CUSTOMIZATION, EMOTIONAL BONDS AND IDENTIFICATION WITH THE PLAYER CHARACTER
A study into the effects of text-based gameplay

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to take a closer look at how customization, or the lack thereof, affects the player to character emotional bond and identification in a digital game. Examining previous articles and studies with similar aim, the lack of study pertaining to a certain game format surfaced and sparked a research interest. To gain some clarity into how character customization, and the identification and bond it inspires in players, would be affected by a non-audiovisual branching stories digital game the researcher created a small game for this study. This paper explores if previous research results on RPGs can be transferred to the format of a text-based non-audiovisual branching story game. For this qualitative study, ten people, divided in two groups, played a version of the game and answered follow-up questions in the form of a questionnaire. In addition, some observations were carried out of the game play sessions. These answers were studied to give the individuals perspective, as well as allowing for the study of the phenomena by reviewing multiple perspectives to distinguish patterns. The results indicate that caring for a character takes longer if the player is not allowed to customize it. It was also indicated that the actual customization was more important than the character created.

Keywords: Customization, Emotional bond, Identification, Text-based gameplay, Branching stories
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1 Introduction

This paper aims to study how playing a text-based game with no audiovisual feedback affects the players’ feelings regarding the player character, pertaining to whether the player has been allowed to customize the character or not. The method used for this qualitative study is phenomenology; the study of how people perceive a phenomenon.

Several authors have written works and conducted studies that relate to customization, emotional bonds and identification with a player character, as well as how players behave and their experiences with mentioned instances.

Customization and character creation has mostly been studied in other formats. The point of studying it in a new context is to broaden the research field and provide more information to developers and designers regarding player perspectives on customization. We can also study how the absence of juicy feedback such as sound effects, particle effects and flashy looking characters, affects the identification player to character. Sheldon (2004) on the other hand says that empathy is traditionally tied to visual characters like movie heroes, and that games are visual media primarily. This study can investigate this further to shed more light on the issue.

Studying identification and customization is an interesting field. Designing customization seems to come down to choices and intent. The intention and design choices made by the designer and the intention and choices expressed by the player. Allowing for agency and choices made by the player creates a personal experience for a player, and that can be very powerful. Lankoski (2011) explores agency and actions in conjuncture with empathy for the player character and finds that controlling the player character facilitates engagement and that this engagement can be either goal-oriented or emphatic.

Studies have been conducted pertaining to the emotional connection players feel toward their characters after having gotten to mold the character into something they identify with or for some reason would like to experience. Turkay and Kinzer (2014) studied players of a Massively Multiplayer Online game (henceforth referred to as MMO) called Lord of the Rings Online (2007, Turbine). They argue that customizing a character has the potential of impacting how the player identifies with the character. Adding more proof to this claim would be valuable to designers and developers.

The studies exploring this phenomenon are studying visual games; that is to say games with some kind of art work representation, spanning from still images of 2D art to animated 3D models. There has also not, to the best of the author’s knowledge, been studies into how this bond between player and player character due to customization is affected by having the player visualize the character and game world based on text only. The fact that the feedback to the player is different from what has been studied in Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (henceforth referred to as MMORPGs) makes it interesting to see if the research into character creation and customization is transferable. Isaksson (2011) concludes her study by stating that one of the main takeaways is that the perception of the game is highly impacted by the process of character creation. However, this study was conducted on MMORPGs by posting questionnaires on two forums; Blizzard Entertainments World of Warcraft forum and a joint forum (www.mmorpg.com).

This study will attempt to fill a hole in the research field in regards to emotions and player characters pertaining to customization in this particular format. With these gaps in the research field having been identified, this study aims to answer the question:
- Will the player experience identifying with the character to a larger degree if they have completed a customization process, in contrast to if they are not part of the creation process of the player character at all, in a text-based game with no audiovisual feedback?

To answer the research question set forth by this study, a game was developed. The game was created in two versions, one in which customization was possible and one in which it was not, to allow for a comparison to be made between the two. The game was text-based with no audiovisual feedback. This was so that the imagery or art work should not affect the emotional bond to the character. By merging table top RPG character creation with the digital game variety, we can also see how letting the player have more agency in the process, through writing text into the game, affects the identification with the character.

The narrative of the game was modelled after the storytelling technique by Joseph Campbell (1949) called “The Hero’s Journey”, as it is a classic model used for storytelling. The only difference between the two versions of the game was that in one the players could customize the player character by ticking boxes and providing free text answers describing the character’s background. In the other version, no customization was available and the background and character cosmetics were presented as a premade character. The theme is an adventure game in a medieval setting.
2 Background

Games are such an interactive form of entertainment that it is not strange that allowing the player agency over part of the creation of the player character has become common. It is therefore highly plausible that being allowed to mold the player character, the representation of themselves in the game world or the representation of the character they are controlling, is an important aspect of why players come to care for their characters. In fact, being allowed to customize their character to their liking impacts how the player feels about the character, as by Hefner, Klimmt and Vorderer (2007), to be presented under 2.1 ‘Customization’.

Customization can be tied to choices and agency, in that the process of customization is a series of choices which serve to give the player the sense that their decisions matter. This is after all why many players play games instead of watch a movie; they like that their choices and actions have consequences for the story and the character (Hefner, Klimmt & Vorderer, 2007; Oxland, 2004).

In this chapter, we will explore the background for this study. We will go through the definitions of terminology set up by the researcher for this study, and we will also get familiarized with previous relevant research and concepts.

In this study the concept of customization will exclude user made modifications, so called modding, and instead focus on the means available to the player, as designed features, regarding how they incorporate their decisions into the game.

For this study the definition of customization encompasses cosmetic customization, gender, skills and such stats, names, as well as creating a backstory. All these things are common variables in Role Playing Games, henceforth referred to as RPGs, and as such should be included in the definition, since these aspects are subject to alteration by the player, to tailor and customize their experience and/or character.

It should also be noted that player experience does not refer to the research field, but rather to the perceived experience the player has when they play the artefact created for this study. Player experience is a vast field of research in and of itself, which deals with the design aspects of how to design for a specific response (Ermi & Mäyrä, 2004). In doing so the players are involved in the design process by testing and giving feedback. Essentially it is user-centered design, Ermi & Mäyrä state in their paper, and refer to other studies conducted by Laurel and Mountford (1990) and Raskin (2000). The authors also state that this is a field where user interface design and a lesser cognitive load is part of the aim (cf. Nielsen, 1993). That is not the type of player experience that this paper addresses, as the focus here is to look at the immersion and perception that comes with having an experience as a player.

2.1 Customization

The creation of player characters begins with design; the choices made by the designer in regards to what they make available to the player to utilize for their experience. This can be thought of as the bare bones of customization. Allowing the player to customize their characters contributes to the emotional bond the players feels for the character they had input into creating, as found by Turkay and Kinzer (2014) in their study.

There are varieties of customization, such as strictly cosmetic customization, skill and stat customization, naming the character and selecting the race and gender (Van, 2014). Van studies character creation and list the above mentioned aspects of character customization and creation in her
paper. The aim of her study is to explore if the players motivation based on Bartle (1996) and Yee (2005) will affect how the participants mould their characters if they fall into the categories of Achiever or Immersive motivation. What Yee (2005) did, was to conduct a test with which she could study the extended 8 player types from Bartle’s (2004) revised model. This allowed her to study possible overlap between player types as well as other unsolved questions. She records the character creation process and conducts interviews to collect her data. The results are that players with high scores in the personality trait Achiever did not care much about cosmetic customization, while those who scored high on the Immersion trait did (Yee, 2005).

There are other aspects, in addition to customization of the character, that will affect the players experience are character personality affecting choices. Such as dialogue options or possible actions, that have diegetically social consequences (Lankoski & Björk, 2007). The term diegetically social consequences, introduced by Lankoski & Björk (2007) refer to the reactions that follow, in this case, the player and his/her character’s actions. An example could be that if the character does something illegal and gains a bad reputation he/she may not be able to enter certain locations in the game world or take on certain quests because of that. This will be explored further in section 2.4.

Customization provides the player with some agency and has been connected to empathy and feeling for the player character (Hefner, Klimmt & Vorderer, 2007). Customization is the collective name for what aspects the player can choose to tailor the gaming experience to their liking, and it commonly refers to the player character. Björk and Lankoski (2007) point this out well when they discuss general aspects of character design, shown below.

2.1.1 Customization and player characters

- Physiology (e.g., sex, age, height, weight, appearance, distinct, and physique);
- Sociology (e.g., occupation, education, family life, friends, enemies, and hobbies);
- Psychology (e.g., moral standards, goals temperament, obsessions, intelligence).

(Björk & Lankoski, 2007)

These three facets of the character are interesting as they are usually all addressed in RPGs to a varying degree. The table top RPGs in the tradition of Dungeons and Dragons (Tactical Studies Rules, Inc) set around campaigns and adventuring, tend to go the deepest, having the players write backstories for their characters and really immersing themselves in the creation and customization of their character.

The aspects listed above by Björk and Lankoski (2007) point out the complexity of what character creation and customization is. The creation process of a table top RPG has many of these elements, as illustrated below.
As can be seen, the complexity makes for unique characters and provides the player with a lot of choices.

Lee Sheldon (2004) backs up the concept of a well-rounded character having three dimensions, or layers, (Björk and Lankoski (2007), stating that the dimensions in question are physical, sociological and psychological (pp. 37 - 40).
Hefner, Klimmt and Vorderer (2007) studied how identification with the player character and video game enjoyment go hand in hand. The authors point out that there are a couple of different theories that conflict regarding identification with media characters in the field of entertainment research. The terminology is one such point of contention, as well as the quality of the experience. To be able to study identification with a player character they defined the term as:

Identification could be described as ‘feeling like’ or as creating the illusion to ‘become’ a key person within a computer game’s universe; it is argued to be an essential element of game enjoyment.


At the time of their study Hefner, Klimmt and Vorderer (2007) stated that no one had studied how the concepts of ‘identification’, ‘emotional bonds’ and the consumer taking the ‘observers point of view’ applied that to the interactive format of video games. Instead the authors state that the entertainment research has been concentrated on movie and TV heroes. The authors aim to find indications of stronger identification with a character by applying the concepts to an interactive game in their pilot study.

The results of the pilot study support the assumption that there is a relationship between identification, interactivity and game enjoyment (Hefner, Klimmt & Vorderer, 2007). The study consisted of 30 male students between the ages of 20 and 30 years old, of which 20 participants were experienced with the gaming genre First Person Shooter, usually referred to as FPS. Participants were randomly selected to either play a level in Battlefield 2 (Digital Illusions CE) or watch a play through of said level. The participants then filled out a questionnaire asking them about their experience in terms of enjoyment and identification with character. In addition, the participants who got to play the game were asked about their impression of competence during gameplay. The identification with the character was assessed using eight statements such as “I have forgotten myself during the game”. The participants were also asked to rate attributes they would identify with, such as ‘masculine’ or ‘powerful’ (Hefner, Klimmt, Vorderer, 2007, pp. 44). At the end of the study the authors pose that computer game interactivity is an important facilitator for strong identification, based on the pilot study they conducted. This is based on the result that those who play the game identify with the game character to a much larger degree than those participants who only watched that character on the video. They also conclude that:

Both theoretical argumentation and empirical pilot findings support the assumption that playing computer games is fun, (partly) because it allows to enter imagined worlds beyond one’s real-life experiences and to perceive oneself in the way one wants to be. In a sense, the term “wishful identification” is most suitable to describe this facet of computer game enjoyment.

Hefner, Klimmt & Vorderer, (2007), pp. 45

The results of the pilot study by Hefner, Klimmt and Vorderer (2007) also point at the importance of narrative and that it plays a big part in the identification process and the risks an underdeveloped or rudimentary plot can play. This, the authors argue, can lead to a lowered game enjoyment as a weaker plot may result in an underdeveloped character which the player may not identify with to a higher degree.

In a study by Trepte and Reinecke (2010) the authors set out to study avatar-player similarity to determine identification with the player character, which was hypothesized to enhance the experience. To test the theories the authors asked the participants of the study to choose personality features for a
player character, set in six game scenarios. Trepte and Reinecke (2010) found that the results of the experiment were influenced both by the participant’s satisfaction with their own lives as well as the games competitiveness. Noncompetitive games tended to have the participants create characters who resembled themselves, and competitive games lead to the creation of characters that were dissimilar to the participant. Also, participants that were pleased with their personal lives tended to create characters like themselves. Interestingly though, the researchers also found that if the character resembled the player closely this related negatively to enjoyment. The authors also state that there is a strong relationship between identifying with the player character and the enjoyment of the game.

Cosmetic customization

Cosmetic customization determines what the character looks like. This may or may not have in-game consequences. It has been suggested in previous studies, that the look of the character is important for the connectivity the player feels toward the character (Trepte & Reinecke, 2010; Hefner, Klimmt & Vorderer, 2007). The way the character looks solidifies the status and personality of the character to the rest of the world, showing and reminding what the character’s traits are. Looks also matters in MMOs especially as the player can express to others who they want to be seen as, according to Ducheneaut, Wen, Yee & Wadley (2009). Cosmetic customization can be body shape, hair style, skin- or hair color, clothing, scars or other embellishments, for example tattoos.

![Figure 2](image)

Figure 2  An example of customization from the game Star Wars: The Old Republic (2005).

Ernest Adams (2010) brings up the point that the avatar in a role-playing game, especially in MMOs, becomes like a vessel or a mask the player wears for the purposes of the game. He also states that the more freedom and opportunity given to players to express themselves through customization, the more the players will enjoy exercising their own creativity.
While most games have an established character as the player’s avatar, role-playing games, especially multiplayer online ones, almost always give players considerable freedom to design an avatar to their own specifications. They can choose the avatar’s race, sex, body type, hair, clothing, and other physical attributes, as well as a large number of other details, such as strength and dexterity that have a direct effect on the way the avatar performs in challenging situations.

Adams, 2010, pp. 129

Oxland (2004) asks if it truly is as important to the player as it is to the marketing team to have visual characters. He says that as far as the game designer is concerned the character’s function and the context and setting it is in, is most important.

These characters, you could say, were lost along the way. They may have begun as a central character that had identifiable characteristics, but somehow, often through bad design and story, become bland and ordinary, perhaps without a soul.

Oxland, 2004, pp. 191

Oxland (2004) goes on to ask why, if it is not necessary for the player to receive positive visual impact in the form of their character, do designers bother to create visual characters? He answers his own question by stating that;

The answer is identification and branding […]

Oxland, 2004, pp. 196

These questions are interesting, as they tie in to the artefact made for this study, as it utilizes non-visual characters. The idea that every character is unique, does not exist in any other world, and serve as branding first and foremost, as Oxland (2004) would have it be, is perhaps a bit one dimensional.

The question of gender

There have been discussions that the gender of the character matters, for example by Dille and Zuur Platten (2007), who suggest that players want to play as their own gender, and that if they play as the opposite gender it leads to another relationship with the character. The authors argue that most male players are not fantasizing that they are Lara Croft in the game series Tomb Raider (Chrystal Dynamics/Ubisoft), and even suggest she may be replacing female companionship.

Lee Sheldon (2004) also mentions these stereotypes but encourages his reader to not write such characters. He discusses the dilemma publishers face as the demographic shifts from having been mostly young males to now include more females, and how that should be reflected in the character design. He does bring up the point of young men enjoying looking at a beautiful, sexy woman as an aspect in the design, but goes on to say that strong and complex female characters are to be preferred. He adds that “men and women both like to identify with preternaturally fit and attractive characters in movies, and in games they like to play them” (pp. 99).

The view on the matter presented by Ernest Adams (2010) is fairly similar, which supports the indications of this view on male or female avatars as being the norm in the game industry. He states that early in the history of videogames it was thought that men might find the idea of “identifying with
a female protagonist somehow threatening” (pp. 131) but that now, as women are becoming a larger part of the audience, the option to play as female has increased.

There are many opinions on this subject, and it is interesting to a degree for this study. As the study’s artefact allows the participants to choose their gender in one version and because the other version stars a female character, gender as a customization variable is relevant. However, gender roles are not the focus of this paper; the ability to customize and the way the gender selection affects the player’s relationship to the character is.

**Customization motivation and design**

What motivates the use of customization, other than wanting to create an environment an experience that is more personal for the player? Bartle (2004) poses that players can reach different levels of immersion in regards to their characters. He introduces four terms for this: player, avatars, character and persona. The player is someone who only sees the character as a pawn or an object to control in the game space to move around. If the player instead feels something for the object he/she controls, the object will instead be referred to as an avatar. The next step in terms of immersion according to Bartle (2004) is the character, and that is the step from avatar to the representative of the player in the game. He goes on to define the deepest form of immersion is persona; when the player feels that he/she is the object.

Bartle (2004) has also defined four player types, called Achievers, Explorers, Socializers and Killers. These gamers have vastly different objectives, and if a player is able to tailor their character to suit their play style this is a good motivation to do so. Choosing classes to which their character can belong affects play style in MMORPGs. Bartle (2004) defines the most frequently used MMORPGs playstyles as Player versus Environment, Player versus Player and Role-Playing.

The so called ‘Role-Play Paradox’ is something that Bartle (2004) discusses as well. He poses that a role-playing player always tries to become one with their character, but that if the player were to ever actually reach that point, the roleplaying would be over, as the character would be the player.

As seen, Björk and Lankoski (2007) bring up the social and psychological aspects of a player characters’ personality. To take it a step further one could argue that this is customization that shows up in the story driving choices and dialogue choices players make; it lets them express how the player thinks and reacts which gives the personality more depth and life and therefor builds on the cosmetic customization.

Not only the players’ motivations for customizing their character is of importance. To know what elements keep players engaged and coming back is important to developers according to Yee (2006), who usually focuses his research around studying identity creation in games.

Oxland (2004) addresses the issue of motivation and how designers can create tasks, challenges and goals that motivate a player to keep playing. However, player motivation in terms of what motivates players is harder to derive from the books written by designers, such as Oxland, Dille and Zuur Platten (2007), as these books are aimed at designers.
2.2 Open and Closed Avatars

For the purpose of this study, Open Avatar and Closed Avatar (Kromand, 2007) refer to the degree of which customization is part of the player character. Kromand (2007) refers to the avatar, or character, with a pregenerated personality, such as Lara Croft (init. Core Design/Edios Interactive, 1996), as a Closed Avatar. An Open Avatar is, by default, a character that has no personality traits without the involvement of the player. It is, Kromand (2007) says, to be compared to a blanc slate, and he adds that the avatars of role-playing games are a great example of this.

When referring to the degree of which the personality of the Closed Avatar is open to customization, there is a spectrum to take into consideration, as each developer makes that decision. An example of how the existing spectrum of Open and Closed Avatars looks is when a player can customize a character that has a fixed personality. An example of this is The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (CD Project RED) in which the character has a personality, a background, a profession and a name – he is Geralt of Rivia. However, in this latest third Witcher game players can customize his hair and skills, giving them some input. This makes Geralt more of an open character, as players can alter him cosmetically slightly, versus a closed character which the player may not alter at all. Kromand (2007) still refers to these slightly more open Closed Avatars as just that; closed, because their personalities and stories are locked in the game in a predefined way.

Open versus Closed Avatars are interesting for this study, as both are actually being utilized by the artefact created, one version using an Open avatar and the other using a Closed Avatar. To study the difference it may make for the player to character identification and emotional bond, in this genre and format of gameplay, is what the study explores in a customization context.

Lee Sheldon (2004), when speaking about the player character, and whether or not the character is controlled by the player or is meant to be the player, expresses that one is preferable over the other. Sheldon brings up the point of view, first person view making the player into the lead character of the game, or second person view which he relates to text-based games and where he feels that the player character and player are one. Sheldon (2004) is in this case not referring to the camera view in a game, but referring to the experience. He related the point of view and allowing players to play themselves in a game to a theory, which states that these aspects are tied to immersion, and he also ties these concepts to the player’s choices (pp. 44).

The theory behind allowing players to play themselves in a game is said to be a greater level of immersion. Certainly in the earlier text adventures, it helped the reality of the world to preface player actions as “you” as in “You find yourself in a maze of twisty passages, all alike”.

[…] Despite the use of second-person text, most games today feature player-characters distinct from players. There are three reasons for this:

1. Computer games are happiest as a visual medium, and text is usually suffered as a necessity.
2. We have a tradition of empathizing with characters in other visual media such as film, television, and live drama.
3. Games today are attempting more sophisticated storytelling. We see this even in the development of the Myst games where the first is nothing more than the unravelling of a backstory, and the later sequels feature ongoing story in which he player-character becomes actively involved.

Sheldon, 2004, pp. 44
Based on the above mentioned reasons, Sheldon concludes that “it is now accepted that a greater immersion is actually possible if the player-character is not a representation of the player” (pp. 45).

Scott McCloud (1994) brings up a similar point, when he in his book *Understanding Comics*, wishes to illustrate how people identify with the plainest of figures, as long as they have some simplistic human traits.

Ernest Adams (2010) has the following to say about the relationship between player and avatar:

> The nature of the player’s relationship with the avatar varies considerably from game to game. Whether the player designed the avatar herself, whether the game displays the avatar as a visible and audible presence, how the player controls the avatar’s movements, and many other factors influence that relationship.

Adams, 2010, pp. 129

Adams (2010) goes on to talk about the earliest, text-based adventure games, written as if the player himself was in the game. Those adventure games had Closed Avatars, or nonspecific avatars, as he calls them. An example of a graphic game with a nonspecific avatar is *Myst* (Cyan Inc/BroderBund), and Gordon Freeman in the game series *Half-Life* is also a non-specific avatar, as he is never seen in the game, being that the designer has not specified anything about the character. The character Gordon Freeman is an empty shell for the player to inhabit, says Adams (2004).

For a designer it is very limiting to create characters where nothing is specified, as it is hard to establish how it fits into the game world; to see it in context. Knowing nothing of the personality makes it hard to write a story (Adams, 2004). A specific character is often used in modern games, which exhibit strong storylines, as they are detailed characters with histories and personalities of their own.

> With a specific avatar, the player’s relationship to her is more like that of the reader’s relationship to the hero of a novel. The reader is not the hero, but the reader does identify with her: The reader wants to know what will happen to the hero, hopes that things will turn out well for her, and so on. The difference is that in in a game, the player can help and guide the hero rather than just read about her.

Adams, 2010, pp. 130

Kromand (2007) also brings up the designers’ perspective on avatars, but he presents a more nuanced picture than Sheldon (2004) and Adams (2010), as he presents the findings of his paper. He proposes that even though his research can be construed to mean that certain avatar types are ideal for a certain consumer, and could be used to drive the sales of games, it is his experience that the character is only a part of the whole. The aim of his paper, Kromand (2007) states is to create terminology for distinguishing avatars.

### 2.3 Game genres and their importance to design

Defining genres leads to the realization that there is some overlap. Oxland (2004) poses that subgenres have emerged over the years and that people have different kinds of ideas as to what elements define a genre, and therefore different ideas of what constitutes a certain type of.

Game core genres, according to Kevin Oxland (2004), are: Sports, Adventure, Action, Simulation, Strategy, Puzzle, Role-play, Management. (pp. 25)
Game genres are an interesting factor for character design. The cosmetics and functionalities depend on the genre in such a way that the character reflects what the main aim of the game is. That is to say, if the player character is a dinosaur, robot or a humanoid character, the features of the character reflect the main mechanics in certain ways. An example could be how fast the character can move, if it has certain skills or perhaps can shoot lasers out of their eyes.

This implies that the characters for some game genres are more suitable for customization than others. Examples of genres where it would be more difficult to utilize customization are big brand name games like Tomb Raider (Core Design, Chrystal Dynamics) or Super Mario (Nintendo) or certain casual games. On the other hand, games that are very brand specific, like the Tomb Raider (Core Design, Chrystal Dynamics) or Uncharted (Naughty Dog) series, can illustrate character growth and development other ways. When a character is played over a number of releases one can usually see a growth in the character, and sometimes even unlock skins that allow for some cosmetic customization. Developing a game series allows the players to follow the character and bond with it over time, and in the case of releasing prequels such as with Tomb Raider (Core Design, Chrystal Dynamics) the developers can show the players the character’s growth, motivations and pivotal points in the character’s life.

However, customization is not always strictly cosmetic, as can be seen in table top RPGs. In such games the players add backstories and skills as well as weapons and the like, to the character customization process. Genres that commonly allow players to customize their characters are MMORPGs and RPGs. MMORPGs that utilize customization are for example World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment) or The Elder Scrolls (Bethesda) series. In these games the player can select gender, race, class and other cosmetic and strategic choices, as well as haggling, stealing or helping NPCs and thus creating diegetically social consequences (Lankoski & Bjork, 2007). More on the topic of different kinds of RPG can be found under 2.4 ‘Roleplaying games’.

In cases when the player can partake in shaping the character, the user experience is designed to inspire engagement. It will also allow the character to act as an extension of the player’s self. This is what Lankoski (2011) proposes at the end of his paper, when he explores how player control affects engagement, actions and empathy for the character. Designers therefor sometimes allow the players to sell their custom skins, partake in designing skins or in other ways listen to the players input when making design choices. Other ways designers allow player input is to choose their own path, for example in Zork (Colossal Cave Adventure) which is a chose-your-own-adventure game series. In games such as these, utilizing branching stories (Dille and Zuur Platten, 2007), the player can have a greater impact on their experience based on their choices and gaming style.

2.4 Roleplaying Games

There are many kinds of games out there, however, for the purpose of this study Role Playing Games, henceforth referred to as RPGs, are the most relevant. A closer look reveals that there are a couple of variants when it comes to RPGs. From analogue to digital, there is a wide variety of RPGs out there; even Live Action Role-Playing Games, so called LARP, falls under this category of gaming. However, as LARP:ing is such a different kind of creature all together it will not be discussed here. For this study there are two forms of RPGs are the most relevant; branching story games and single player action RPGs on computer.

As previously mentioned RPGs usually allow for some customization of the player character. The player is introduced to one or several quests over the course of the game and gets to follow his/her hero
through challenges and growth. This growth can be either of a more mental variety; making wiser choices, or in a more physical way; levelling up or unlocking new abilities, weapons and other related skills.

Role-playing games are unmistakable. They have evolved from the MUDs and text-based MMORPGs of yesteryear.

[..] Some have argued that an RPG is an adventure game, but RPGs go way beyond adventure games in design complexity and sheer scope and they also have an element of strategy about them.

Kevin Oxland, 2004, pp. 27 -28

Oxland (2004) defines an RPG as having certain defining aspects. A fundamental element is defined as having a character that has development and growth, however he does not mean in a story sense, but rather in terms of skills and abilities in numbers. He goes on to state that well-rounded, in-depth characters belong in adventure games and not RPGs (pp. 28). He goes on to bring up the fact that players generally institute everything about the character’s persona, physical aspects and so on, that RPGs tend to have inventory systems, this type of game requires a time commitment from the player, sometimes even months or years to complete (pp.29) says Oxland. He also goes on to speak of the core challenge as part of what defines an RPG, stating:

The core challenge for the player is to guide his character(s) successfully through to the end of the game and to build them up to their ultimate state of being. But the end does not necessarily mean the end of the game. It could mean to bring the characters up to a certain level and sustain it, as in Everquest, for example. But the player can only do this by modifying his character’s attributes and components as he moves through his quest. That is the heart of an RPG.

Oxland, 2004, pp. 30

Oxland also lists RPG components as; Character creation, Character evolution, Character class, Attributes and skills, Inventory management, Melee, Quests, Interactive story, Adventure (pp. 30).

There are a couple of traits that are commonly occurring in RPGs; a story affected by choice, exploration and quests, items and inventory, character actions and abilities or skills, gaining experience and levels, combat, diegetically social consequences, among other things. Lankoski and Björk (2007) explain the term ‘diegetically social consequences’ as:

Actions by a person in a game world influences how other people perceive and interact with that person.

Lankoski and Björk, 2007

For the purposes of this study the definition of an RPG is hereby provided by the researcher, as being a game in which the player takes on a role, moulding the character to their specifications. This role is customizable to a varying degree, allowing for skills, traits and cosmetic customization, as well as allow the player to control the choices of the character.

A brief overview of the different forms of RPGs will show the main design choices and customization that is tied to that specific variety.
2.4.1 Digital RPGs

**MUDs**

Multi-User Dungeon, or MUDs, as this kind of RPG was first called, allows multiple players to engage in a session together. This form of RPG was later has been referred to as Multi-user Dimension or Multi-User Domain. This is a game of the text-based computer game variety, however in some MUDs pictures or images occur. Text is the primary source of gameplay, giving the player information about what they see, who they are facing, what is happening and results of attacks.

**MMORPGS**

Massively Multiplayer Online RPGs allow sometimes thousands of players to exist in the same world all at once; intertwining their stories and experiences with one another, creating a stimulating and ever-changing world. Players can team up to defeat monsters and complete quests. Often players can choose what type of game play they are interested in by selecting a server that is dedicated to that kind of player objective, such as Player versus Player (PvP) or Player versus Environment (PvE) servers. When so many players are doing the same quests at the same time it can lead to immersion breaking events when a player has not gotten as far into the story as other players have. Since the players share a space it can unleash events that to one player is the consequence of an action, such as defeating a monster, but to someone else is completely out of place.

**Single player computer or console RPGs**

These games are geared towards one player, such as Fallout New Vegas (2010, Obsidian Entertainment) and the Elder Scrolls series (Bethesda). Just as with an MMORPG you can customize your character and follow questlines, interact with other characters; it’s just going to be Non-Player Characters in this type of game.

**Choose-your-own-adventure-game**

This kind of RPG is not very common these days, but when RPGs were first being ported to computers for game play rather than being played sitting around a table talking. Zork (1980 – 1997, Infocom/Activision), a single player text-based game, featured this kind of game play; allowing the player to move about in a virtual world by typing commands based on his/her reactions to the text. For
example, the game could spell out that the player was standing in front of a boarded-up house and that to their left there was a mailbox. At this point the player would input a command prompting the story to progress. For instance, the player might type “Open the mailbox”, to which the game would produce feedback based on the action, for example stating that the mailbox is empty.

This kind of game play was based on a kind of book called Choose-your-own-adventure-books, and it worked by giving the reader a choice every now and then with which the player could alter the course of the story. The player, presented with a situation or dilemma, makes a choice and turns to the designated page to continue reading, thus creating their own personalized and re-playable experience.

From looking at the characteristics of the RPGs listed above one can conclude that some rely on imagination and rules, others on 3D graphics and digital worlds while others, even though they may or may not include some form of visual feedback, are text-based. As seen above, any of these bases for designing RPG game play can be made to work for either one or several players, depending on the designers intended player experience. Thus, a text-based RPG, played on a computer for example, can be either a multiplayer experience like a MUD or a single player experience like Zork (1980 – 1997, Infocom/Activision) or the game created for this study.

2.4.2 Analogue RPGs
Pen-and-paper or Table top RPGs

The most basic form of RPG in terms of what one requires to play a game, or portion of a gaming experience. These kinds of RPGs are played by a group of players that together create their experience, aided by a person acting as Game Master, rulebooks, social gaming etiquette, character creation sheets and dice. The players take on different roles and usually form a party, which moves through the fictional world by having the players react to each other, the game world, non-player characters and monsters and the events as narrated by the Game Master. This kind of game relies heavily on imagination and gives vast freedom of choice to its players.

This form of RPG can be played a number of ways, to suit the players’ liking; the objective of the game in terms of gaming style can be problem solving, acting as the player character, power gaming, co-telling the story. Most players mix these objectives, drawing upon many at a time.

An example of a table top where the experience of a RPG has been boiled down to something more manageable is Drakskatten (Target Games), where young players could collect treasure, defeat monsters and the like. Another more modern table top card game is Munchkin (Steve Jackson Games), where players can alter their characters in many ways, even change their gender, and where lying is a main mechanic. All while fighting monsters and collecting cards and treasure.

2.5 Storytelling and branching stories

As a field, there has been a lot of research done on the topic of storytelling, some of which is relating to game studies.

Evans and Short (2014) study a simulationist storytelling system named Versu. They test the game “Abstract”; an interactive text-based drama, which is heavily based on social interaction and convention found in the game world, which is written to resemble the regency period England. In this game the player has to make choices that bring the story forward, making it a branching story game with high re-playability, according to the authors.
“Façade” (2005) by Procedural Arts is another game that has a heavy emphasis on diegetically social consequences, just like “Abstract” it is a text-based drama, where the player’s choices impact the story. This branching story game relies on dialogue and storytelling to convey an experience to the player, who gets to experience an evening with friends that turns ugly as accusations start to go around.

Dille and Zuur Platten (2007) bring up a wide range of different branching narrative types and story styles in their book. They also bring up many other aspects of game writing, such as consequences, setting up the game world and building characters. Creating a great story is the aim of a game writer, and these are some of the tools at a game writer’s disposal. The authors give examples of structures that a game writer can utilize in their profession. Although the tips in this book are not specifically aimed at text-based games, there are a couple of strategies that are applicable, such as writing to form players relationships to their character, which is what we aim to study in this paper, among other things.

Foldback stories, as presented by Ernest Adams (2010) is a way of coping with the disadvantage of branching stories, which is that it is expensive to produce so much content. Foldback stories are a compromise between linear and branching stories, where the plot branches a number of times but then folds back to a single inevitable event. Most foldback stories, Adams interjects, have only one ending, however this is not a requirement (pp. 174).

The foldback story is the standard structure used by modern games to allow the player some agency without the cost and complexity of a branching story. Developers routinely construct the interactive stories in adventure games and role-playing games as foldback stories.

Adams, 2010, pp 174

To utilize storytelling to affect how the player perceives the story of the game, as well as the character, world and lore, and to ultimately affect the emotional effect the game has on the player, can be called emotioneering (D. Freeman, 2003). Emotioneering is a concept by Freeman (2003) that comprises of the two words engineer and emotion, and together they suggest that emotions can be engineered for the game and the player by the designer. Or rather, in the words of the author himself:

Emotioneering is a vast body of techniques that can create, for a player or participant, a breadth and depth of emotions in a game or other interactive experience, or that can immerse a game player or interactive participant in a world or a role. It also means the application of these techniques. The goal of emotioneering is to move the player through an interlocking sequence of emotional experiences.

D. Freeman, 2003

Taking another approach to how someone connects to a character in a text-based game is possible by studying other text-based characters. Therefore looking at literature studies became another way to approach emotional bonds to written characters.

All these aspects of literature studies that were mentioned above, relate to the format of books, and as games are an interactive media type there are some limitations to how this field of study can be applied to games. The way characters are written, for example, works only to an extent as there is a more dynamic approach to the character in a game than in a book. Still, the fundamentals can be said to apply for both mediums, and one of these fundamentals is the structure by which a story is woven. Just as there are many genres when it comes to books, there are many genres of games as well.
Oxland (2004) brings up stories and how he feels that they are poor in comparison to other media. He also says that “not so long ago games were tagged as interactive movies” (pp. 153), and he goes on to express that a game is an interactive experience first and foremost. He also questions whether games really need stories, expressing that they don’t necessarily do, in his opinion (pp. 161). He ties the characters to the story, saying they play a pivotal role in it.

I believe, the closer a computer character gets to portray emotion and life experience, the deeper the experience for the player.

Oxland, 2004, pp. 156

2.6 Player experience and behavior

Player experiences and behavior in this paper refer to the perceived experience a player has, as defined in section 2, Background. For example by Sheldon (2004) in regards to empathy in games. He defines empathy as:

EMPATHY: The ability of human beings to understand the feelings of others, even fictional characters, to such a degree that they enter into those feelings, and experience them almost as if they were their own.

Lee Sheldon, 2004, pp. 45

There has been studies conducted pertaining to the emotional connection players feel toward their characters after having gotten to mold the character into something they identify with or for some reason would like to experience. Turkay and Kinzer (2014) studied players of an Massively Multiplayer Online game (henceforth referred to as MMO) called Lord of the Rings Online (2007, Turbine) and divided their testers into two groups; one of which was allowed customization of their player character, and one group that was not allowed to do so. They argue that customizing a character has the potential of impacting how the player identifies with the character. Thus, previous studies show that this pattern exists, however, the studies are related to game genres such as RPGs, MMORPGs, casual games or simulators, such as for example Wii Sport Resorts (2009, Nintendo).

To study emotions is complex as it is affected by a number of factors. For example, Page and Nowak (2002) pose that empathy leads to fairness, as sharing sparks the empathic thinking and revolutionizes it resulting in fair treatment and good behavior. It comes down to psychology and how it relates to experiences and certain socio-cultural aspects.

Empathy, as defined by Daniel Pink in the paper by Gabbiadini et al. (2016), is putting yourself in another person’s shoes, to look through their eyes and feel in your heart what they feel. Pink also links being so immersed in a game that you identify with a character, and how that can affect the empathy, or lack thereof, for characters in the game.

In particular, some works have shown that when experiencing a virtual world, players are likely to establish a connection between themselves and their game character, and even imagine themselves to be that character.

Gabbiadini, Alessandro & Riva, Paolo & Andrighetto, Luca & Volpato, Chiara & Bushman, Brad J. (2016)

Ernest Adams (2010) states that;
In general, male players don’t actually identify with their avatars as much as female players do. Men are more willing to take the default avatar provided by the game and happily run with it. Women tend to see an avatar as an expression of their own personalities and an opportunity for self-expression.

Ernest Adams, 2010, pp. 133
3 Problem

The fields related to the research question at hand have been explored by many researchers. Lanskoski (2011) has studied agency and empathy for player characters, Turkay and Kinzer (2014) studied role playing and character customization, Kromand (2007) explored the concepts of Actors and Avatars. The concept of branching stories has been studied by Riedl and Young (2006) as well as by Evans and Short (2014), respectively.

When these studies within these fields are combined they all point to a hole in the research, namely how it would affect the feelings for the player character if there was no audiovisual feedback. As previously stated, there has also not, to the best of the author’s knowledge, been studies into how this bond between player and player character due to customization is affected by having the player visualize the character and game world based on text only. As a part of a field of research, studying how customization in text-based games affect the user experience and emotional ties to the player character related to customization, is an underdeveloped area of the field.

Isaksson (2011) conducted a study with similar aim in relation the identified gap in the research field of this study, but which was set up very differently in terms of data collection. Her study was conducted on an MMORPG, and not on a text-based single player RPG. The results of her study was that designers must know their audience when designing character creation in their games. More interestingly for this thesis is that she also found that a lot of time should be put in when characters are created, as well as letting the players have the tools to create unique and perceivably perfect characters. To be able to do so would aid in the creation of character identity and that players like as much customization choice as is possible. Isaksson (2011) concludes that the study clearly shows that the character creation process is a very important part of a player’s perception of the game they play. Her questions, although from a design perspective, were very similar and it would be interesting to see if her results are transferable across genres and with a different data collection method.

Building on previous studies pertaining to other game genres the research question is as follows;

- Will the player experience identifying with the character to a larger degree if they have completed a customization process, in contrast to if they are not part of the creation process of the player character at all, in a text-based game with no audiovisual feedback?

The study may also be able to show indications of how, if at all, it affects the players’ emotional bond to only be able to themselves visualize their character in a text-based game with no character art representation after they have gone through a cosmetic customization process?

Hefner, Klimmt and Vorderer (2007) and their pilot study previously described, is a good start at covering the relationships players form with enjoyment and identification to player characters in interactive games. Building off that study, it is the aim of this paper to further investigate and support the findings by Hefner, Klimmt and Vorderer, utilizing an interactive game with the aim to study the identification with the character in relation to customization. By studying a fundamentally different kind of game, with no audiovisual feedback such as in Battlefield 2 (Digital Illusions CE) and with the aim to look closer at how the act of customization impacts the identification and empathy players feel, this study has the potential to support the findings of Hefner, Klimmt and Vorderer (2007). If the phenomenon is found to exist also in this kind of interactive game it further solidifies the finding and can prove valuable to both researchers in the field of games as well as game designers.
3.1 Research question and conditions for fulfillment

Research question:

- Will the player experience identifying with the character to a larger degree if they have completed a customization process, in contrast to if they are not part of the creation process of the player character at all, in a text-based game with no audiovisual feedback?

As this research question consists of many different parts coinciding, breaking it down into conditions to be fulfilled makes it easier to determine if the research question is answered by this study.

Conditions:

- Are the players expressing emotional responses for the character; such as empathy, connection to, or identifying with the character?

- Is there a difference between the two groups playing the different versions of the game pertaining to what degree that they identify or empathize with the character?

- Do the participants' answers relate how the text-based non-audiovisual game format impacts the feelings the player has for the character, regardless of version?
4 Method

This study utilizes the qualitative method phenomenology, as it studies people’s perceptions of a phenomenon. This is due to the researcher’s interest in perceived experiences, and such subjective answers are best collected utilizing this method. In this case the research pertains to the participants’ perception of how their feelings for the player character were affected by being able to customize their character versus not customizing it, in a text-based game with no visual feedback.

The purpose is to discover one or more qualities by collecting data in the form of observations, notes and information from the game in the form of code, to generate a hypothesis by the end of the paper. Analyzing the data results in finding qualities and themes, which are then used to make hypothesis based on the study findings.

According to Fossey, Harvey, Mcdermott & Davidson (2002) phenomenologists study the way people experience the world, focusing on how they experience it, and how best to understand said experiences. The authors goes on to say that this includes looking at social, historical, and cultural aspects of a person’s life.

4.1 Participants

The participants were selected through convenience sampling. In total, 10 people, excluding those who partook in the pilot studies, participated in this study. Group A consisted of five participants, of which three were men and two were women, between the ages of 21 to 34. Their cultural backgrounds were Sweden, Czech Republic and Finland. They have experience with RPGs and on average they play between 10 and 30 hours per week. They are experienced with backstories and roleplaying as well as other game genres.

Group B consisted of five participants, of which three were men and two were women, between the ages of 24 and 37. Their cultural backgrounds is Swedish only. They have experience with RPGs and on average they play between 2 and 100 hours per week. They are experienced with backstories and role playing as well as other game genres.
The differences between the two groups does not pose a problem for the research in question. The participants in both groups are of roughly the same ages as well as consisting of two females and three males. The diversity in cultural affiliation in the two groups are not an issue for this study, but simply provides more insight into how the participants may be influenced by their culture. Lastly, the number of hours the participants played will not affect the results in this study either, but serves to inform the researcher of their familiarity with games.

### 4.2 Data collection

The data for this study was collected by conducting selected observations of game play and questionnaires utilizing both Likert scales and open questions to retrieve qualitative data. In addition, data was collected by way of programming code in the game, which recorded what choices the participants made. This provided a road map of their experience with the game in question.

#### Observations

To collect the data the researcher observed a play session, in which a participant would play the game The Mask Bringer. The game was created by the researcher for the purpose of this study and is a text-based role playing game with no audiovisual feedback. The researcher did not present the problem to the tester beforehand, so that the player would not play as he/she feels the researcher would want them to, but as they themselves would play the game organically.

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**Table 1** Participants in study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group A</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Cultural Affiliation</th>
<th>Weekly Gaming</th>
<th>Plays</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Particip.1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>RPG, FPS, Fighting, Adventure, Puzzle, Point and Click</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particip.2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Finland/Sweden</td>
<td>15+</td>
<td>Mostly Story Driven games, Action, Adventure, RPG, Puzzle-Platformers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particip.3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Mostly: Turn-based Strategy, RPG, Simulation, Puzzle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particip.4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particip.5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>MMORPG, Strategy, Board Games</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group B</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Particip.1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Action, RPG, RTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particip.2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>90-100</td>
<td>FPS, RTS, MMORPG, ARPG, SRPG, JRPG, Action, Adventure, Puzzle, TBS, 4X, Tabletop, Etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particip.3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>MMO, RPG, SRPG, FPS, RTS, ARPG, Dating Sims, Visual Novels, Arcade, Boardgames, Tabletop RPG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particip.4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>RPG's, Strategy, Survival Horror, Sandbox, Adventure, Action, Shooters, Card Games, Tabletops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particip.5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>Real-Time Strategy, FPS, RPG, Everything Blizzard Makes :)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The observations are a combination between structured and unstructured, as they utilize both field notes and a schematic. This schematic consists of a printout of the choices in the game, in the form of a roadmap, on which the researcher can circle the choices made. The researcher may also note things the player might say, the frequency and intensity with which behaviors are exhibited or other field notes.

The observations will provide data about behavior and the interviews will provide data about experiences and perceptions. The notes will provide support for the observations and serve to aid the researcher’s memory in regards to the interviews.

Five game play sessions out of ten were observed, individually, during which the researcher took notes regarding player behavior. The researcher recorded such instances as choices that were changed, hesitation or if sections of text were re-read before a choice was made. Other behaviors recorded were in what order customization choices were made or how long players took selecting the character’s name or other characteristics.

**Coded data from the game**

The code incorporated into the game, which the participants included in the questionnaire, gave information regarding what choices they made that moved the story forward and how long the player spent on each section of the game before making a choice that moved the story forward. This data let the researcher see what route through the story the player took. It also shows indications of if they were attempting to get more lore or information or simply attempting to get to the end the fastest way possible by skipping any choices that would take longer and give more backstory. By studying the timeframes, the researcher could see how long a player spent on making a decision even when no observations were possible. Studying this data in conjuncture with observations and/or answers from the questionnaire the researcher could get a more complex image of player behavior to produce patterns. It could also support the analysis of the observations and/or questionnaire and the participants perceived experiences.

**Questionnaire**

In this section the researcher will attempt to explain and motivate the questions in the questionnaires. Both groups A and B had the same part one and part four. In part one the researcher asked their general background to establish that the participant is a valid candidate for the study. Part four is simply about additional information, such as feelings on how the game can be improved or if the format affected the feelings they had for the character, in their opinion.

Part Two has the biggest differences between group A and B, as it pertains to customization. Part three investigates their view of the character trying to gage how they feel about the character. In both parts the researcher attempted to, using similar questions, ascertain new information by utilizing another angle as well as Likert scales.

The Likert scales had two purposes; they make the participant choose, to visually take a stand and it provides the researcher with quantitative data that can support the qualitative data and patterns found. Although the main reason for using Likert scales was not to collect such a vast amount of quantitative data that it could be used on its own, it does have a use as such.

The bulk of the questions relate to these themes; the player’s choices, the players perceived experiences, the feelings for the character and the customization. There are also complementary questions pertaining to these subjects in the questionnaires, to be able to establish a baseline of what is normal to the participant, so that there is something to compare the experience to individually as well as within the group and between the groups.
**Data analysis**

The collected data was reviewed several times. The answers from the Likert scales were viewed both as part-answers to the related questions, illustrating visually how the participants stand on the issue addressed, as well as being processed as their own form of data. On either side of the neutral or forced answer choice, number 3, on the scale the two graded answers on either side; agree/disagree and strongly disagree/agree, were combined to find how many of the participants agreed or disagreed with the question or statement. The programmed data, from the game play session, was studied and used to derive quantitative data. This data was utilized to strengthen the qualitative data of the questionnaire and the observations. Coded words were derived from the answers in the questionnaire, as well as notes from conducted observations.

The research data was reviewed both from the participants’ individual perspectives and of the group to get as comprehensive knowledge as possible. For examples of how the analysis was conducted see chapter 6, Analysis.

**4.3 Pilot test**

A pilot test was conducted with two participants, selected through convenience sampling. The play sessions were observed in the respective homes of the participants and a questionnaire was used as a basis for an interview post play. This test resulted in both revised questionnaire as well as the choice to use RPG playing participants for the larger study. It was also decided that due to time restrictions interviews were too time consuming.

**4.4 Conducting the study**

The researcher posted an inquiry on Facebook stating that participants for a game study was needed and got a handful of responses. Those respondents who lived in the area agreed to come in to meet up and play the game in a University environment, while those who lived far away were sent a copy of the game. Five participants played the game in a university class room setting with which they were familiar. They were observed and notes were taken, as well as the game code recording how long each section of the game took, and what choices were taken throughout the game. This code was copied and pasted for the “End”-page of the game and copied into the questionnaire. After the play session, the participants finished the questionnaire and turned it in electronically. At the end of the questionnaire the participant was asked if the researcher could contact them for further questions if need be.

At the beginning of the game there was a short introductory text explaining ethical considerations, such as confidentiality and the option to quit at any time.

The other five participants were recruited over the internet and an electronic version was sent out, with a link to the questionnaire at the end of the game was included in this version as well. These participants played the game in a web browser at home at their convenience.

The versions of the game were randomly given out, as more games were sent out than responses were received in the form of completed questionnaires. The researcher only took care to send it out in the same quantities of both versions, and to have both men and women in each group; where group A played the customizable version and group B played the non-customizable version.

At the end of the testing the researcher had data in code form regarding choices made and timeframes for gameplay, observation notes, answers in free text form in the questionnaire paired with Likert scale data from the questionnaire.
4.5 Method bias

There are of course a number of things that can affect the outcome of this paper related to the method of choice and how the study was conducted. For example, the researcher is aware that when the questions in the questionnaire are interpreted by the participants, there is room for misunderstandings due to poor wording or dubious meanings regarding to what a question relates, such as “Why?”.

As the data is only studied by a single person with their own subjective experiences and cultural affiliations the researcher is aware that interpretations made by the researcher can affect the outcome of the analysis. To try to rectify this problem the researcher attempted to triangulate the data utilizing Likert scales, open ended questions as well as observations and game data. Another researcher would have probably have found other patterns in the same data.

The choice to utilize convenience sampling is another aspect of the method that could skew the data. To rectify this the participants were chosen with a criterion in mind; participants were RPG gamers. They also did not know beforehand what they were being studied and tested for, so as to avoid skewing of the collected data.

In putting together a tailored questionnaire per version of the game created for this study, the researcher had an empathy questionnaire in mind, but did not utilize it as it was lengthy. The questions used in the questionnaires are motivated in the Method section of the paper, as well as in their entirety in the Appendix A and B.

4.6 Reliability and validity

In outlining how to assess the trustworthiness of qualitative research Fossey, Harvey, Medermott & Davidson (2002) refer to Lincoln & Guba (1985) who outlined the criteria as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, that parallel the criteria for qualitative criteria; internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity, respectively. It should be noted that there are according to Bryman (2002) discussions regarding how relevant reliability and validity is in a qualitative study. For this paper the focus in regards to assessing the trustworthiness will be based on the criteria presented by Lincoln & Guba (1985).

As this is a qualitative study, the focus lies on “inquiry into selected issues in great depth with careful attention to detail, context, and nuance” (Patton, 2002, pp. 227), which means that the data collected from smaller sample size groups are more detailed and descriptive. When dealing with a smaller focus group, as in this case on an individual basis, the researcher was able to give their full attention to the observation of the game play, for example.

Fossey, Harvey, Medermott & Davidson (2002) also point out that ethics are an important aspect of discerning trustworthiness, as there exists a power relationship between the researcher and the participants. Within the game created for the purpose of conducting this study, at the very beginning, the participants were informed that they may withdraw at any time and that their answers will be anonymous and given an alias for the purpose of the paper.
Thank you for taking the time to play through this branching story game. I hope you will enjoy it.

After you have finished the game, please continue on to fill out my questionnaire. A link will be provided for your convenience at the last page. Simply copy the indicated on the last page of the game; that is the information I need in terms of play session data, and then paste it into the questionnaire. After that all that remains is a few minutes of reflection, filling out a few questions.

For the purpose of this playtest your identity will remain anonymous, and your contribution given an alias for presentation purposes. This test is conducted to gather information for my master thesis and I thank you for your participation.

If at any time you wish to withdraw from the study, or have a question to ask, simply send me a message at eleonora_hackman@yahoo.se

**Figure 4** Snapshot of information at the beginning of Mask Bringer

Before starting the game they are also informed that certain metrics will be recorded and that they will be forwarded to a questionnaire after the play session. By engaging in the session they are giving their consent to the data being used for the study. Giving the participants this choice is important for ethical considerations.

As qualitative research is measured against how well the participants’ answers have been authentically represented (Fossey, Harvey, Mcdermott & Davidson, 2002). This is achieved by utilizing quotes and showing Likert scales throughout the paper. This is paired with a detailed example of how the data was collected and applied in the context of arriving at one of the themes, or patterns, to achieve transparency.
5 The artefact

An artefact was created, in two versions, to accommodate the study. In order to design it to suit the needs of the researcher certain design choices were made, which will be explained here. The games was named The Mask Bringer.

5.1 Twine format

The game was built in Twine, a program that allows for easy game making with a limited knowledge of programming. The game is also made available to play in a web browser, allowing for easy distribution. In addition to this, the Twine format suits the needs in this study, as it can easily be used to make branching stories (Dille and Zuur Platten, 2007).

Twine does allow the developer to use pictures, sounds and other features, but for this study the choice was made to keep it to text only to be able to study how the text-based non-audiovisual format would impact the player character connection. In his book Understanding comics, Scott McCloud (1994) speaks of how words and images work together or separately to convey information and to aid our imagination and identification process. This relates to the idea of the avatar that is either more or less customizable, allowing fewer or a larger number of people to identify with it. This is what McCloud (1994) is alluding to as well as what we can see when we study the design choice of Open or Closed Avatars (Kromand, 2007).

5.2 Design choices

In the artifact created for this study, The Mask Bringer, the player plays a character which she/he can give a backstory, a name, skills, customize cosmetically and have act out its personality in terms of dialogue and story driving choices. For one version of the artefact the character is Open Avatar and for the other version it is Closed Avatar (Adams, 2010).

The participants of both versions of the game got to portray the character’s personality by making dialogue choices and actions in the game. In addition, statistics regarding some character skills were presented to the player in the beginning of the game, to support the feeling of the game being an RPG. These stats are supposedly generated by the choices the player made, but serve only to set the tone for the game. The other RPG elements in the customization are the free text naming and background writing, as well as selecting skills.

The researcher opted to have the players write their own backstory free form instead of choosing a pre-generated backstory based on the way table top RPGs do the character customization. Having stats for the characters, and explicit skills, are also inspired from table top RPGs, which has to do with the fact that those kinds of games are branching stories (Dille and Zuur Platten, 2007) just as The Mask Bringer.
The choices made for the fixed character regarding backstory, name and gender were based on the researcher rolling a die. The researcher then crafted a plausible backstory based on gender and stats, and then naming the character something gender and setting appropriate.

Sheldon brings up an interesting point, saying that the gender should not matter for how the functionality of the character works, but could affect how they approach obstacles. In this case, the choices are worded similarly regardless of gender. There is a slight variation in terms of possible flirtations which serve as part of the diegetically social consequences in the game (Lankoski & Bjork, 2007) but in regards to the fighting both genders take the same approach.

Any game that gives players the choice to create a male or female gives us an additional thing to think about. The male and female characters are often graphically different. But they are always functionally identical. […] But single player-games could be designed so that the differences between females and males could be used to differentiate how each sex attacks the obstacles in the game.

Lee Sheldon, 2004, pp. 101

Diegetically social consequences (Lankoski & Bjork, 2007) is another feature in the artefact. As the player progresses through a series of choices the other characters in the story that the character interacts with will react to the player’s choices. This means that someone might leave the party, take a more active role or die due to the player’s actions and dialogue choices.

To make the choices more engaging and give the player a sense of agency the game is built around a branching story (Dille and Zuur Platten, 2007) structure. There is however only one ending, as the researcher wanted the emotional responses from the participants relating to the death of their character. There is however as number of ways to die, as a result of the choices made previously.

The Mask Bringer storyline is loosely based on the Hero’s Journey by Campbell (1972). Due to the scope of the study and thus the game, there was no possibility to make a game large enough to encompass the whole cycle of the Hero’s Journey for this paper. The game does, however follow the first steps of the process, such as Denial of the quest, Crossing the threshold and Meeting the guide(s) (Campbell, 1972).
Figure 6  The Mask Bringer, Choices

In The Mask Bringer the main character can and will die. This is so the researcher can use the participants’ reactions to the emotional bond for the character to gage identification and other emotions the participants have developed. These questions can also be related to whether the character was customized or not.

Sheldon brings up the fact that the player character getting killed is a game mechanic, which is usually used to up the stakes and to penalize the player for failing. He goes on to point out that it is the primary game mechanic in shooter games. To kill the player character multiple times is possible because the players have accepted this mechanic as part of the gameplay. Sheldon believes that there are other ways to make a player empathize with a character than killing them, such as giving them a cause to fight for that speaks to the player; such as freedom.

Game developers recognize, as do producers of television and motion pictures and publishers of books, that the stakes don’t get much higher in a story than when there is a life in the balance.

Lee Sheldon, 2004, pp. 71

The kind of feedback the player gets in this game is non-audiovisual, which means that instead of seeing the cause and effect of their actions, the participants receive written feedback. They get presented with a scenario based on their choices and sometimes their actions have consequences for other characters than themselves.

When the player picks up the control device and performs an action, he will want and need to see the results of that action. Every action needs a reaction and every cause has an effect.

Oxland, 2004, pp.77-78

Oxland also brings up the illusiveness of emotional feedback. It is the hope of the researcher that the game created for this study will generate some emotional feedback, especially when the character is placed in danger and ultimately when he/she dies.

Emotional feedback is always a tough nut to crack. If you can trigger laughter, crying or gasps from the player’s input, you have done exceptionally well.

Oxland, 2004, pp. 90
5.3 Two versions

This Twine game was created for this study. It is a text-based branching story game in which the player can choose the gender, the cosmetics of the character and name it, as well as bolstering the feel of who the character is by making choices regarding the dialogue or actions.

The first page of the game contains instructions informing the player about ethical consideration and for how to get the data to the researcher. After that the game world was presented to the player who the proceeded to either learn about the character that was predetermined by the game designer, or to customization choices. The predefined character presented to those who played version B was female, had a given name, profession, cosmetic design and a brief backstory that incorporated all that the customization textbox portion or version A asked the players to complete.

The customization available to the players in version A were; gender, physical cosmetic aspects and profession as well as writing their own backstory in a textbox. They also got to name their character.

![Figure 7](image)

Figure 7  The Mask Bringer, map of the choice pathways

5.4 How the game design relates to the research question

The game was designed with the research question in mind, and so the scope of the paper came to influence it. Questions such as the ones provided below were taken into consideration:

Are they identifying with the character? Compared to previous experiences, and compared to the other group; A or B?

What customization forms can be utilized for this format; naming and writing own backstory in free form, clicking buttons to choose gender, cosmetic and skill customization? Will these forms of customization make the participants care in spite of the game being short?
How do participants speak about their emotional bond to the character related to customization?

How do their emotional bond to the character related to customization impact game play; reflecting their feelings?

How does the format impact the emotional bonds? Why? Can the participants show indications of that there is a difference between this genre and other game genres?
6 Analysis

The collected data was analysed by studying the material respectively and then as a whole. Themes, or patterns as they are also referred to, were derived from the data and will be presented below, in section 6.1. The formal framework of how this study was set up has been presented in chapter 4, Method. Here we will go over how the collected data was analysed, by looking at how one of the themes was formulated as an example.

The questionnaires were printed out in their entirety per participant, as well as in a grouped format: one for group A and B respectively. In the cases where an observation had been conducted and notes taken, these notes were placed with the respective participant, for clarity.

Studying the material started with checking to see if there was any quantitative data to indicate measurable differences or similarities between the groups or within the groups. The quantitative data could be found in the programmed code indicating the participants path in the game, as well as from Likert scales. To simplify the Likert scale data the two graded answers on either side of the scale; agree/disagree and strongly agree/strongly disagree, were combined to simply indicate agreement or disagreement. The variable of strongly agreeing or disagreeing was more useful on an individual level, compared to the group perspective.

The written answers were carefully read and given code words and then grouped into themes. This was iterated several times and then similarities and differences were considered to discern as much data as possible. The group answers were then compared to each other to see differences or similarities between how the two versions of the game were perceived. Participants quotes were chosen to illustrate the similarities and differences that were discovered. Below is an example of how theme 2 was discerned:

The data analysis was done in one of two ways, and utilized the thematic analysis methodology (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). How depended on whether or not Likert scales were available for verification, as it is one of the two forms of obtaining quantitative data in the study. Other quantitative data was derived from the programmed data, showing how many participants chose a particular path in the story or how long a decision took. Starting with this indication of a potential theme or pattern, the second step was to look at the qualitative data in the form of written answers, applying code words, and notes from observations if available.

As there are not Likert scales for all written questions, some themes originated from studying the written answers and then applying programmed data, code words and if available, notes from observations. An example of how this was done is provided below, for clarity, of arriving at theme number 2.

This theme originated from theme number 1, and as soon as indications of it alerted the researcher the Likert scales in question were studied. As it was very clear from looking at the Likert scale for the question regarding if they cared for their character, this warranted further study.
Group A, this group customized the character

As is visible from the Likert scales above, all the participants in Group B were of the same opinion, choosing the neutral or so called ‘forced choice’ column. The fact that no participant in Group A made the neutral choice is a clear indication that there is something worth investigating pertaining to the question.

Next, the relevant answers from the questionnaire were studied. The additional data provided complexity to the question, as the participants brought up different points of view. In Group A the
answers indicated that they cared about the character because they customized it, whereas Group B displayed a wider range of thoughts on the matter. One example from each group is presented below, and for more extensive explanations as to what the participants answered, see theme 2, under section 6.1 Themes.

When asked if customizing their character’s backstory made them care more, two participants said:

The character became more alive to me, I had a stronger bond with it.

Participant #2, Group A

As Group B were not able to customize their character the question instead was if they thought being able to do so would have affected how much they cared about the character:

If I could customize it (within a framework) and it would affect the game – I would definitely care more about the character. Let’s say I could create a backstory in a similar way the talent tree in WoW works. Then I would really care. If it does not affect the game, I would not care.

If the backstory affects subtle things (like how the character is greeted) or things like increased health or strength – I would definitely care.

Participant #5, Group B

Next, the material from the observations were examined. For this particular question, they did not add any significant data. The notes taken at the time of the observations addressed circumstances such as if players hesitated or changed their minds during the session, which was not in question here.

As a final step, code words were derived from the data, such as: bond, effort, care, alive, time, mood, not caring, growth, affect game, tailored, information. These words were used to further strengthen the similarities and differences in answers between the participants. This made it easier to discern and formulate a theme, utilizing the compiled data.

6.1 Themes

1) Participants relate feeling for, or identifying with, the player character as having to do with these aspects primarily; customization and choices versus time spent with the character and choices.

This depended on if they played the customization version or not, where those who had not customized the character felt they needed more time to get to know the character. They also brought up the point of not understanding the choices in the game as much as the other group, which may of course be due to coincidence of how the groups were put together. One participant said:

The character had some distinguishable traits but was still a fairly clean slate, a human being most people could sympathize with. She wasn’t annoying or rude. I’d say that I followed her for too short a time for me to care for her, but she could have grown on me if given the time. Sympathy often takes time, unless it’s a primal thing, like caring for something helpless like a child or animal.

Participant #1, Group B.

Only one participant in Group B expressed that they cared for the character, relating this to how the story was structured as well as to choices:

The interesting background and me getting to make important decisions made me care more. The longest texts – with me making less choices made me care a bit less. The action sequences
included interesting choices and those made me care more. I felt that the choices were key to surviving, and that made me care the most.

Participant #5, Group B.

In addition to the open question pertaining to caring for the character in the questionnaire, a Likert scale question was also included. This was done to make the participants present their opinion in a more visual manner as well as expressed in text. In group B the results were very telling, as illustrated by the graph below.

In contrast the participants in Group A expressed that they cared for or felt connected to the player character to a larger degree. They tied their feelings for the character to a couple of different aspects such as being able to customize that character cosmetically as well as choosing profession, gender and name and by writing the backstory themselves. Their answers reflected they had gotten to customize their characters. Only one out of five felt disconnected from the character, and expressed that this depended mainly on a lack of choice and agency, as this participant wanted to be able to go in other directions story wise.

[…] In a real RPG (non computer based) you’re much more free to act out anything you want […]

Participant #5, Group A

Other participants stated that:

I would say it’s normal to care in RPG games and the backstory and the customization probably made me care more, or maybe in a different way.

Participant #3, Group A

I was allowed to customize it – and write a backstory helped me build a bond to the character.

Participant #2, Group A

I gave birth to him.

Participants # 1 and #4, Group A

In the questionnaire provided for Group A there was also a complementary Likert scale question pertaining to how much they cared about the player character, and as can be seen below in theme number 2, the differences between the two groups are evident.

However, as this is a small study comprising of only 10 participants, we cannot draw any definitive conclusions, but can only point out that this pattern was found.

2) The participants link customization to caring, regardless of version played in this study.

Both groups, regardless of whether they got to play the customization version of the game or not, related caring more for the character to being able to customize it.

This theme ties well in with the previous one, but is still important in its own rite, as it points out that even if the participants in Group B did not care especially for their characters, they still thought they would have done so if given the opportunity to customize.
Group A related caring to having been able to customize the character, and group B related not caring especially to not getting to customize. Both groups also related caring to making choices that move the story forward; i.e. making choices that point of fact show the player the personality of the character (Lanskoski, 2011). This is what the previous theme showed, however, it is supported by the Likert scale question present on both questionnaires, which asks if the participant thinks that customization would make them care more for the character.

As can be seen, three out of five in Group B felt it would matter to be able to customize their character, compared to four out of five in Group A. This is interesting as the participants in group A were the ones who were able to customize, and it appears that they are also the ones who, marginally, feel that it was more important pertaining to how they felt about their character.

In Group B on the other hand, a majority feel that it would make a difference, with the remaining two out of five being undecided or of no opinion.

The participants in both studies were also asked about the various aspects of customization and how they might impact how they would feel or felt about their characters. Group A were asked if creating a backstory made them care more about their character, and why or why not, to which they answered:

Yes it did, but rather than only more, it made me care in a different way. […]

It made me want to follow the backstory and stay true to the character I made.

Participant #3, Group A

Other reasons why creating the backstory made participants in group A care were:

The character became more alive to me, I had a stronger bond with it.

Participant #2, Group A

Because I put effort into it.

Participant #4, Group A

Four out of five participants in Group A felt that the backstory writing made them care more. One participant expressed a more strategic view, stating:

Not at all since the backstory did not affect the gameplay.

Participant #5, Group A

The answer given by participant #5 can be related to the answer provided by the same participant previously; this person is used to more freedom and agency as well as playing table top RPGs, meaning their customization matters in a different way than as just flavor or incitement to action.

In group B the question was whether or not being able to create a backstory for their character would make them care more, to which there were mixed answers. One participants said no, another said absolutely. Two participants were ambiguous; one stating that it was both, and the other:

Not necessarily.

Participant #1, Group B

The fifth participant gave a long and more detailed answer, stating that:
If I could customize it (within a framework) and it would affect the game – I would definitely care more about the character. Let’s say I could create a backstory in a similar way the talent tree in WoW works. Then I would really care. If it does not affect the game, I would not care. If the backstory affects subtle things (like how the character is greeted) or things like increased health or strength – I would definitely care.

Participant #5, Group B

To the question of why or why not creating a backstory would affect how much they cared about the character, they answered:

Because I feel more inclined to care about a character tailored to my specific tastes, concepts and the mood I’m in when I’m playing.

Participant #2, Group B

Doesn’t really matter since the premise here was that she was premade. More time with her, more information about her could have helped. But mostly just more time to get to know her.

Participant #3, Group B.

Two participants expressed that being allowed to follow the growth of the character, rather than to just get told afterwards what their backstory and their emotional journey had been up to present day, would make them care.

To establish a baseline of normalcy to their experience with this game for the study, Group B was also asked if customization is something that they usually care about when playing RPGs, and to motivate their answers.

3) In both describing the player character and what happened to it, there was a difference between Group A and B.

Group A tended to describe the player character that they themselves had customized to a lesser degree than Group B. Examples of how the participants in Group A described the character was:

An ordinary man with ambitions.

Participant #1, Group A

A strong person looking to do the right thing.

Participant #4, Group A

Strong-willed, red-haired, a woman of action, loner. But when she starts to care for someone she cares for life – as was the case with Marious.

Participant #2, Group A

Group B tended to describe the character as she was presented to them; from the color of her hair as well as profession, to personality traits that they had envisioned based on the game play and the backstory. It became evident that some participants gave her some additional traits compared to the short backstory they were given.
A farmgirl with brown hair not beautiful but not ugly either, liked potions and meds. Sometimes went hunting with her dad. Strong, proud, happy, courageous. Better at close range combat than long range.

Participant #3, Group B

A farmgirl with brown hair and freckles, with a knife. Seemed a bit timid. Went on hunting with her father now and then, not keen on getting married. Had a name starting with M. No idea of the stats.

Participant #2, Group B

A strong, careful character with brown hair who packed expensive stuff that she could be able to sell later.

Participant #1, Group B

As can be seen above, the group who were presented with a premade character seems to have committed the image more to memory than the group that got to customize their character themselves, which when compared to the previous themes makes for an interesting interjection.

The same behavior could be found when studying the participants answers of what happened to the character. Group A answered very shortly, and none of them brought up the journey the character had gone on. This could of course be due to poor wording on the researcher’s part, yet as the other group gave longer answers it is still an interesting phenomenon.

He died not fulfilling his destiny. Not very skilled at fighting.

Participant # 1, Group A

She died when trying to save villagers.

Participant #3, group A

He died.

Participants #4 and #5

In contrast, the participants in Group B had tendencies towards longer explanations, stating that:

She was going on a journey. Meets 4 people, finds out she’s part of a prophesy starts the journey. Village is attacked she tries to save the women and children. Dies.

Participant #3, Group B

She died horribly after she tried to defend against an attacking horseman.

Participant #4, Group B

In a country with interesting history, the character got invited to a mysterious and seemingly important quest including a powerful magic scroll and a small dedicated group. This small group embarked on its journey and ran into a patrol with horses and footmen that was hostile. It did not end well for my character, so it was a short adventure.

Participant #5, Group B
4) Those who played the customization version of the game, with the Open avatar, tended to roleplay the character in their own experience. Yet they also indicated a wider range of emotional bond with the character; spanning from identification, extension of self to strategic game play or not connecting at all.

This supports the previously mentioned phenomenon of there being different gaming styles when it comes to RPGs; some players play Closed avatars, others play Open avatars. Some play strategically, others strictly role play and some play as an extension of themselves. It proved to be the same with this group; they expressed that they were roleplaying to a large degree, but their answers to some of the questions point to there being cases of strategical thinking, playing as extension of self as well as roleplaying. This also ties in well with theories presented by Bartle (1996) and Yee (2005), in which player styles, and their motivations for playing a game, are divided into four types; Achievers, Explorers, Socializers and Killers.

In support of this theme, there were other questions in the questionnaire designed to address the issue from other angles, which show what the participants experienced emotionally when they talked about them.

Words used by participants in Group A to describe their feelings for the character were: I gave birth to him, like a parent cares for a child, a bond to the character, distant, no connection, connection to character; cared about my character, care in a different way, come alive, stronger bond with the character.

To say that they experienced identification or empathy, distinguishing between these concepts, is difficult due to how the questions in the questionnaire were asked, as they were designed to be open ended and not guiding. The words the participants chose to use in their answers can be classified as both empathy and identification, as it depended on how the participant understood the question.

5) The act of creating the character mattered more to the participants than the character outcome.

This was one of the more interesting findings of the study. The participants expressed that, what the character outcome was; how it looked and what skills it had, was secondary to them in relation them being able to customize it in the first place. For example, being able to name the character did not seem to make the participants flustered, as a number of them expressed that they reuse names on a regular basis.

First that came to mind.

Participant #5, Group A

I used one that I use, which seemed to go with the setting.

Participant #3, Group A

Group A, who got to customize their character, brought up that there was no part of the customization process in which the choices seemed meaningless, or made them not care and make haphazard customizations. Four out of the five participants also said that they cared more because of the customization and getting to write the backstory.

The pattern emerges when studying how the participants answered when describing their characters. Group A, who customized their characters, and felt that customization was important and made them
care more for their characters, described the character very briefly, as has been shown in previous patterns. This point to there may not being a lasting impression of the character simply due to being able to customize it. Group B gave a more detailed description of the character inspite of the it being non-customizeable, which implies that the idea that the participants’ perceptions of the importance of customization is not actually related to the character outcome has support.

6.2 Answering the research question

Here we will determine if the research question has been answered, by examining the conditions set. The research question:

- Will the player experience identifying with the character to a larger degree if they have completed a customization process, in contrast to if they are not part of the creation process of the player character at all, in a text-based game with no audiovisual feedback?

Fulfilling the conditions set up previously in the study to determine whether or not the question can be said to have been answered.

Conditions:

- Are the players expressing emotional responses for the character; such as empathy, connection to, or identifying with the character?

In answer to this question it can be stated that the participants have been expressing that they feel connected to the player character, either as an extension of self or as a character they feel for, care about and so on. Thus this condition can be said to be fulfilled.

- Is there a difference between the two groups playing the different versions of the game, pertaining to what degree that they identify or felt for with the character?

The answer to this question is yes; the participants experienced a difference regarding to which degree they felt that they identified or felt for with the character, depending on what version of the game they played. Thus this condition can be said to be fulfilled.

- Do the participants' answers relate that the text-based non-audiovisual game format impacts the feelings the player has for the character, regardless of version played?

In answer to this question, both versions of the game led to the participants expressing that they felt the format impacted the gameplay; negatively or positively. Regardless of how they thought the format affected the feelings for the character, both groups did say that the text-based non-audiovisual game format mattered.
7 Conclusions

In looking at the data there are a couple of things that show up; the wide scope of answers found even within such a small experiment goes to show that there are no conclusive answers to be had to the questions. There needs to be more research into some of these questions to be able to provide conclusions that are not easily refutable. We can however see indications and patterns.

7.1 Summary

In comparing the results between the participants playing either version of the game, the players playing the non-customization version brought up the length of the gameplay as a potential reason for why they did not identify or care for the character as much as they felt they could have.

Participants felt more for the character when they had to give it more thought in the beginning, making up a backstory and getting to compose a character by selecting traits and cosmetic variables to make a character for the game. Because they had no visual feedback they had to imagine the character, which some of them expressed a liking of doing.

Participants expressed that the process of customizing their characters is more important to them than the actual outcome.

Regardless of what version of the game the participants had played, customization or not, they tended to relate caring for the character to customization. In the case of Group B they explained not caring as not getting to spent time getting to know the character or having agency in the game. When asked they also related it to not having gotten to customize the character as well, as a majority indicated that in their minds customization does affect emotional bonds.

The participants’ familiarity with different RPGs also proved to have impact on how they related to the non-audiovisual text-based format of gameplay, and how much they related to the character. Table top RPG players wanted a lot more freedom of choice and were more interested in the customization and stats, but only if the customization mattered in terms of impacting the game world and social aspects with NPCs. The computer RPG players missed the audiovisual feedback from such games, and one participant even suggested a narrator for the game. Having different RPG players partake in the study led to becoming aware of the different expectations they have, even within this one genre.

Even though the players in group A expressed that they cared more for their characters than Participants in Group B, the Participants in Group B were better at describing their characters, which was particularly interesting to the researcher.

Also, as indicated by this study, caring for a character you have not been allowed to write the backstory for, or where none has been presented to the player, takes more time.

7.2 Discussion

The player’s experience has always fascinated the researcher, whose bachelors paper (Hackman & Björkqvist, 2014) was on the topic of why and what modders mod in The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (2011, Bethesda). Studying how modders thought about the experience they were presented with, and how they changed the game to add and alter the experience; tailoring it to their specific tastes, was very interesting. It led down the path to studying customization; more specifically how customizing the player character affects the emotional experience and the emotional ties players feel for what is, in part, their creations. Mods are a different kind of customization as it is not made by developers of the game,
and will therefore not be a part of this study. Instead, the focus will be developer designed customization.

The researcher, when studying the data collected in the form of the observations, that the participants are saying conflicting things, and are not aware that they behave certain ways. This casts a shadow over the truthfulness of the data, as it illustrates that a player may not always be doing something wittingly. For example the players might have indicated on the questionnaire that they did not hesitate or change their minds, when the research notes says they did. Likewise, they may have re-read sections of texts, as noted by the researcher in the notes from the observation, before making a choice, but have no recollection of this themselves. Player behavior is now, not only player personalities as described to by Bartle (1996), but also the actions performed by the player. This was not deemed as a strong enough occurrence that it constituted a pattern, but none the less it was interesting to bring to light.

At the beginning of this study the choice to make RPG players the target group from which to procure participants for the study, which lead to a broad generalization of player styles and preferences. During this study it became evident to the researcher that RPG players cannot be thought to be a homogenous group. Although RPGs are a genre with certain traits, and therefore a certain crowd of players tend to enjoy these kinds of games, the various ways to play RPGs as well as the multitude of PRGs out there means that players are drawn to different aspects of the games as well as being influenced by their gaming styles. This was illustrated by how, when faced with a text-based non-audiovisual RPG, the participants both played and answered the questions given to them afterwards differently.

This leads the researcher to believe that this kind of text-based non-audiovisual feedback game would be best loved by computer based single player RPG players rather than by tabletop players, even though design choices were made to gear it towards tabletop RPG players more.

Players expressed that they identified or connected with the character more when they got to customize the character, as found by this short and small study. This of course needs to be corroborated by a larger study but the answers given by the participants’ show that the act of customizing and writing backstories lets the player feel like they are getting to know the character much faster, and therefore they feel a stronger connection to him or her. They also get to choose the gender, name the character and allocate traits and cosmetic variables that allow them to better visualize the character. Because they have to visualize the character rather than to have a model that constantly reminds them of their customization process this game the players were imagining it, which gave them more freedom in determining how they wanted the character to look in their minds eye.

This ties well in with how the participants related feeling for the character to customization and choices versus time spent with the character and choices, depending on the version played. One could argue that when given a premade character, as group B was, it would have been less of a freedom to ‘fill in the blanks’, thus making it less interesting for the players to keep the image of the character in mind. However, it appears to be the opposite, as group B’s participants were the ones who seemed to better be able to recall the features of the character they played. The researcher speculates as to whether this could have to do with that players were expecting a ready-made character, as the format is so similar to a book, and that when faced with customization they perhaps did not commit the imagined image of the character so much to mind as they did the backstory. It seems to the researcher that it could be possible that the form of free writing input that was allowed in the backstory writing, emulated after tabletop RPG character creation, had the effect of sticking stronger in the mind of the players in group A than the cosmetic customizations choices they made.
7.3 Bias

The game was created by the researcher who is not a professional game writer, nor had any training in game writing on a professional level. Therefor the game itself may present an issue pertaining to how the participants perceive the character and the game world. This can of course affect the data, which the researcher is aware of.

The time allocated for the creation of the game was also limited due to time constraints which also impacted the result. Therefor the choice was made to end the game play with the player character dying, one way or another, related to the participant’s choices. This also adds to the feeling of it being a game rather than a book, and that the choices matter, and can be used to indicate to the researcher how the players felt about the player character. The player character dying in the end is story-wise a strange plot twist, which was implemented to try to ascertain how the player feels about their character dying, and therefor indicate how they feel about the character itself. But as the story is about the hero/player character it may feel strange to some players to die. One can however argue that player characters can die in many roleplaying games, so it is not strange, but as players will play this game only once that might affect their feelings. It could also be that the format of text-based games with no audiovisual feedback gives such a different context that the death of the player character feels out of place.

Players only play approximately 30 minutes, and as the participants indicated in their answers in the questionnaire, that may not be enough time to establish a player character relationship. That, as it would seem, may depend on the ability to customize the character or not. Players also only play the game once, and therefore don’t see differences in how customization affects gameplay and relations from NPC. One example being how they are greeted.

7.4 Future Work

As this study has shown indications of there are a couple of themes that could benefit from further study;

Delving deeper into how this format of text-based non-audiovisual games with customization options affects emotional responses from players, by studying answers from a larger sample. To be able to draw any conclusions further research is needed. A new or revised questionnaire may be needed.

Hefner, Klimmt and Vorderer (2007) pose that there is a risk with a rudimentary plot in a game, in regards to the bond formed between player and character. This would be an interesting phenomenon to further study, and it could be done by making the presentation of the game world short and abstaining from art or sounds or elaborate detailing. They also pose that the players take on attributes associated with the character and its role in the game, which is also interesting as it is part of the identification with the character.

It would be interesting to further explore how free writing backstories into digital text-based games with no audio-visual feedback affects how the character is perceived – by personality or ‘looks’.

Using names for characters that have already been used; what does that mean for the emotional bond between player and character? Does the name come with implications or does it mean nothing, and can therefore be re-used?

How long does it take for the players who do not get to do any customization to bond with their player character, since time was an issue?
References


**Games:**


Bethesda (2011) *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* [Computer program].

Quantic Dream (2010) *Heavy rain* [Computer program].


Procedural Arts (2005) *Façade* [Computer program].


Nintendo (1985 -) *Super Mario*, series [Computer program].

Konami (1999) *Dance Dance Revolution* [Computer program].


Tactical Studies Rules, Inc, (1974) *Dungeons and Dragons* [Table top game]


Äventyrsspel (1983) *Drakskatten* [Boardgame] Target Games

Steve Jackson Games (2012) *Munchkin* [Card game]
Appendix A - Questionnaire Group A

Please paste the code from the game here, to proceed. Thank you.

About you:

Do you identify as: Man / Woman / Other

Age:

Country of origin (cultural affiliation)

What genres of games do you play?

What experiences do you have with RPGs?

Do you currently play an RPG; and if so, which one?

How much do you play per week, on average?

About the customization:

What was your thought process when customizing the character for this game?

How did you choose the name for your character?

When writing the backstory for my character in this game I thought about:

I usually make up backstories for my characters: 1---5

I often roleplay my characters: 1---5

- Why or why not?

I roleplayed this character, for this study: 1--5

That my character had skills and stats, displayed in the beginning of the game, made me think:

It is important that the character is optimized for the role it has in the game (that skills match the role):

- Why or why not?

I cared about my customization choices/options: 1—5

I knew what customization choices I would make right away: 1—5

I changed my mind or hesitated during customization: 1---5

Does any particular choice stand out to you?

Where there parts of the customization that you did not care about?
**Describe character and game play:**

Describe that character (personality, looks, stats) you played in this game:

What happened to the character?

I cared about my character: 1—5

What made you care or not care about the character?

I think customization of my character would make me care more: 1—5

Did creating a backstory make you care more about the character?

- Why or why not?

What were your feelings when the character died?

- Why?

When making choices that move the story along, what did you base the decisions on?

Were any choices harder than others? If so, which ones and why?

What was the thought process when faced with the choice to put the character in danger?

Did you hesitate, change your mind? How did you choose when faced with danger?

**Other feedback:**

How did you think the format affected how much you cared for the character? (The text-based only and no audiovisual feedback):

What changes could be made to improve the experience?

Which aspects of the game were good?

May I contact you for further questions if need be? If so, please write your e-mail below. Thank you!
Appendix B - Questionnaire Group B

Please paste the code from the game here, to proceed. Thank you.

About you:

Do you identify as: Man / Woman / Other

Age:

Country of origin (cultural affiliation)

What genres of games do you play?

What experiences do you have with RPGs?

Do you currently play an RPG; and if so, which one?

How much do you play per week, on average?

About the customization:

How did you feel about the gender and backstory of the character?

How did you feel about the name for your character?

I usually make up backstories for my characters: 1---5

I often roleplay my characters: 1---5

- Why or why not?

I roleplayed this character, for this study: 1--5

That my character had skills and stats, displayed in the beginning of the game, made me think:

It is important that the character is optimized for the role it has in the game (that skills match the role): 1--5

If you could customize this character, how would you have put it together (looks, backstory ect)?

Is customization something that you care about when playing? Why or why not?

Describe character and game play:

Describe that character (personality, looks, stats) you played in this game:

What happened to the character?

I cared about my character: 1—5
What made you care or not care about the character?

I think customization of my character would make me care more: 1—5

Did creating a backstory make you care more about the character?
  - Why or why not?

What were your feelings when the character died?
  - Why?

When making choices that move the story along, what did you base the decisions on?

Were any choices harder than others? If so, which ones and why?

What was the thought process when faced with the choice to put the character in danger?

Did you hesitate, change your mind? How did you choose when faced with danger?

**Other feedback:**

How did you think the format affected how much you cared for the character? (The text-based only and no audiovisual feedback):

What changes could be made to improve the experience?

Which aspects of the game were good?

May I contact you for further questions if need be? If so, please write your e-mail below. Thank you!