'evil' ending? Or, perhaps, do you choose to hybridise these approaches, and role-play as a Durge who is resisting their dark urges unsuccessfully?

I have (unwillingly) seen spoilers for The Dark Urge's storyline on the internet; The Dark Urge is a Bhaalspawn, the child of Bhaal, the god of murder. One of the game's major villains, Orin the Red, is also a Bhaalspawn, and I am under the impression that a large part of the Dark Urge storyline resolves around the time of meeting and battling her in Act 3. I also know that should The Dark Urge indulge their desire to kill, they can eventually unlock a "Slayer" form, where they take the form of a massive demonic beast.

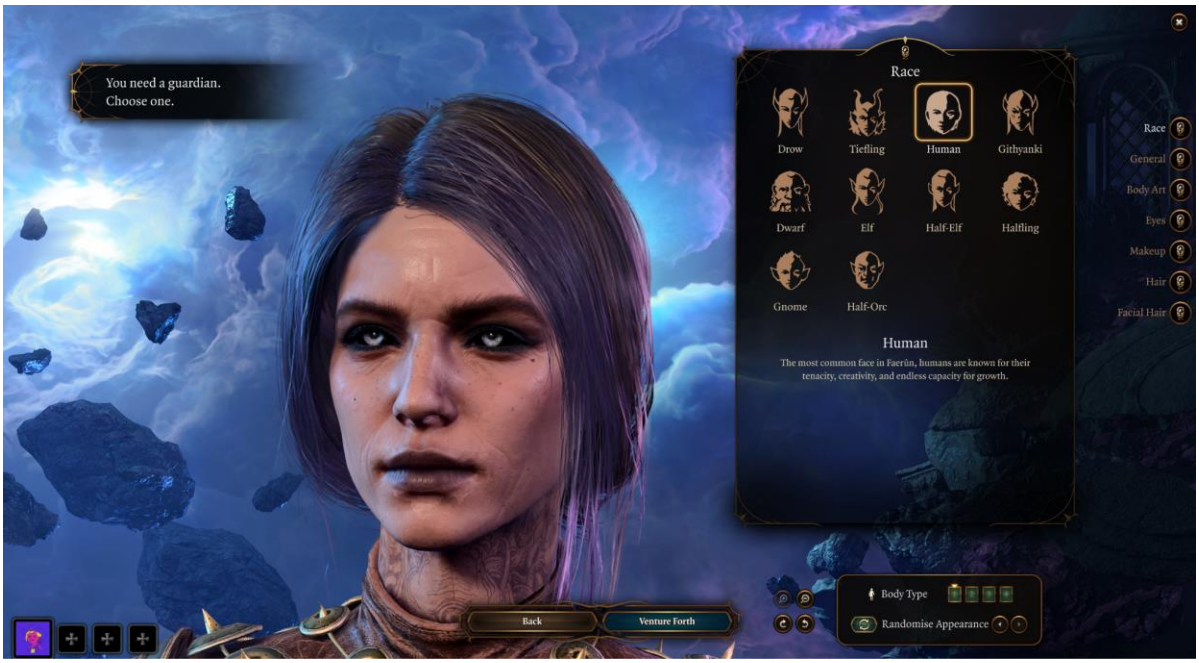
For our main playthrough, I will be playing as The Dark Urge; my Dark Urge is a Half-Orc Rogue / Fighter named Thokk, who will generally be taking the path of resisting their dark urges.

Guardians

In addition to their player-character, the player is also invited to customise a ‘guardian’ for their character. This customisation is purely cosmetic- a race, a male or female voice, a body type, hair/makeup, etc.

A first-time player has no context for this, and playing on the idea of a ‘guardian angel’ I decided to make a half-orc to match my player-character, imagining them as a long-deceased ancestor.

Below is an example of a guardian; this guardian is an older human using the female-sounding voice and a feminine body type, with grey/purple hair and eyes with black instead of white, making her seem more otherworldly and magical.



Levelling up and Multiclassing

Whenever the player-characters gain enough experience points from combat, questing, and otherwise adventuring, all characters in the party simultaneously gain the ability to level up.

The player is then given the option to enter a ‘level up’ menu, where they will be presented with all of the new features they have unlocked- more health, new skills and spells, etc. These are entirely dependent on the player’s class and, to a much lesser degree, race.

Sometimes, levelling up may come with a decision to make, such as picking a subclass, choosing new spells to learn, choosing a feat (a universal list of perks available to all classes) or choosing from some other class-specific set of options.

Alternatively, a player can instead opt to 'multiclass' at the level-up screen. This means that instead of levelling up, they start the path of a different class starting at level 1, granting them access to features from that class instead. The trade-off is that the maximum level for any character is 12, so a player cannot reach the maximum level of one class if they have instead spent one or more levels on investing in a second class or beyond.

This can allow for hybridising of gameplay tools as well as allow for unique narratives; for example, both Bard and Warlock cast spells using Charisma, so it would be a good gameplay idea and an interesting story idea to play as a Warlock/Bard, playing as a character who has made a classic 'deal with the devil to master an instrument'.

If a player is already multiclassing, they are given the option of adding a new class at level 1 or adding a level to one of their previous classes at each level-up screen. There is no limit to how many classes a character can invest in, and the game features an achievement for playing as a 'jack of all trades' character who has 1 level in each class.

For my prime playthrough, I chose to play as a multiclass Rogue-Fighter, which allowed me to balance stealthy assassinations with prolonged melee brawling.

If, at any point, the player wishes to refund their levels and rebuild their character's class from scratch, they can do so by talking to Withers and paying a fee of a few hundred gold.

Gameplay (as related to story)

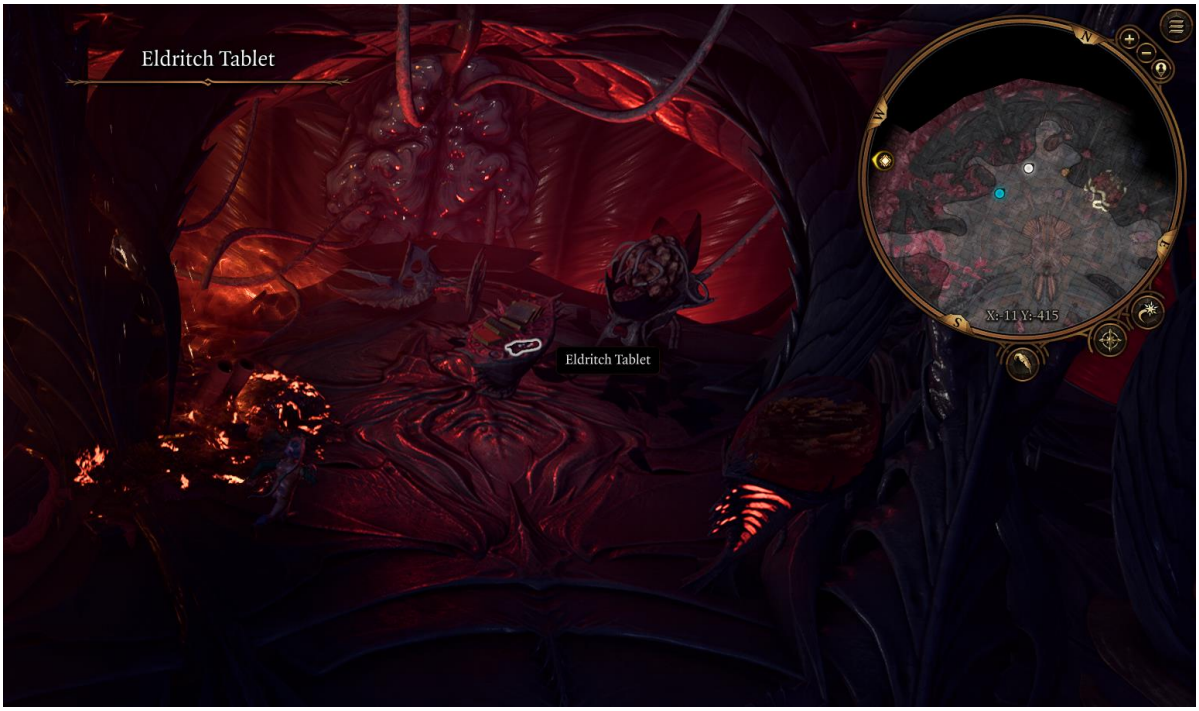
Gameplay in Baldur's Gate 3 can be split into three pillars; exploration, dialogue, and combat.

Exploration

Exploration is the default state of Baldur's Gate 3. Taking place in a top-down view, the player can click to make their party move to a place on the ground, interact with an NPC or object, open containers, etc. All of the character's abilities are listed in the panel at the bottom of the screen, so there is no such thing as a 'combat-only' skill or action.

By default, exploration takes place in real-time, but a turn-based mode (where NPCs and environmental objects move all at once in chunks) can be activated at any time, which is helpful for stealth, carefully avoiding obstacles, or otherwise moving with precision.

As they explore, player-characters will often pass comments on their surroundings, story events, or each other. These conversations are static, take place outside of the usual conversation system, and cannot be interacted with by the player; as such, they chiefly act to flesh out character dynamics between party members, demonstrate personality, or fill quiet moments with humour or drama.



Players can interact with objects in the world; by default, this will be a reasonable ‘default’ action like opening a container or pulling a lever. The player can also right-click to see a list of other available options.

The world is designed to react naturally to player actions; throwing a barrel of water will make the floor wet, which will make it easier to electrocute people standing in that water, for example. Shooting a lever may cause it to activate, and pushing an object or person from a height will damage them. The world is designed in a systemic way to promote creative, emergent gameplay and narratives.

Players can gather items which are stored in inventories specific to each character; party members can pass items between themselves, but qualities like the weight of items are specific to the person holding them. Items can be stored with the ‘send to camp’ option, which instantly sends the item to a storage box in the player’s camp.

Rest and Camp

Players can perform a ‘short rest’ or return to camp at any time, and while at camp can perform a ‘long rest’, which requires the use of supplies like food and drink to achieve. These rests allow for differing amounts of health to be regained, and refresh abilities in various ways (most non-magical abilities can be performed once per rest, whereas spells use various levelled ‘spell-slots’ which are usable once per long rest each (except for Warlocks, who have fewer spell-slots but regain them on a short or long rest). From a storytelling perspective, this contextualises the fatigue placed on a character by their abilities; some can be done infinitely, some require a short rest, and some cannot be performed again until after sleeping. The party can only perform two short rests per long rest, and when both have been spent party members will begin to comment on feeling tired/ wanting to go to bed.

Camp is a special location instanced outside of the regular game world (it is not possible to walk to camp) which changes in shape and decoration based on what area the player was in

when they clicked “go to camp”. Ag camp, the party members often partake in dialogue that progresses their relationship- indeed, before a ‘long rest’ all party members change into their pyjamas and have a chance to talk before finally going to bed.

Oftentimes, this is where the progression of personal quests and romantic relationships takes place; in Act 1, my playthrough saw the following story beats take place at camp, among others;

- Wyll being punished by his devilish patron Mizora for violating their contract and sparing Karlach
- Shadowheart and Lae’zel trying to kill each other
- Lae’zel losing hope and attempting to commit a murder-suicide on the party to avoid succumbing to the tadpoles
- The murder of Alfira by The Dark urge
- A party with the Tiefling refugees following the defeat of the Goblin raiders
- A romantic evening with Shadowheart on the evening of the party, initiating her romance arc
- A sex scene with Lae’zel, initiating her romance arc

The camp is the partry’s ‘home’, and story content triggered in the camp usually reflects the passage of some threshold in the larger story or a character’s personal arc. Characters that have something important to say are marked with a large speech bubble icon, making it difficult for players to miss that there is important information to be ascertained and relationships to be progressed; the game also warns the player that they are about to skip story content if they try to sleep too early.

Combat

Exploration and combat are largely similar; both take place in a top-down perspective and are swapped between on the fly. Combat takes place in the turn-based mode, seamlessly transitioning from exploration whenever a hostility triggers- such as being spotted by a hostile creature or performing an action which turns a previously peaceful character or group hostile, such as attacking them or an ally.

Combat is turn-based, and begins with all involved parties rolling for ‘initiative’- this is influenced by their Dexterity stat and determines what order turns are taken in, with higher rolls moving first. The turn order is displayed at the top of the screen.

What specific skills are available to a player-character depends largely on their class, although there are several universal concepts; all characters have a ‘main action’ and a ‘bonus action’ each turn, and a finite amount of movement to be spent each turn. All weapon attacks are considered a main action, as are most spells.

Each class has its own mechanics, abilities, and spells (if the class is magically inclined) that are specific to how that class does combat. Fighters gain special ways of using melee weapons and can attack several times per turn, wizards can cast explosive fireballs, clerics control the ebb and flow of battle using buffs, debuffs and healing, etc.

Magic classes have a certain number of levelled ‘spell-slots’, which allow the player to cast spells of that level or lower. For example, a powerful cleric spell like Spirit Guardians requires higher-level spell slots than a basic spell like Cure Wounds. This characterises the character’s abilities and stamina for their use; a wizard of certain level may be capable of using very powerful spells, but only so much before they need to rest. An even higher level wizard may be able to cast spells of that level considerably more times before expending all their spell-slots.

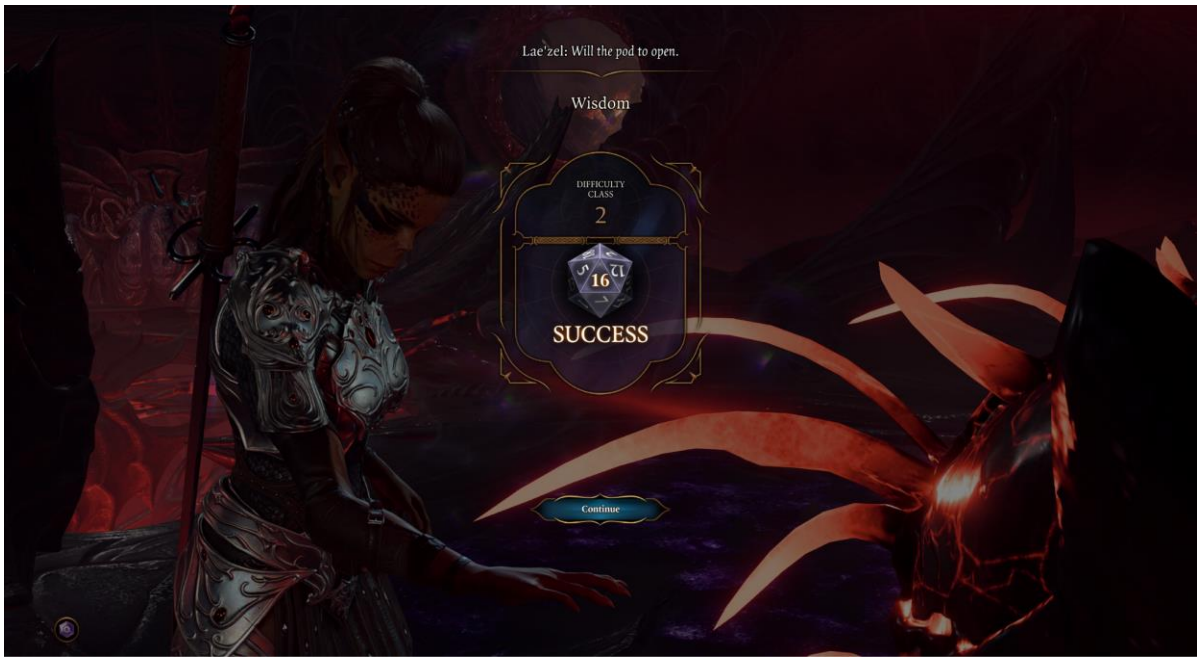
Players can choose to use ‘non-lethal attacks’ to subdue an enemy without killing them, which can be very important for some playthroughs; famously, keeping the Act 1 boss Minthara alive will allow the player to recruit her later in the game without having to help her murder a group of innocent refugees, allowing Minthara to progress a redemption arc.

The goal of combat is not always to simply defeat/subdue all enemies; combat can usually be fled from, and some quests give alternate goals like defending an object or escaping a location in/for a certain number of turns.

Skill Checks

Borrowing from DnD, BG3 has a system of 'Skill Checks' which are directly inspired by the same system in Dungeons and Dragons. During dialogue or in the overworld, characters are invited to perform a skill check against one of their skills (Athletics, Performance, Sleight of Hand, History…) or attributes (Strength, Dexterity, Charisma); the player rolls a virtual 20-sided dice and adds or subtracts any character traits relevant to that skill. Said modifiers can come from the character's base stats or from buffs/debuffs added by spells, equipment, or environmental elements. For example, a character who has a high dexterity and is proficient in Sleight of Hand has several significant bonuses when attempting to pick locks; Thokk (The Dark Urge) has a massive +10.

The resulting value is compared to a pre-set threshold and if said threshold is matched or exceeded, the player succeeds in the action. If the threshold is not met, the action fails, and often some kind of penalty can follow.



Finally, if the virtual D20 lands on a 20, this is considered a 'critical success' and the action passes no matter what; if the D20 lands on a 1, this is considered a 'critical failure' and the action automatically fails.

Similarly, calculations like Attack Rolls and Saving Throws are incorporated into combat, but the game does not display a visual representation of the dice-roll in these circumstances, possibly in service of keeping combat fast-paced and tactical.

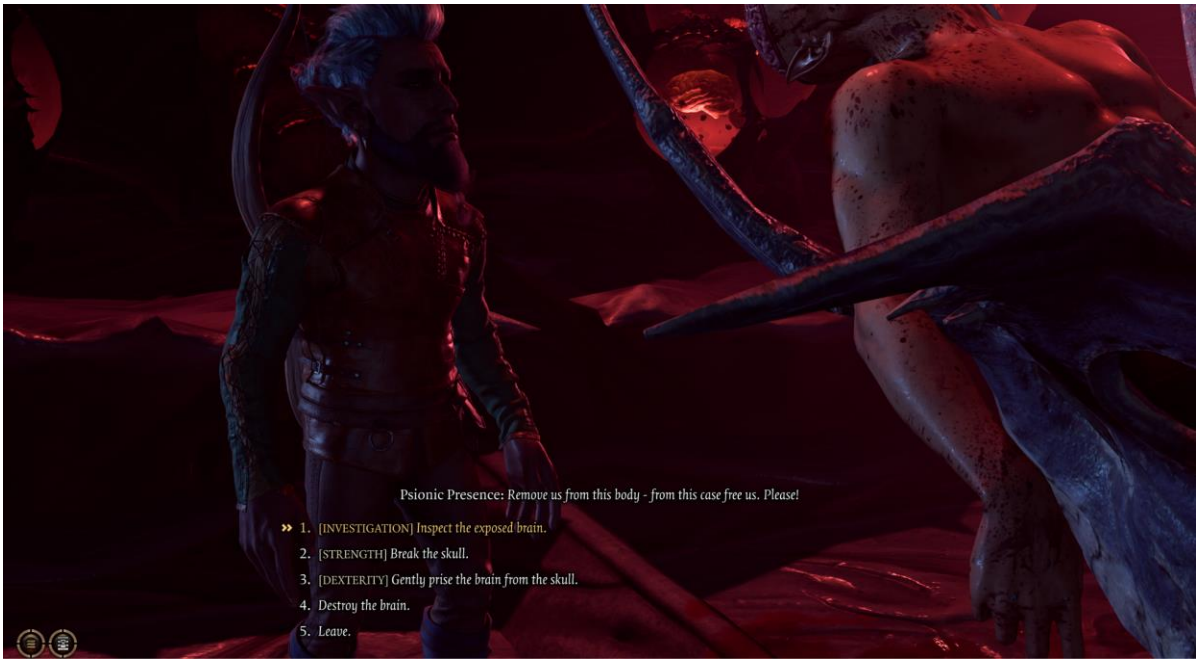
Dialogue

Party members in Baldur's Gate can also enter a dialogue mode; this usually happens when a conversation begins, but the system can also be used to ask the player to make choices during setpieces or when encountering a situation for which the usual game mechanics do not easily allow the presentation of choices.

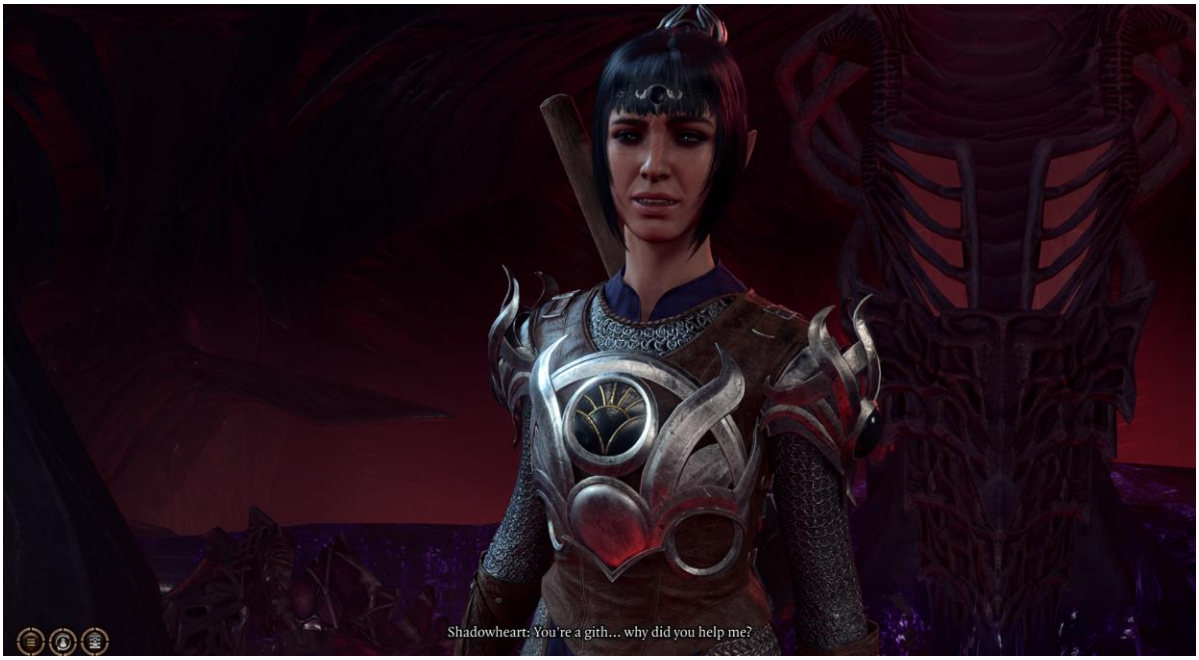
Dialogue can be triggered in many ways, such as clicking on a character, walking into a trigger, or equipping or examining an item. The beginning of dialogue is marked with the game announcing "(character) started a conversation."

During dialogue, the party member who is participating in the conversation will often be presented with several conversation options. Unlike 'Cyberpunk 2077', 'Baldur's Gate 3' does not tell the player which conversation choices will irreversibly progress the conversation.

Not all conversation options are spoken words; often, conversations are used as a framework to allow the player to make scenario-specific decisions that are not accounted for by the game's more general mechanics, and these often tie into the player's skills or class. For example, the screen below offers Grendel the chance to free a brain-monster from a skull using his Strength or Dexterity, which is both a gameplay decision (based on my stats, which is more likely to succeed) and a narrative decision (what would my character do in this situation?).



Dialogue in Baldur's Gate 3 takes place in a semi-separate instance from combat/exploration, as demonstrated by the screenshots below, where Lae'zel is conversing with Shadowheart, who is stood up, while our example character Grendel is not taking part in the conversation, seeing Shadowheart kneeling.



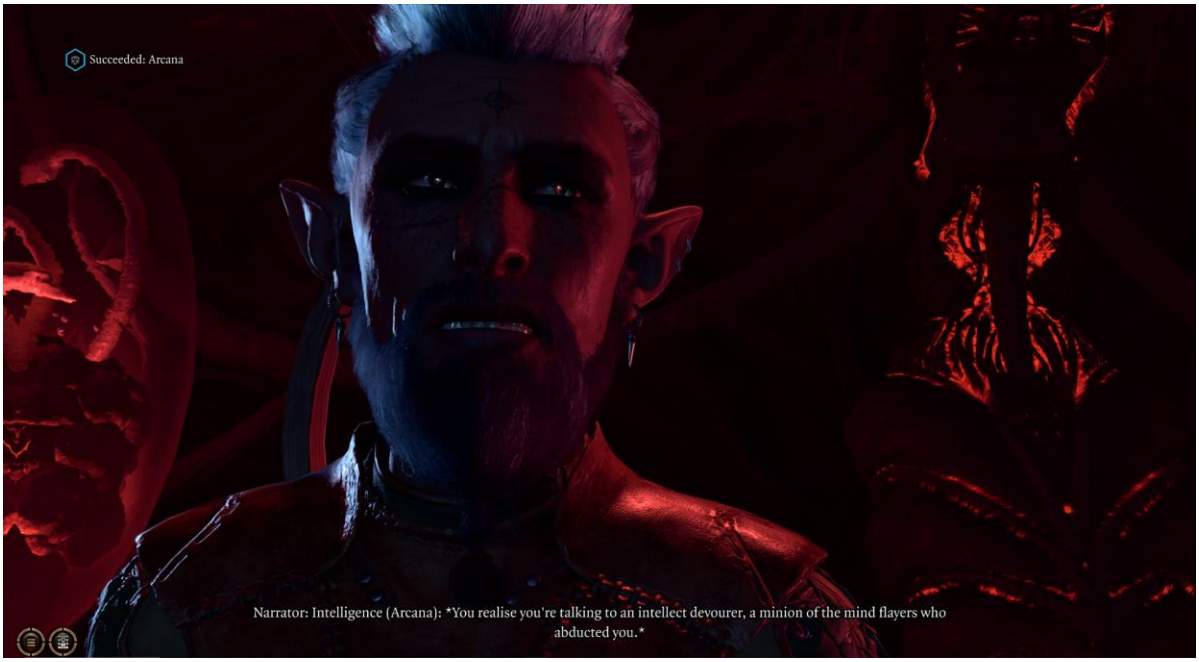
To follow on from that; not all members of a party need take part in a conversation. While a conversation takes place, other party members can go off and do other things. A character being in a conversation is indicated by a speech-bubble UI element. However, in some conversations, characters will not interact fully or at all with companions- only the main player-character,

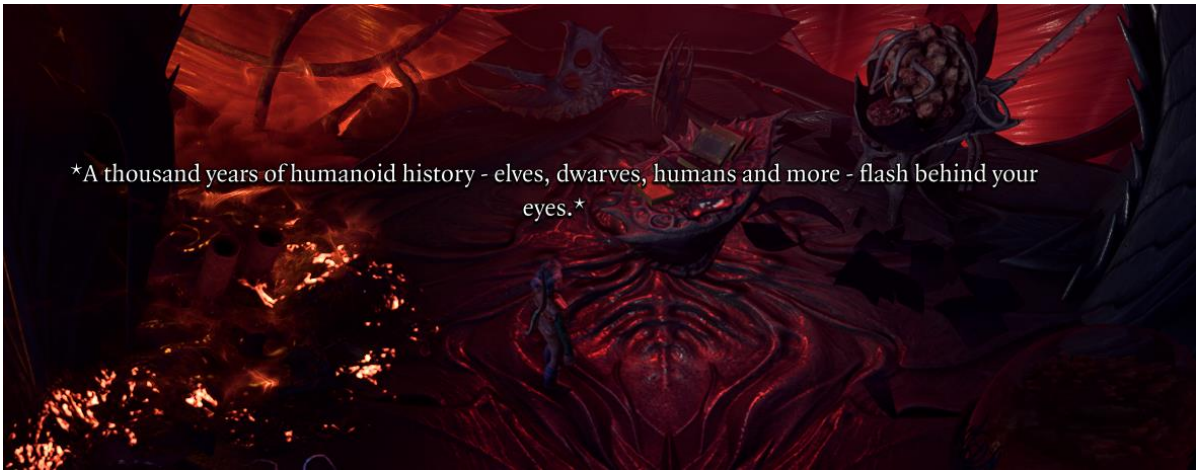
Story Direction and Delivery

Narration

Baldur's Gate 3 has a narrator character who is omnipresent and seemingly not a character within the game world; her narration fills in any information that cannot be conveyed by visuals or diegetic words, such as the player characters' thoughts. The Narrator should be paid attention to during journaling, as their input can be invaluable for tone-setting and exposition. If Baldur's Gate 3 is guided by the aesthetics of Dungeons and Dragons including tabletop-like activities like dice-rolling, the narrator could possibly be the game's version of the Dungeon Master.

This is a significant feature that sets Baldur's gate apart from other RPGs- who sometimes use text-based UI elements to convey this information (Fallout NV, Skyrim, Pokemon) or else do not narrate at all (Dishonored, Cyberpunk 2077, Borderlands).





For the most part, the narrator details the player-character's internal world; what they notice, what they see, what they realise. They also often reflect the results of skill-checks, such as this example where the player-character passes a perception check.

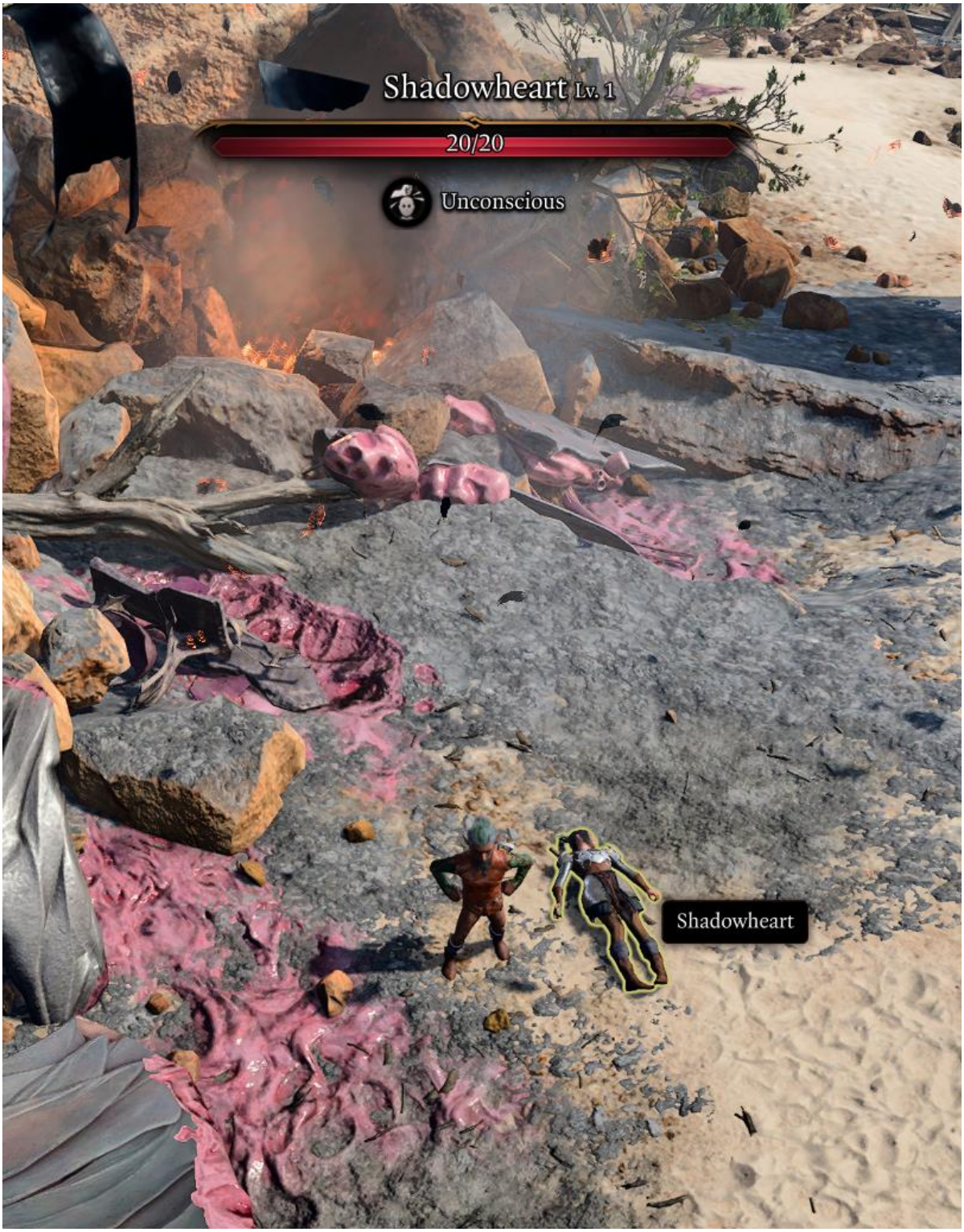
Oftentimes, the player-character is entered into a conversation with noone at all, either to describe their interaction with an object or a period of thought- here, the narrator's presence allows the player to interact directly with their character's thought processes.

Journal

The game keeps a journal of all the dialogue interactions, quest progress, and map exploration that has taken place so far, which the player can access at any time from a menu.

Level + Quest Design

Baldur's Gate 3 uses a modular approach to world design that gives a sense of exploration without sacrificing direction; for example, the opening moments of Act 1 place the player-character on a beach, next to shadowheart, who most players will immediately interact with and ultimately recruit.



The beach is important as it corners the player in on two sides, limiting the paths they can take; there are two ways to navigate the first area, with one being a fairly obvious path through a dungeon-like area and the other being a more hidden climb up a rock face. However, both intersect at the exact same location the player encounters Lae'zel, caged by Tieflings- this is the next semi-essential story moment, as Lae'zel is important for much of the story, especially when interacting with the other Githyanki during the second half of act 1.

No matter what, the shape of the world map dictates that the party will pass the Druid grove- and witness innocent, likeable characters being attacked by goblins and monsters- before they pass the goblin camp. Therefore, it is clear that the developers have made a conscious decision to show the sympathetic ‘good’ druids and refugees before showing the ‘evil’ goblins and cultists; since the player ultimately sides with one of these groups to progress the main plot, the developers clearly thought this order was vital to satisfying story progression and so created the shape of the world to guarantee it.

Appendix B: Report on ‘Cyberpunk; 2077’

Version

Cyberpunk 2077’s systems have changed dramatically over its lifespan; it is important to note that my playthroughs only took place after the 2.0 update that accompanied the ‘Phantom Liberty’ expansion in September 2023; the following report concerns the game’s systems **after** that overhaul. As such, systems like police chases, perks, and fast travel differ from the game’s launch interaction.

Genre (fiction) + story premise (Prologue/Act 1 story)

Cyberpunk 2077 is the latest entry in the science fiction ‘Cyberpunk’ franchise of role-playing games, and the first to be a video game (All three previous entries in the franchise are tabletop RPGs).

Named for its own subgenre, Cyberpunk as a franchise takes place in a world where humans regularly integrate technology into their own bodies. The game takes place in a dystopian world where disease has ravaged livestock to the point where most people eat only synthetic food, national governments have given way to megacorporations who wage cold and hot wars against each other, and the life of the average person is short, impoverished and miserable, poxed by exploitation and gang warfare- while the wealthy few live lives of obscene privilege, extended artificially by technology available only to the upper class; the series can be compared to works such as ’Blade Runner’ and ‘Neuromancer’.

As a series, Cyberpunk explores themes of transhumanism, class disparity, corporatism, libertarianism, and ecological collapse.

Following several world-shaking events in the series’ three tabletop entries, including several corporate wars and rampant AIs swallowing the old internet whole before being confined behind a ‘Blackwall’, Cyberpunk 2077 follows the story of V, a young mercenary who, along with their best friend Jackie Welles, plans to rise in notoriety in the underworld of Night City, an independent city-state located in the former California.

Depending on the ‘lifepath’ the player selects, V is either a member of a nomadic culture who has just broken ties with his ‘clan’ to seek greater fortunes in Night City (Nomad), a local of Night City’s Heywood borough returning after 2 years seeking success and escape in Atlanta (Streetkid), or a mid-level counter-intelligence operative working for the cutthroat Arasaka Corporation (Corpo). In one way or another, a botched job leaves them to meet Jackie Welles and establish a friendship based on their mutual desire to pursue fame and fortune doing the dirty work of anyone willing to hire them; the life of a Night City ‘merc’.

Much of the game’s first act details Jackie and V rising in notoriety to the point that they are hired to steal an artefact from the penthouse suite of a local luxury hotel, naively unaware that they are being manipulated into a suicide mission by desperate people with their own agendas; several missions follow the two preparing for the robbery.

At the end of the first act, V and Jackie botch the hotel robbery, which turns out to be targeting Yorinobu Arasaka, scion of the Arasaka Corporation, who V and Jackie witness murdering his father/the CEO Saburo Arasaka.

The artefact or 'relic' the two were sent to steal is a 'Biochip' that will degrade if not stored in an environment like a human brain, so Jackie and later V store it within their skull-mounted interface ports. Jackie bleeds to death of a gunshot wound, leaving V to return to the 'fixer' who hired them; Dexter DeShawn, who executes V in a panic and attempts to flee the city.

V is saved from death by the 'biochip', which repairs his brain injury and also implants the a personality 'construct' of the dead Rockstar-turned-terrorist Johnny Silverhand into his brain; Johnny can see what V sees and speak to him, and the Biochip is slowly overriding V's psyche until it is entirely overwritten by Johnny's personality. V is terminally ill, unless he can find a way to remove the biochip and the 'engram' of Silverhand before he fades away.

V is rescued by Saburo's bodyguard, Goro Takemura, who in turn asks V's help in bringing Saburo's murder to light. And so, V goes out into Night City to pursue a story of his own life and legacy, accompanied by the ghost of a dead terrorist and a growing coterie of allies.

Cyberpunk 2077 comments on the play between life and legacy; the question of whether it is better to die young and leave and be remembered for greatness, or live on to be old at the cost of being forgotten: the concept of a 'legend' is raised by many characters, especially V, Silverhand, Jackie and the other Mercs at the Afterlife bar.

Genre (Game)

Principally, in addition to being an RPG, Cyberpunk is chiefly a first-person shooter. Combat makes use of mainly firearms, combined with melee weapons and hacking. Different player-characters can build into different skills which enhance different weapon types, movement abilities, and dialogue options, among other more niche abilities.

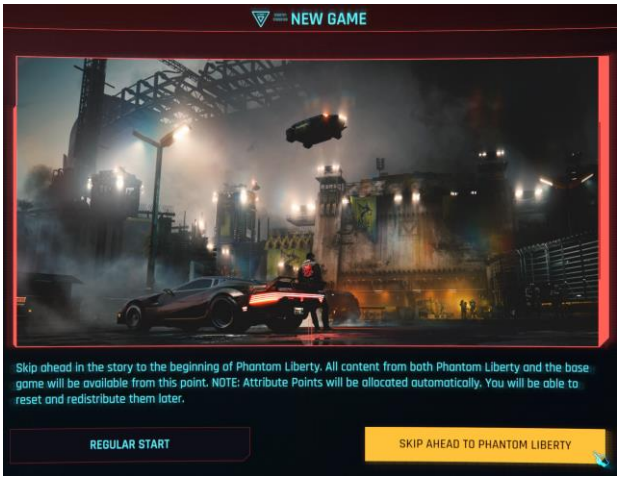
As an open-world game, Cyberpunk allows the player to experience side content in and order, although some only become available after certain points in the story when it makes narrative sense for that content to appear.

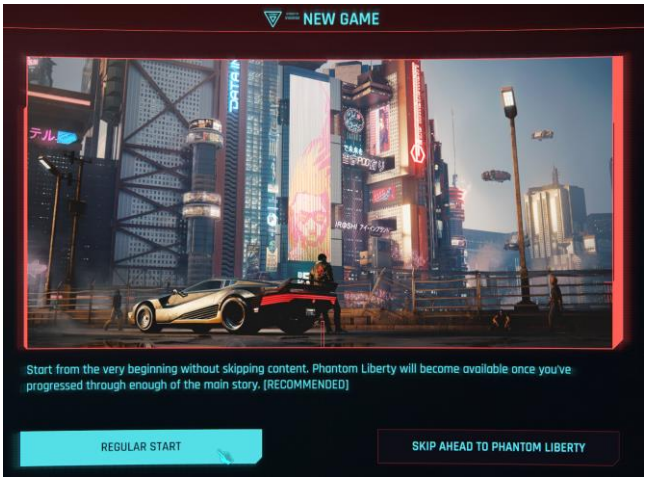
Ultimately, Cyberpunk is a game of exploring an open world completing quests in pursuit of money, items and XP to make your character stronger, in the pursuit of ultimately finishing the main story, the ending of which reflects your own personal choice of how your V would act.

Character creation and Levelling

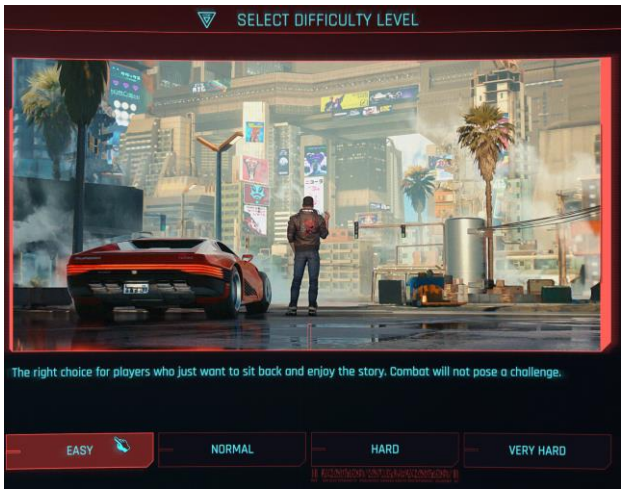
Unlike 'Baldur's Gate 3', the player has only one player-character available to them; V. V is a nickname, revealed in the game's second act to be short for Vincent or Valerie, and V's appearance and backstory may vary; but the name and general personality of V constitutes the set protagonist and player-character of Cyberpunk 2077, this is an inescapable fact of the game's premise.

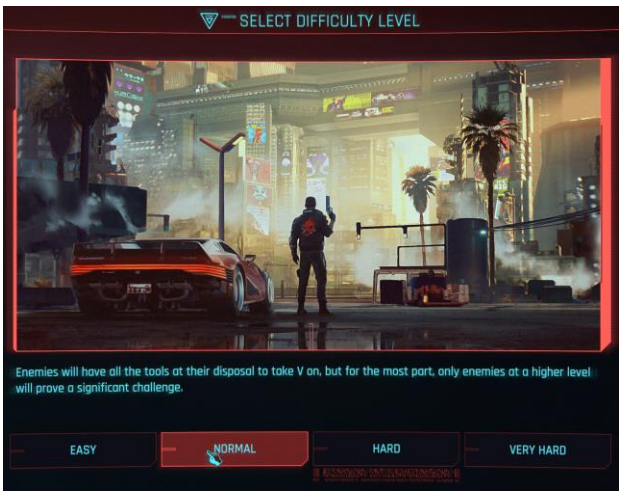
With the Phantom Liberty expansion installed, the first choice the player is given is to pick between starting the game at the beginning, or skipping to the beginning of the expansion's story content.

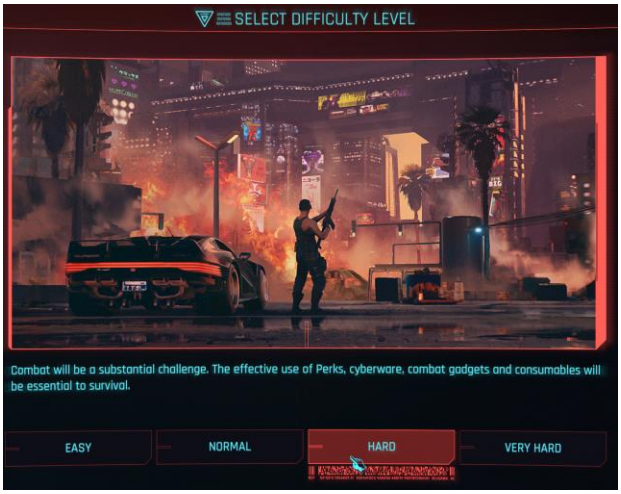


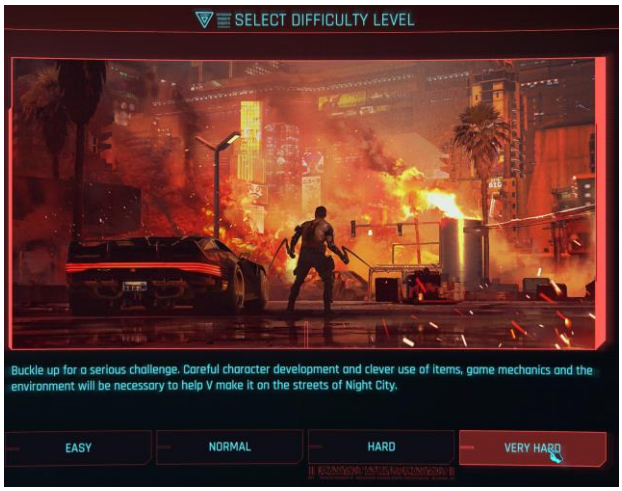


Next, the player is asked to choose a









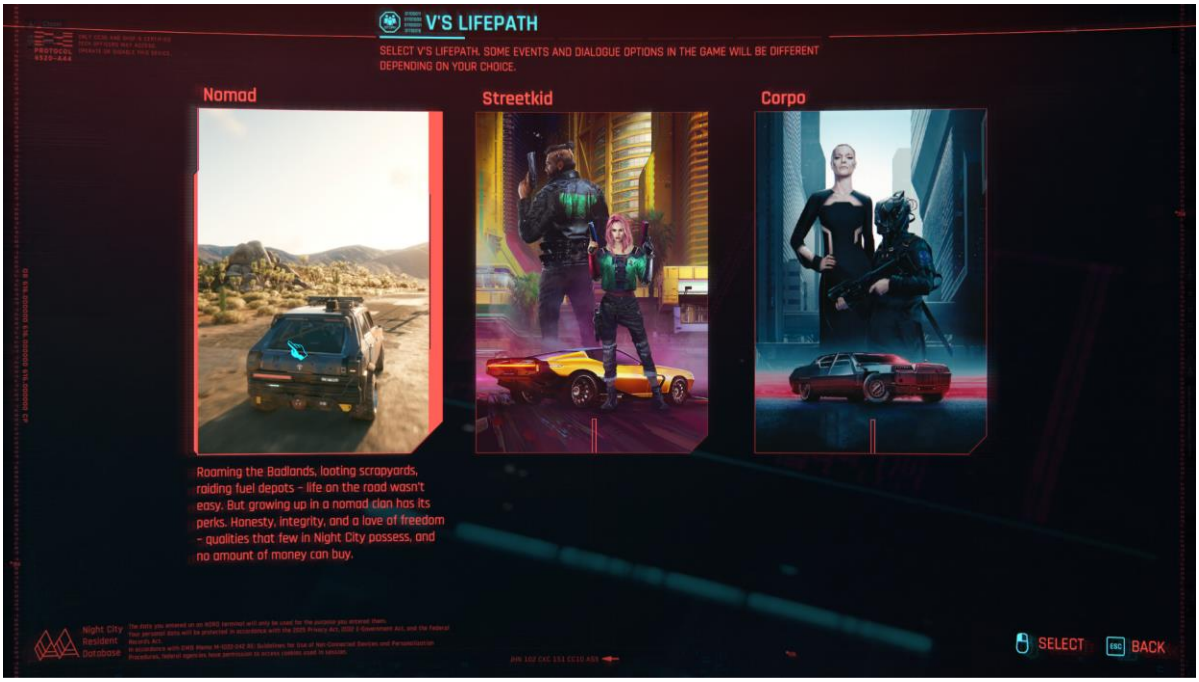
difficulty;

It should be noted that in the description of 'Easy' mode, the developers have specified that this difficulty is 'The right choice for players who just want to sit back and enjoy the story'.

Customising V: Lifepath

Lifepaths form the core story authorship that takes place during character creation, being the only choice other than gender that can affect the game's story and dialogue. The player is asked to choose from 3 pre-set backstories for V;

- **Nomad**
  - "Roaming the Badlands, looting scrapyards, raiding fuel depots- life on the road wasn't easy. But growing up in a nomad clan has its perks. Honesty, integrity, and a love of freedom- qualities few in night city possess, and no amount of money can buy."
- **Streetkid**
  - "They say if you wanna understand the streets, you gotta live 'em. Gangs, fixers, dolls, small-time pushers- you were raised by them all. Down here the law of the jungle dictates the weak serve the strong- the only law in Night City you have yet to break."
- **Corpo**
  - "Few leave the corporate world with their lives- fewer still with their souls still intact. You've been there- you've bent the rules, exploited secrets and weaponized information. There's no such thing as a fair game, only winners and losers."



Customising V: Gender

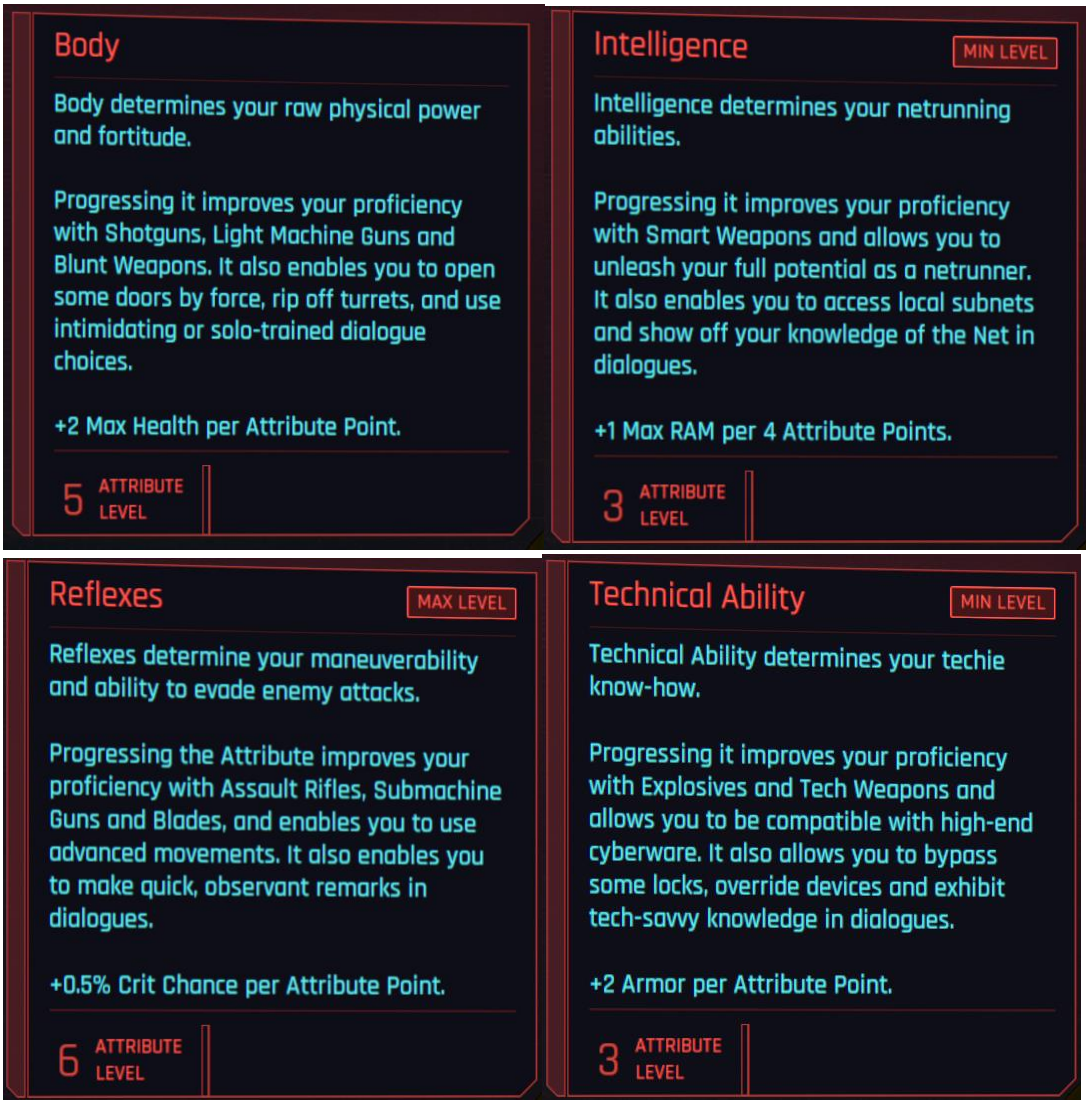
Cyperpunk 2077 does not have a binary system for choosing V's gender. Instead, V's body and voice are chosen separately, and the voice selected determines if other characters refer to V as a man or a woman.

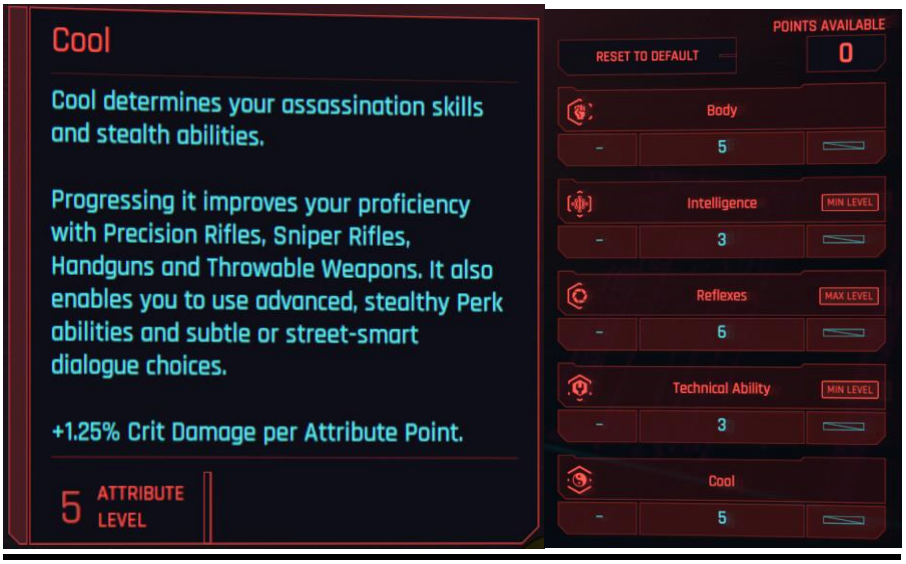
As a person of a non-binary gender identity, I found immediate interest in the design of the character creation menu; Once can use any makeup, body type, genitals and voice in any combination. However, I was disappointed to find that the male body type could not be clean-shaven, which I felt defeated the point of non-gendered character creation, as did the choice of binaries for voice and body.

Customising V: Cosmetics

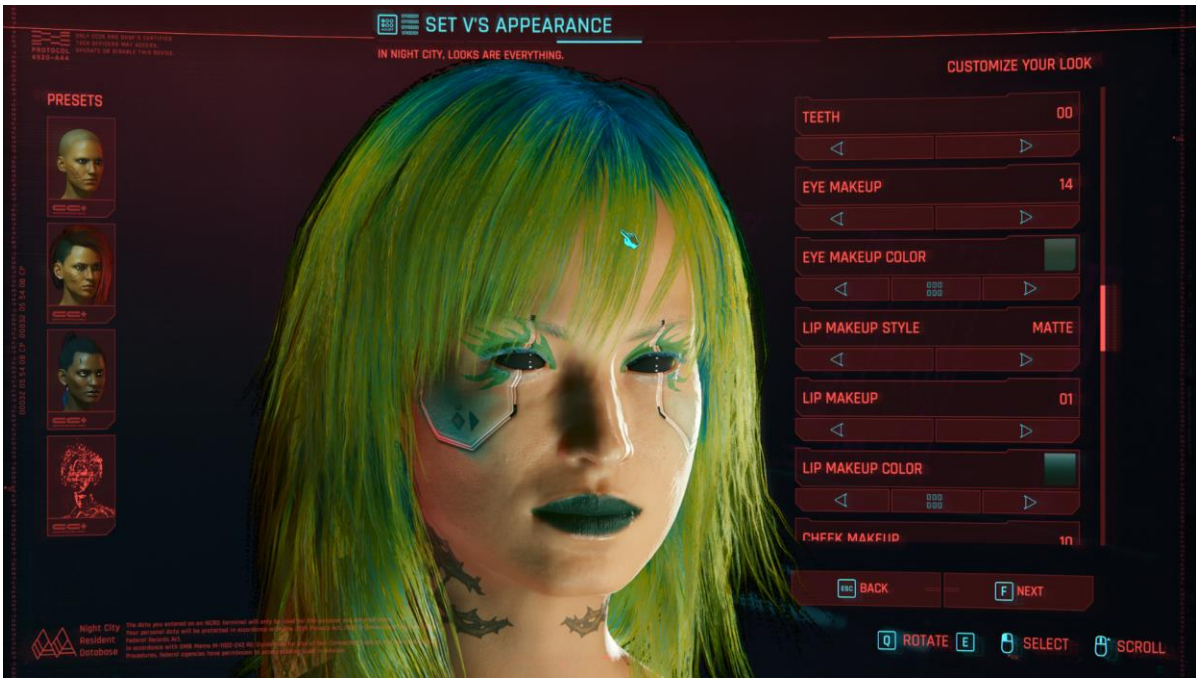
Players are able to select from a Male or Female body, various hair colours and styles, makeup styles, eyes, cybernetic augmentations, and facial components (nose shape, jaw shape, etc); whilst this is a form of characterful self-expression, it only affects V's appearance and is never reflected by or mentioned by the game's narrative or gameplay mechanics.

Customising V: Attributes





Pictured below is the example character I have created for the purposes of demonstrating the character creation process; this V is a Streetkid, uses the female body type and voice. They are built to make use of the Body, Reflexes, and Cool attributes as the basis of their 'build'. The game tells me that these skills determine certain attributes, as seen in the above screenshots, but what actual perks these skills unlock is left a mystery at this stage.



Since I have played CP2077 before, I was familiar enough with the game's mechanics to have an idea of my character's build at that point; I focused this example character on Body, Reflexes, and Cool, allowing them to move rapidly and stealthily around the map doing high amounts of Melee damage, whilst ignoring the hacking and technology skills that had defined my previous character.

Other character attributes

Gear

Weapons and Cyberware in 2077 follow a 5-tier system which determines their statistics, with items granting more and more significant buffs as the quality increases. The quality of gear that drops on defeated enemies / is sold by vendors steadily increases with V's level, and under-levelled gear can be upgraded using crafting components found by hacking and looting bodies and containers.

Special items called 'Iconic' weapons can be found at set points in the game; they may be a quest reward, dropped by specific boss fights, found in specific locations or sold by specific vendors. Iconic weapons come with a small flavour text at the bottom, which sometimes contain story information. They also have one or more unique gameplay effects and a unique appearance; for example, the Pizdets smart SMG found in the 'Phantom Liberty' expansion acknowledges that its increased chance for critical hits comes from modifications made by the man you need to kill to obtain it, Boris Ribakov (a boss from an optional Job in Dogtown).


WEAPONS
200
SHOTGUN
277
SUBMACHINE GUN
175
SNIPER RIFLE
CYBERWARE
QUICK ACCESS
EQUIPPED
PIZDETS
TIER 5+ / ICONIC
Smart Submachine Gun
ATTACK SPEED 5.9
DAMAGE 47
RELOAD SPEED 2.1
EFFECTIVE RANGE 24
WEAPON HANDLING 6.2
+85% Headshot Damage Multiplier
1.2 sec Lock-on time
Fire rate increases with each consecutive shot.
Thanks to Boris's mods, the longer this weapon fires, the greater the Crit chance. Comes with its own custom silencer.
€$ 8394 5 277

Clothing

In Cyberpunk 2077, clothing/armour is not as central to gameplay as some other RPGs. Whilst some clothing offers small buffs (ammo belts grant ammo capacity, balaclavas decrease visibility, etc), clothing is largely cosmetic. To this end, 2077 allows the player to equip V with an outfit for gameplay effect, and another for cosmetic effect. This way, the player does not have to choose between gameplay advantage and character expression through fashion.

My main V, being a Nomad, often wore biker and punk-inspired clothing, with a Cyberpunk twist. V's connection with vehicles, outdoorsy practical nature, and distrust of authority were forefronted by my choice of clothing, while underneath the cosmetic layer lay a few items of clothing that gave V additional armour, quickhacking speed, and reload speed.

Outfit 1 was a practical yet distinctly punk general outfit with sleeveless vest and leather jacket, 2 was motorcycling gear, 3 clothed V in all of Johnny Silverhand's old clothing, 4 was a 'wetwork' stealth outfit, 5 focused on V's skills as a netrunner, and 6 was a more everyday punk outfit with the phrase 'burn corpo shit' on the back of V's jacket. All of these are outfits my V would wear, and despite the lack of any gameplay advantage I would swap between them as appropriate for the situation.

Gameplay (as related to story)

Narration

Unlike Baldur's Gate 3, Cyberpunk 2077 has no narrator character.
Since the game is in the first-person, it is likely that this choice was made with diegesis in mind; CD Projekt RED seemingly wanted the player to feel immersed in the game's world as seen through V's eyes, and so to introduce it, we see various cutscenes during the prologue such as a montage of V and Jackie's work, news broadcasts, and a monologue from V.

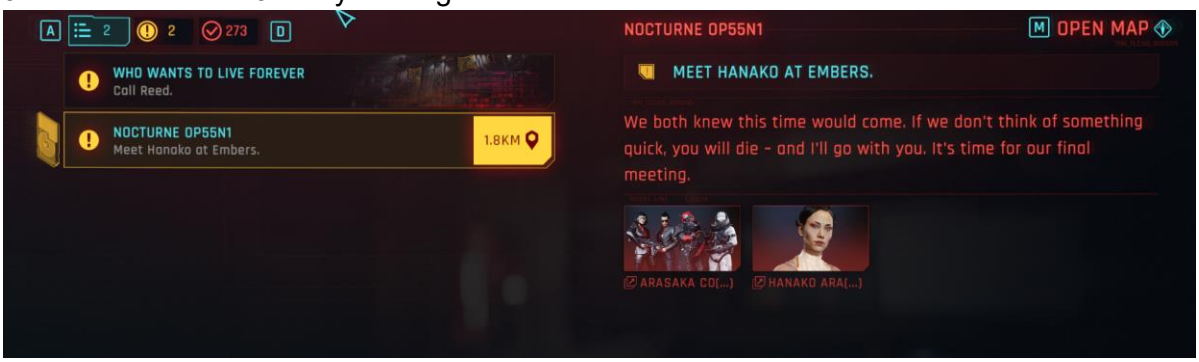
Menus and Journals

The main menu tracks three percentage-meters which have little to no gameplay implications, but track V's character arc.

The first tracks V's 'street cred', a stated goal of V's which essentially maps to his reputation among his mercenary peers. This increases over time as the player completes optional 'job' missions spread across Night City. This stat has seemingly no gameplay effect.

The second tracks V's relationship with Johnny Silverhand. V and Johnny do not get along at first, but over their time together the player has the opportunity to make choices, such as dialogue choices or the resolution of quests. If the player has increased this past a certain threshold by Act 3, they gain access to a few quests which progress Silverhand's character arc, and ultimately the 'secret' ending where V and Johnny assault Arasaka tower alone.
The final counter tracks V's health as the Biochip slowly eats away at their brain tissue. This has no gameplay effect and does not reflect any decisions made by the player; it simply counts down at set intervals in the main story to give a sense of urgency to its completion, when in reality the player is free to take as long as they like to finish the game.

Quests are tracked in a traditional Journal format. However, it seems that during Act 1, the Journal entries also represent otherwise unseen conversations with Jackie. From the beginning of Act 2 (Jackie's death and Silverhand's introduction), it seems instead that the Journal entries are Johnny's thoughts on the current situations V finds themself in.



Skills, Perks and Skill Checks

Cyberpunk 2077 foxes on five main attributes; Body, Intelligence, Reflexes, Technical Ability and Cool.

During dialogue and gameplay, V can access new options, such as lines of dialogue or the ability to open certain doors, by having enough of a certain stat to pass a pre-defined threshold. Unlike some other RPGs, these skill checks are guaranteed to succeed if V has the skill level required to select them- for example, V may use their high Intelligence stat to convince an NPC that they are a skilled ‘Netrunner’ (hacker), or use their Body stat to pry a door open.

Most perks, however, relate strictly to combat scenarios; there is no skill bound to bartering or persuasion like in series like Fallout or Dungeons & Dragons.

V receives Attribute points and Perk points by levelling up. There are also ‘Relic points’, spent in their own perk tree, that are acquired by finding hidden computer terminals around Dogtown in the Phantom Liberty DLC.

Even a maximum-level V does not have access to enough perk or attribute points to ‘max out’ every tree, so the players must make tactical use of a limited resource to determine their V’s strengths and weaknesses in combat.

Perks exist in trees, which are associated with a certain attribute each. As V’s attribute level increases, they gain the opportunity to access perks associated with that playstyle; for example, my main nomad V used hacking instead of direct combat or stealth, so their Intelligence stat was significantly higher than Cool with more points invested in hacking-

related perks like ‘Overclock’ and ‘Smart Synergy’.

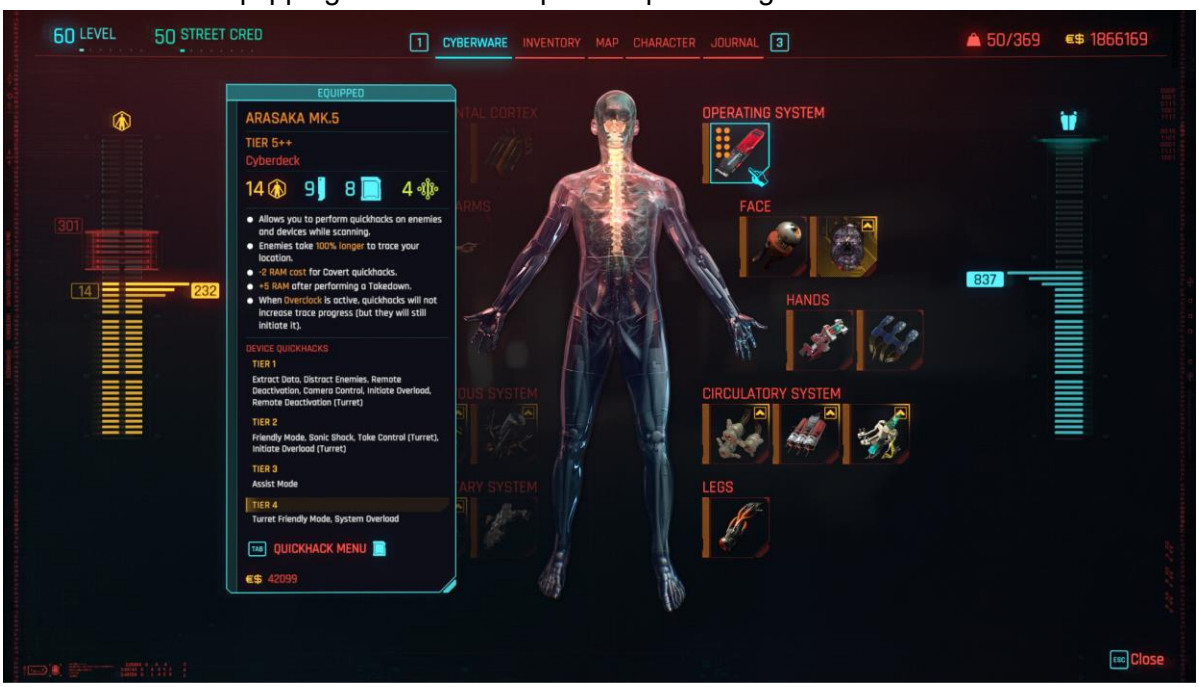
Cyberware

‘Cyberware’ is the technology embedded in V’s body. Each area of V’s body has 1-3 slots for technological enhancement, and the total level overall as well as Cyberware-synergistic perks are tied to the Technical Ability attribute.

Cyberware is another way of defining V’s playstyle and thus personality; some Vs may equip armour plating and ‘gorilla arms’ and approach combat by punching and throwing enemies, others like my main V may invest in hacking technologies to manipulate the battlefield from afar, and others may forego a high level of technology to focus on traditional weaponry.

Cyberware must be acquired, by finding/looting the individual pieces of technology or by buying it.

Furthermore, Cyberware cannot be equipped from a location-generic menu like perks, clothes and weapons; V must visit a ‘Ripperdoc’ to have the technology surgically implanted, which is a small hurdle of convenience that provides a world-based story context for the action of equipping a new brain implant or pair of legs.



Thus, each V is left with a unique combination of abilities which characterise their approach to combat and gives them access to unique approaches in dialogue and exploration; while much of V’s dialogue can make them seem like a pre-written character, much of the expression of V’s personality can be put down to how the player chooses to play as them in combat.

Story Direction and Delivery

Dialogue (With examples from opening scene of ‘Streetkid’ prologue)

V often delivers dialogue the player has not selected; the game’s developers have chosen not to sign over complete control of V’s speech to the player. The player can expect to make several dialogue choices per conversation, but these do not always influence the conversation’s outcome.

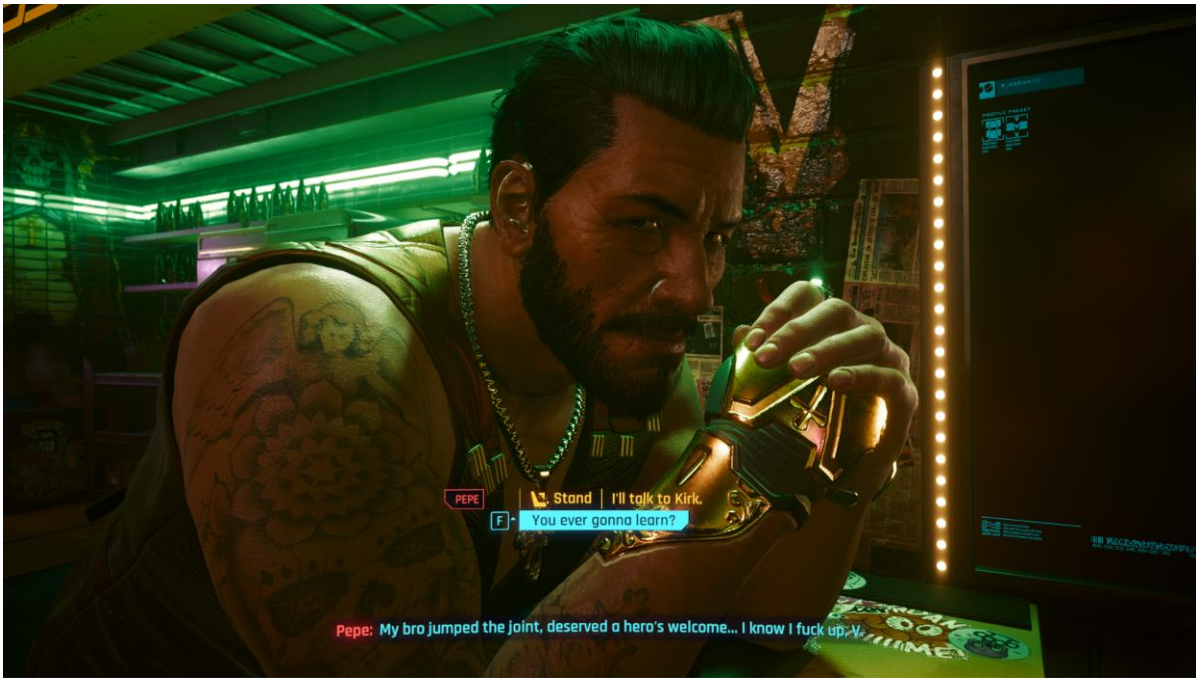
Cyberpunk includes a specific moment of non-diegetic information to the player that helps them make informed decisions in dialogue; dialogue options highlighted in yellow are formal decisions that progress the conversation, whereas the blue options will circle back to the same selection of options, meaning that a player can pick any blue option knowing with

confidence that they are not making a decision with long or even short-term consequences; most blue conversation options flesh out characters and conversations, or are opportunities for role-play- the example below of drinking the shot Pepe has brought her is of no consequence, but does allow the player to pilot V's actions in a binary; drink the shot or do not.

However, there is only one option of any real consequence; setting the broken nose, which triggers a conversation wherein V reveals she met with an attempted mugging, 'handled it', and when asked by Pepe if the mugger was local, she asks "Do you think anyone local would try to mug me?"

It is possible to argue that this is a moment in which V's personality is being authored by the developers with no real input from the player, but we must keep in mind that the player chose this prologue, and therefore this version of V, from a list of three.

Cyberpunk 2077 also contains dialogue that 'fills space' while the player picks dialogue choices; in this screen Pepe occasionally asks "So, you gonna help me out, V?", helping to establish that the time spent choosing dialogue is indeed passing in-universe.

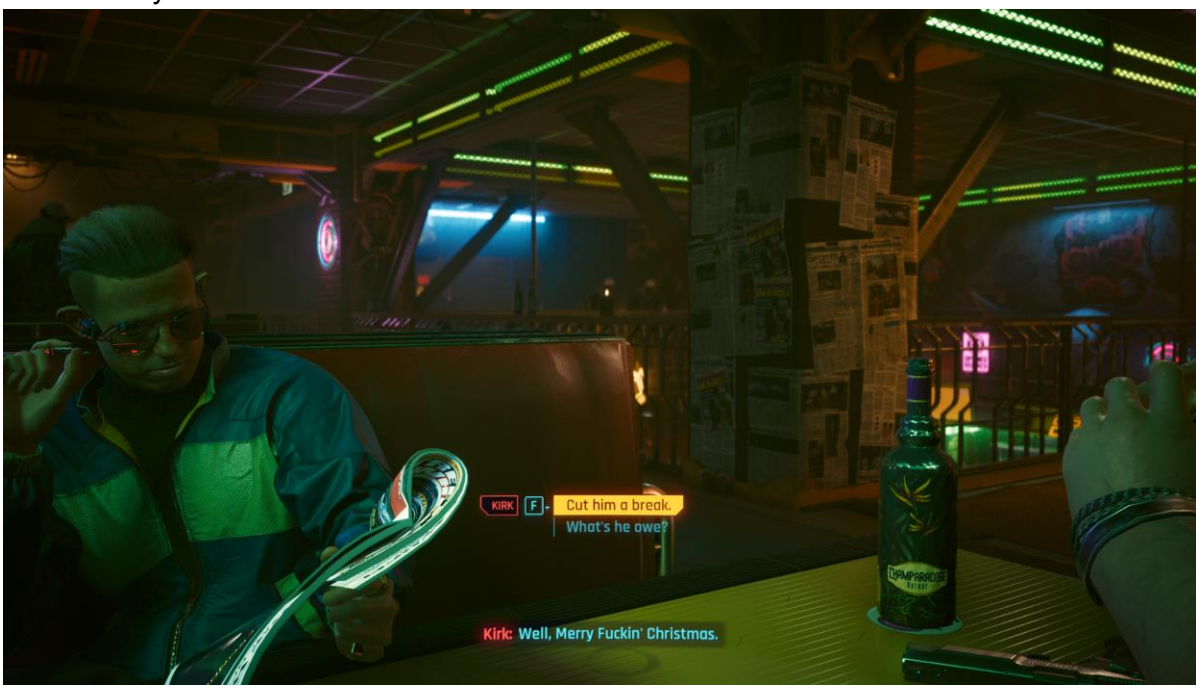


Dialogue options are often tied to actions, such as talking and sitting down at the same time.

In the screenshot below, I have only one dialogue option, but am still free to move V away.

In this conversation, the game gives me the choice of only two main dialogue options, but both are directed at different NPCs; the game acknowledges that V is in a conversation with more than one person. However, upon choosing to talk to Big Joe…

..the game returns to the same choice of dialogue options, sans the option I had just selected; the game's systems had been presenting the illusion of agency, but in fact this was simply another instance of a dialogue line with no consequence; it was a chance for me to author my own version of V.



Dialogue selections with several blue options and a single Yellow allow the player to probe for information, characterise their V, or otherwise interact with NPCs without committing to a consequence later down the line. This is a contract the game makes with the player and commits to throughout.

V often speaks on the telephone. During missions, V answers the phone/makes outgoing calls automatically, but during free-roam the player has the chance to make and accept/reject calls as they see fit. There is no benefit to declining a call; the caller will call back later, and phone calls never have negative consequences as far as the game-state is concerned. The presence of phone calls means V can enter into dialogue with NPCs at any time, and give a strong illusion that things are happening in Night City even when V is not involved.

As an experienced player, I was able to recognise that the NPC on the right is Mama Welles, the mother of V's best friend Jackie Welles; V has not yet met Jackie at this point in the story, so whilst Mama Welles' conversation about an unnamed person is noticeably about Jackie, only a player on their second playthrough or beyond would know this.

Likewise, this conversation between two bargoers discusses two candidates in the upcoming Night City election, with Peralez being the subject of a large questline later in the game. A new player would not understand their conversation, but an experienced player would understand it as much as V likely does.

Endings

2077 has several endings, as does its DLC ‘Phantom Liberty’. ‘Phantom Liberty’ is completely optional, takes place parallel to the main story, and does not affect any of the pre-existing endings; however, if completed correctly it does unlock a new one.

Phantom Liberty Endings

Phantom Liberty has a linear storyline until the mission “Firestarter”, where the player is asked to choose between siding with either of the two main supporting cast- the secret agent Solomon Reed or rogue hacker Song So Mi- at which point, the story forks in two. Each of these two forks can result in a pair of endings.

Siding with Song So Mi will see the player fighting through the airport to get aboard a shuttle flight to a colony on the moon, where a clinic can cure V and So Mi of their respective illnesses. However, So Mi betrays V when she reveals there was only space for one person on the shuttle in the mission. Here, V can send So Mi to space, killing Reed to do so; or, V can hand So Mi into government custody, re-earning Reed’s respect in the process.

Siding with Reed will see So Mi captured by Maxtac, forcing V to work with Reed to rescue her. V will need to contact a Netrunner (there are five options, all of whom are named NPCs from the base game, and all of whom will only help if prerequisites are met).

To simplify, Phantom liberty’s story forks at a point that could be considered the end of act 2, (not to be confused with the main game’s formal ‘act 2’ phase) and then again right at the end for a total of four endings.

Achievement	Details	Requirements	Quests
 King of Wands	Take Songbird to the stars.	• Side with So Mi during Firestarter • Carry her to the space shuttle during The Killing Moon • Kill Solomon Reed when he confronts you	• Firestarter • The Killing Moon • Unfinished Sympathy • From Her to Eternity
 King of Swords	Take Songbird home.	• Side with So Mi during Firestarter • Call Solomon Reed and/or carry So Mi to the space shuttle during The Killing Moon • Surrender So Mi to Reed when he confronts you	• Firestarter • The Killing Moon • Through Pain to Heaven • Who Wants To Live Forever
 King of Cups	Fulfill Songbird's request.	• Side with Reed during Firestarter • Finish Black Steel In The Hour of Chaos • Fulfill Songbird's request during Somewhat Damaged	• Firestarter • Black Steel In The Hour of Chaos • Somewhat Damaged • Leave in Silence • Four Score and Seven
 King of Pentacles	Refuse Songbird's request.	• Side with Reed during Firestarter • Finish Black Steel In The Hour of Chaos • Refuse Songbird's request during Somewhat Damaged	• Firestarter • Black Steel In The Hour of Chaos • Somewhat Damaged • Leave in Silence • Four Score and Seven • Who Wants To Live Forever

Main endings

There are four main endings that conclude the story; there is also a ‘secret’ ending (a variation on ‘the , a poignant if anticlimactic non-ending where V commits suicide, and a bonus fifth main ending unlocked if the player completed the main questline of ‘Phantom Liberty’ with any ending in which Solomon Reed is alive and on good terms with V (meaning, any ending except for ‘King of Wands’).

Achievements	Details	Requirements	Quests
 The Devil	Help Takemura avenge the death of Saburo Arasaka.	• Save Takemura in Search and Destroy (optional; needed for the achievement) • At the rooftop, call Hanako for help during Nocturne Op55N1 • Take the omega-blockers (pills) • Finish Where is My Mind? • Choose "[Sign Contract] I want to live" or "[Refuse to Sign] I'm going back to Earth"	• Last Caress • Totalimmortal • Where is My Mind?
 The Sun	Become a legend of the Afterlife.	• Complete Rogue's Blistering Love side job by picking the correct dialogue for Johnny during Chippin' In (see here) • At the rooftop, choose to follow Johnny's plan to go ask Rogue for help during Nocturne Op55N1 • Take the pseudoendotrizine (pills) • Inside Mikoshi, cross the bridge as Johnny • Finish Path of Glory --- • Pick the correct dialogue for Johnny during Chippin' In (see here) • Wait around three minutes at the rooftop during Nocturne Op55N1 • Choose Johnny's new option • Inside Mikoshi, enter the well as V • Finish Path of Glory	• For Whom the Bell Tolls • Knockin' on Heaven's Door • Changes • Path of Glory --- • (Don't Fear) The Reaper • Changes • Path of Glory
 The Star	Leave Night City with the Aldecaldos.	• Complete Panam's Queen of the Highway side job • At the rooftop, call Panam for help during Nocturne Op55N1 • Take the omega-blockers (pills) • Inside Mikoshi, enter the well as V • Finish All Along the Watchtower	• We Gotta Live Together • Forward to Death • Belly of the Beast • Changes • All Along the Watchtower
 Temperance	Let Johnny Silverhand keep your body.	• Unlock Panam and/or Rogue's paths by completing their specific side quests • At the rooftop, choose to ask for help from either Panam or Rogue during Nocturne Op55N1 • Inside Mikoshi, cross the bridge as V or enter the well as Johnny • Finish New Dawn Fades --- • Pick the correct dialogue for Johnny during Chippin' In (see here) • Wait around three minutes at the rooftop during Nocturne Op55N1 • Choose Johnny's new option • Inside Mikoshi, cross the bridge as V • Finish New Dawn Fades	• Changes • New Dawn Fades --- • (Don't Fear) The Reaper • Changes • New Dawn Fades

Phantom Liberty

See also: Cyberpunk 2077: Phantom Liberty Endings

Achievements	Details	Requirements	Quests

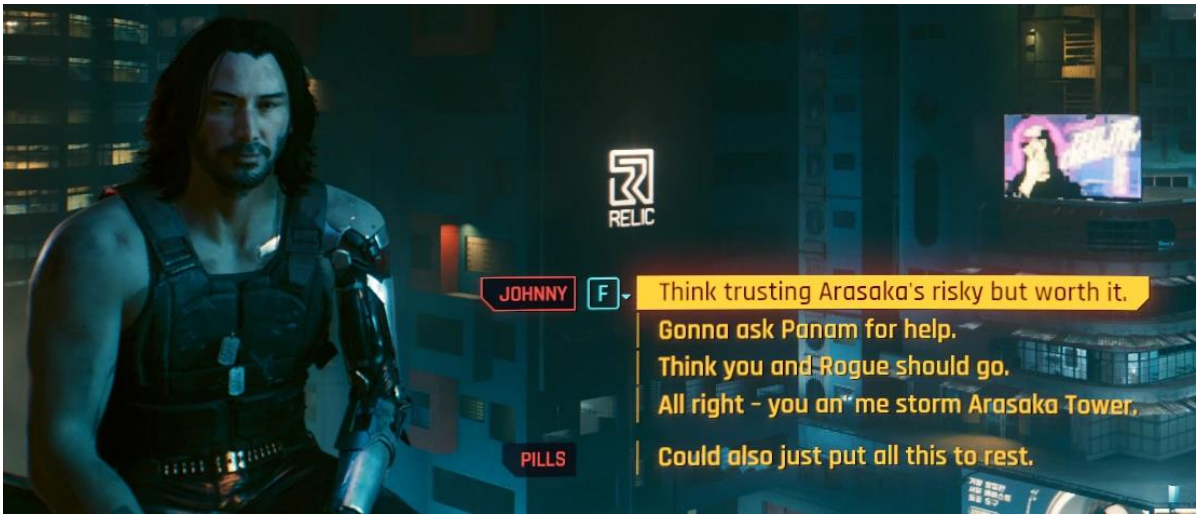
	Survive Night City,	• Choose to either help Songbird escape or to surrender her to Reed in Firestarter
		• If helping Songbird:
		  • Either choose to call Reed near the end of The Killing Moon or simply take So Mi to the shuttle. When Reed appears, let him take her away
		  • Finish Through Pain to Heaven and later accept Reed's offer
			• Who Wants To Live Forever

(Screenshots taken from the Cyberpunk 2077 Wiki)

The choice of ending is one of the major defining choices the player makes during a pkaythrough in terms of story authorship- during the mission ‘Nocturne Op55N1’, Misty and V will have a heartfelt conversation on a rooftop about V’s declining health, and it becomes clear V is about to make his final decision.

The player unlocks endings based on their path through the main story, primarily by completing the side quest chains associated with (and therefore, the story arcs of V’s relationship with) NPCs like Panam and Rogue, or by completing the story of Phantom Liberty without killing Solomon Reed.

The player then gets to choose their ending from a list.



My V was a Nomad from outside of town, and chose to call on his romantic partner Panam, also a Nomad, for help. This resulted in the ‘The Star’ ending, where V leaves Night City with Panam with six months to live; a peaceful resolution of his story arc. V came to Night City seeking fame and fortune at the cost of his own life, achieved his goal, and decided to leave the glory behind and go back to the Nomad lifestyle with a new family and his girlfriend, albeit with only 6 months to live; he left his home, went through trials, and returned home with a changed perspective on his life; a classic, satisfying ending that evokes concepts like Joseph Campbell’s Monomyth.

Thus, the main choices I made as V can be seen as beginning-middle-end; I chose the Nomad lifepath, made several decisions such as developing a friendship with Johnny SIlverhand, building and dressing V as a car-mad hacker and romancing Panam Palmer, and then choose The Star as my ending.

Appendix C: Report on ‘Help Hobgob Home’, a ‘Dungeons and Dragons’ Homebrew

Story genre + premise

‘Help Hobgob Home’ is a Dungeons and Dragons 5th edition campaign, homebrewed by myself in accordance with the Dungeon Master’s Guide and Player Handbook.

Set in a renaissance high-fantasy world of largely my own design, Hobgob is set in the ‘6 Nations’, a rough estimation of the UK and Ireland as filtered through ‘Dungeons and Dragons’ lore. The six nations are approximations of Scotland, Wales, England, Yorkshire, Cornwall, and Ireland, named The Northern Kingdom, the Central Kingdom, the Southern Kingdom, the Republic of Mir, The Eastern Kingdom, and the Sovereign Kingdom respectively.

The campaign is set in and around the ‘Scottish’ town of Daragh, a Dwarvern woodcutting town which lurks beneath a single mountain in the middle of the forest. After celebrating a special festival where the summer solstice and full moon land on the same day, a large explosion is heard at midnight, seemingly coming from the top of the mountain.

The players are, following the prologue, assembled by the mayor to return a kidnapped baby hobgoblin to its family atop the mountain; the mountain is broken down into 36 individual sections each 1-2 hours walk apart, and contain a mixture of puzzles, monsters, and story environments; the players must successfully pass each room in sequence, slowly ascending the mountain, in time to deliver the baby home and prevent a catastrophe.

The game’s core premise comes from time travel. The baby is supernaturally connected to time: every time the baby takes lethal damage, time resets to the same morning. However, throughout the story the players come to find that a cult of orcs (banished from these lands due to an ancient war) are planning to take part in a ritual that ties into the death and rebirth of the universe; this is ‘Deaths Legion’, led by the orc-tiefling Terrakus the Demolisher.

The mountain is the sleeping body of ‘The Beast’, the physical manifestation of the universe’s collapse upon itself. When the beast awakes, the universe dies, and a mortal soul gives their life to birth the next world; the beast awakens 72 hours after the start of the time-loop, and if the players fail to deliver the baby by this point, the universe resets and the players are invited to change at least one detail about their character (class, race, name, backstory) as the universe progresses into a new incarnation, with the loop starting again.

The orcs are aided by Kechler, a mysterious figure who the players will eventually discover is the baby from a former timeline, capable of surviving the death of the universe and persisting onto the next. Kechler plans to ‘eat’ the baby’s soul at the point of universal collapse, which will ultimately build his power over time until he can surpass the beast in power and become the ‘sovereign of time’, or a being existing on a plane of existence above the mortal world.

And so, the players must deliver the baby home, defeat Death's Legion and Kechler, and find a way to end the cycle of death and rebirth so that a future can finally exist.

I designed this campaign to have a distinct goal and end-point; as a player of DnD, I have found that some former campaigns I have played in have ended up petering out over time as schedules fill up and friend groups move apart; I instead planned 'Help Hobgob Home' to end on a 'bang', with a satisfying ending that ties up the plot as soon as a specified goal- reaching the top of the mountain and killing The Avatar Of The Beast- is reached.

System + Play

The game takes place in Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition (not 5.5, which was released during the campaign). As the Dungeon Master

All combat and the majority of exploration takes place on a series of paper maps I drew by hand; the maps are drawn on grid-paper with a key to determine the scale of the grid to the fictional world (Typically 5 feet per cm). All characters are represented by 1cm wooden cubes, onto which I glue a small paper portrait. The other faces of the cube have the character's name, initials, and a small decorative element drawn by the players or myself. They are also colour-coded; Blue ink for player-characters, Green for town citizens, Red for Orcs and Purple for Boss Fights.

Each map represents a specific location. The path up the mountain is mostly linear, and each map represents a stop 1 hour's walk up the route; as such, I keep track of time by adding 1 hour to the game time each time the players walk between two maps.

I keep a sketch of the world's layout in my personal notes. Each zone is described in a google document (including NPCs, puzzles, and loot) to guide me when running the sessions, but this is not gospel and I can and often do deviate from the written plans.

For example, I may write "to understand the enchanted item, roll at least 12 for history", but might decide to forego this roll when the players bring the museum curator NPC with them.

Character creation

I gave no guidance for character creation other than that the campaign was set in renaissance Scotland, and all player-characters must be of a neutral or good alignment; an evil party would potentially derail the campaign's core plot. I specified that the game would take place with level 6 player-characters, all of whom start with 50 gold apiece.

As each player discussed their character with me, I would log into the website 'Heroforge.com' and model a virtual miniature for their character, taking notes and going back-and-forth with the player until we were both happy with the character. I would then host the portrait on a Discord server, along with NPC portraits.

At the start of the game, the party consisted of the following characters;

Portrait	Name	Race/Class	Notes
	March Macruggles	Harengon / Totem Warrior Barbarian	A local celebrity and career adventurer, March Macruggles once saved Daragh from a plague of Owls and as such was invited as a guest of honour at the full-moon/solstice festival.
	Frae Hannis	Human / Divination Wizard	A travelling Wizard who was kicked out of the previous town for selling snake oil, Frae Hannis settles down in Daragh for the night before being dragged into the plot.
	Rob Anybody	‘Pixie’ (Fairy) / Thief Rogue	Rob Anybody is apparently inspired by a character by Terry Pratchett with which I am unfamiliar. Rob is a Pixie who is functionally a re-skinned Fairy. Rob’s small stature requires that I often rely on what we call ‘Loony Toons Physics’; he is able to store items in an unseen pocket dimension and can somehow lift things significantly larger than him, as if he was the size of a normal character. In the story world, he is 3 inches tall, meaning I allow him to pass through small openings and hide in clothing. Otherwise, I mechanically treat him like any ‘normal-sized’ character.

	Dave Ferguson	Hill Dwarf / Champion Fighter	Dave's player is new to D&D, so I let the other players design their player-characters then had Dave pick from the player's handbook for race and class. Dave is a simple character; he is a local alcoholic dwarf who hits things with an axe. I then wrote much of the world to accommodate Dave as a character as much as possible; he is the grandson of a major historical figure, and as such is the prophesied hero of the group.
	Gilda McNally	Tiefling / Spirit Bard	A former university roommate of Artemisia la Cognizi, Gilda is a skilled musician-turned-medium who is hired to play at Daragh's full-moon/solstice festival.
	Artemisa La Cognizi	Astral Elf / Artillerist Artificer	A former university roommate of Gilda McNally, Artemisia is a skilled astral elf inventor who is staying with an old friend, Allen Kie, in Daragh. Artemisia's race was negotiated through discussion between myself and her player to fit into the story world I had prepared; her player wanted her to have a french/italian feel, so I specifically wrote my interpretation of the Astral Elves to match this in terms accent, climate and culture.

	Thokk ‘The Glokk’	Half-Orc / Assassin Rogue	Thokk is **MY** player-character. Taken from a previous campaign I had played as him in, Thokk was intended as a Boss Fight. However, as the game progressed, the players took a liking to him and ultimately I allowed them to recruit him as a permanent party member, which also allowed me to play the game as I ran it. I nerfed Thokk by making him a character-sheet instead of a monster sheet, putting him on par with other player-characters in terms of power levels.

At one point in the campaign, Gilda McNally’s player, and later Artemisia La Cognizi’s player, had to leave the campaign for personal reasons. As such, I recruited two additional players, both mutual friends of the remaining players. Their characters appear below.

Portrait	Name	Race/Class	Notes
	Buguth Bifusispora	Mapach / Circle of Spores Druid	Buguthy Bifusispora is a wandering Mushroom expert who is camping outside of Daragh, consuming psychoactive mushrooms and enjoying nature.
	Urzul	Orc / Life Domain Cleric of Eldath	Urzul a priestess of Eldath, goddess of peace, and the last surviving member of an orc clan who attempted to peacefully leave the ashen lands but were slaughtered. She seeks Death's Legion as a means of safety and community, but finds herself repelled by their cultish beliefs and is cast out.

Story Direction and Delivery

Narration

Narration is provided by me, the Dungeon Master, off-the-cuff, as is standard for D&D. I narrate the setting of scenes, voice-act the various characters around town.

Level + Quest Design

The game follows a linear quest; get the baby to the mountain's peak. When the baby dies, a flashing light emerges from the baby and resets time to 8am on the first day.

Only the player-characters and the villain Kechler have a memory that persists between loops; all other NPCs have no memory or concept of the loop. As such, the players can learn over time how to 'Game the system' and make previously difficult obstacles easy or even advantageous.

If 36 hours passes from the start of the loop, the villains finish their evil plans and the world is destroyed; in this case, the players are asked to change at least one major detail about their characters (race, class, backstory, name, appearence) as the next unvierse comes

about; these new characters magically regain their memories of their past lives at 8am on the first day.

All content in the game therefore revolves around a single quest; get to the top of the mountain quickly. Kechler can adapt his plans in accordance with previous loops, throwing in a fun element of cat-and-mouse across the various loops.

Appendix D: Report on ‘Cyberpunk: Yorkshire’, a ‘Cyberpunk:RED’ One-shot

Story genre + premise

‘Cyberpunk; Yorkshire’ takes place in the story world established in the Cyberpunk; RED rulebook as well as the Cyberpunk: 2077 video game, with one key difference; instead of being set in Night City, in the former California, the game is set in Bright City, on the site of what was once Harrogate, North Yorkshire. All stated lore about Night City and the New United States, save for its physical location, instead applies to Bright City and the New United Kingdom.

The one-shot sees a selection of mercenaries being hired as bodyguards for the popstar Kai Katiri following a failed assassination attempt by his own staff. When Kai goes missing, with his manager mysteriously killed, the players are arrested as key suspects, and must attempt to solve the mystery, find Kai Katiri and clear their names.

Along the way, they travel to the bombed-out ruins of York, now a small haven in the middle of a ‘combat zone’ where scavengers and gangs hold an uneasy peace for the sake of trade.

In the final act, the players discover that Kai has been kidnapped by ‘Zenith’, a homebrewed start-up owned by the Megacorporation ‘Militech’, who have sponsored Kai’s career thus far. Zenith treated Kai for a traumatic brain injury by implanting a prototype cranial implant, but this prototype- secretly designed as a means of mind control- malfunctioned, turning Kai cyberpsycho, in which state he murdered his own manager.

Zenith had paid off Kai’s own team to kill him before their technology could be publicly disgraced, and the party ultimately rescue Kai, expose Zenith for their kidnapping and enslavement, and reap a heft financial reward from the city government.

System + Play

The game was played in-person over a weekend, with the use of the official companion app allowing for expedited combat maths as well as

A large sheet of gridless paper, on which 1x1 inch paper portraits were placed, formed our battlefield; an exterior (street) and an interior (police station/facility) map were available, but smaller-scale combats were resolved using “theatre of the mind’ combat

Character creation

I gave no guidance for character creation other than that it would be fun to make use of Cyberpunk: RED’s dice-based character creation ‘lifepath’ system. When I authored the story, I took advice I had read online and weaved as many of the player’s lifepaths into the campaign as possible.

As each player discussed their character with me, I would log into the website ‘Heroforge.com’ and model a virtual miniature for their character, taking notes and going back-and-forth with the player until we were both happy with the character.

At the start of the game, the party consisted of the following characters;

Portrait	Name	Role	Notes
	Gwen ‘Crash_Override’ Prime	**Netrunner**	A profit-motivated Netrunner-for hire
	Tavaris ‘Lantern’ Steiner	**Tech**	A German drone technician who does mercenary work on the side; has tragically ended relationships (due to illness, suicide, and kidnapping) and a secret friend in Millitech who feeds him parts in exchange for work
	Aliana ‘Redtail’	**Medtech**	A neurotic, fastidious Russian surgeon who works for hire as a combat medic while hosting a street clinic to help the impoverished. Enjoys dressing up in Japanese fashion.
	‘Knightrider’	**Nomad**	Implanted with the same technology as Kai, Knightrider’s consciousness is overridden by a library of fantasy movies, making him believe himself to be a mediaeval knight. As such, he has been welcomed into the nomad clan that calls itself Camelot in his honour.

Appendix E: Blank CRPG Ongoing Journal Form

ONGOING CRPG Story tracking chart					
Date		**Session #**		**Game**	
Playthrough		**Character**			
List of quests and other content 'chunks' worked on during this session					
Summarise story progression within this game					
What mechanics and scenarios did the game present which allowed for narratively-significant interaction?					
When interacting with the above, what influences did you feel on your decision-making processes?					
List any ways that decisions and inputs in previous sessions led to story variation. How significant is this variance?					
Notes relating to relationship with developer					
Any other notes					

Appendix F: Blank CRPG Retrospective Playthrough Summary Form

CRPH Retrospective Playthrough Report					
Date		Playthrough #		Game	

What proportion of the game was played through prior to the study?

What character did you play?

Class		Background	
Species (if app.)		Gender Identity	
Level		Playstyle	
Backstory			
Influences on character creation			

From memory and reference to resources, what major story decisions were taken on this playthrough?

From memory, why did you choose to make these story decisions? What influences did you feel?

To what extent did you feel you were in control of;
-Story direction/outcomes on a micro level (IE within quests/questlines)
-Story direction/outcomes on a macro level (IE within acts or the whole narrative)

List any notable ways in which you were able to wield authorial agency over the game story

List any notable ways in which you were distinctly unable to wield authorial agency over the game story

Any other notes

Appendix G: Blank TTRPG Ongoing Journal Form

ONGOING TTRPG Story tracking chart						
Date		**Session #**		**Game**		
Register						
PC Name						
Player						
Present?						
(Complete BEFORE) What content has been planned for this session? Why?						
(Complete BEFORE) How do you as the DM plan for the story to progress this session?						
Session Gameplay & Plot summary						
Did this session deviate from the DM's expectations? How?						
Notable player inputs into the narrative						
Notable system-sourced story inputs						
Any other notes						

Appendix H: Blank TTRPG Retrospective Journal Form

Retrospective TTRPG Story tracking chart						
Session Date		Session #		Game		
Who, if anyone, helped recall the session?						
PC Name						
Player						
Present?						
What content had been planned for this session? Why?						
How did you as the DM plan for the story to progress this session?						
Session Gameplay & Plot summary						
Did this session deviate from the DM's expectations? How?						
Notable player inputs into the narrative						
Notable system-sourced story inputs						
Any other notes						

Appendix I: Design Justifications for Blank Journal Forms

Herein, I explain the ethos underpinning each question in my Systematic Self-Analysis forms (Stage 3 Data.

1: TTRPG ('Ongoing' and 'Retrospective') Structured Journalling Forms

1. **What content has been planned for this session? Why?**
2. **How do you as the DM plan for the story to progress this session?**

These opening questions log my, the GM's, authorial intent; comparing the GM's plans to actual outcomes, I aimed to understand how the input of players and other surprise factors limit and detail the DM's authority.

3. **Session Gameplay & Plot summary**

Direct narration of story; assisted recollection of events, was compared to Q1-Q2 to answer Q4.

4. **Did this session deviate from the DM's expectations? How?**

Examines limits and complications implicated in DM-authorial inputs. DMs do not hold or yield total control over game-narrative; tracking successes of failures to direct the plot illuminated social and ludic power dynamics underpinning authorial dialogues.

5. **Notable player inputs into the narrative**

Freeform section noting behaviours and powers players could wield, thus examining power dynamics between DM ('lead' storyteller) and Players, who may deviate from, modify, or derail the intended narrative through varied means.

6. **Notable system-sourced story inputs**

Freeform section noting narrative elements manifesting from the game rules. Tracking these elements illuminated the game system as complicating factor, mistranslating human authorial intents into story outputs.

7. **Any other notes**

A freeform section for any other observations, allowing flexibility

2: CRPG 'Ongoing' Structured Journalling Form

1. **List of quests and other content 'chunks' worked on during this session**

For easy reference, allows quick cross-referencing with online resources and quick recollection of session events.

2. **Summarise story progression within this game**

Notes the story-as-experienced on a granular level; important conversation choices, inputs not tied to defined 'quests', etc.

3. **What mechanics and scenarios did the game present which allowed for narratively-significant interaction?**

Illuminates formal points and methods of contribution to game-narrative the title presents to the player; allows the tracking of formal tools of dialogic authorship as granted by developer via game to player.

4. When interacting with the above, what influences did you feel on your decision-making processes?

Opens up avenues for noting more subconscious experiences, such as story pre-planning, biases, goals, etc.

5. **List any ways that decisions and inputs in previous sessions led to story variation.**

Follows up on decisions note in previous entries; notes longer-term story impact of decisions beyond a single session.

6. **How significant is this variance?**

Explores magnitude of impact previous sessions have had on long-form narratives; thus illuminates the scope of output that can result from player inputs and limits of player agency.

7. **Notes relating to relationship with developer**

Freeform notes on any direct psychological engagement with the 'developer', such as to highlight any similarities /differences between CRPG and TTRPG dialogues.

8. **Any other notes**

3: CRPG 'Retrospective' Summary Form

1. **From memory and reference to resources, what major story decisions were taken on this playthrough?**

Draws focus to major player inputs into the formal narrative, rather than unreliable narrations of plotlines. Aims to identify specific anecdotes or reminders that prompt memory data for use throughout this form.

2. **From memory, why did you choose to make these story decisions? What influences did you feel?**

Highlights motive, ethos, and goals with regards to story-authorial player inputs, which in turn may be linked to cultural values present in Stage 2 data.

3. **To what extent did you feel you were in control of | Story direction/outcomes on a micro level (IE within quests/questlines) | Story direction/outcomes on a macro level (IE within acts or the whole narrative)**

A space for exploring the experience of authorial dialogue, as a means of prompting the search for methods and underlying values which underpinned my experiences of the game from a narrative perspective.

4. **List any notable ways in which you were able to wield authorial agency over the game story**

Notes primary tools for participation in dialogic authorship; game mechanics, strategies, mapping of decision trees, etc.

5. **List any notable ways in which you were distinctly unable to wield authorial agency over the game story**

Highlights noticeable limitations on player-authorial agency. Explores developer influence on the negative space, and prompts questions of why said limitations exist.

6. **Any other notes**

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