DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Pivoting the Player: A Methodological Toolkit for Player Character Research in Offline Role-Playing Games

Fizek, Sonia

Award date:
2012

Awarding institution:
Bangor University

Pivoting the Player

A Methodological Toolkit for Player Character Research in Offline Role-Playing Games

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by

Sonia Fizek

A thesis presented to Bangor University in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD

School of Creative Studies and Media

College of Arts, Education and Humanities

Bangor University

2012

SUMMARY

This thesis introduces an innovative method for the analysis of the player character (PC) in offline computer role-playing games (cRPGs). It derives from the assumption that the character constitutes the focal point of the game, around which all the other elements revolve. This underlying observation became the foundation of the Pivot Player Character Model, the framework illustrating the experience of gameplay as perceived through the PC's eyes.

Although VG characters have been scrutinised from many different perspectives, a uniform methodology has not been formed yet. This study aims to fill that methodological void by systematising the hitherto research and providing a method replicable across the cRPG genre. The proposed methodology builds upon the research of characters performed in video games, fiction, film, and drama. It has been largely inspired by Anne Ubersfeld's semiological dramatic character research implemented in *Reading Theatre I* (1999).

The developed theoretical model is applied to three selected cRPGs, which form an accurate methodological sample: *The Witcher* (CD Projekt RED 2007), *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios 2008), and *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* (Troika Games 2004). The choice of the game genre has been incited by the degree of attention it draws to the player character's persona. No other genre features such a complex character development system as a computer role-playing game.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor Dr Astrid Ensslin for her most insightful comments, patience and enthusiasm for my ideas in the past few years. I much appreciate all the academic opportunities she opened before me during my stay at the School of Creative Studies and Media at Bangor University. I could not have been offered a more devoted and inspirational supervisor. I would also like to thank Dr Eben Muse for his witty and alert questions which helped me formulate sound arguments.

I am thankful for all the beautiful moments I spent in Wales with my NIECI Junta friends (Amy, Maggie, Jenny, Vaughan, Lyle & Paul) and all the academic disputes we led during the meetings of the Research Circle. I also must thank my friend Wojtek for endless crazy escapades into the Welsh wilderness and his enduring belief in my supernatural powers. The calming effect of all the conversations we had over Guinness pints is priceless.

I would like to thank the School of Creative Studies and Media and the College of Arts, Education and Humanities for their financial support, without which it would have been a lot more difficult to devote sufficient time to my doctoral research. I appreciate the valuable academic experience I collected during the three years of lecturing and co-operating with the School.

I especially thank my dear friend and partner Monika Wasilewska for numerous thought-provoking conversations, papers written together, and the book that became a milestone in my PhD project. I am grateful for her patience and company during all the sleepless nights spent playing *Grand Theft Auto IV* and writing up.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my parents who have been supporting me financially and otherwise from the beginnings of my academic career.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used in this thesis to identify various media, ludological phenomena, and game genres.

AI	Artificial Intelligence
AOL	America Online
ARPANET	Advanced Research Projects Agency Network
CRPG	Computer Role-Playing Game
D&D	Dungeons & Dragons
D&DA	Dungeons & Dragons Advanced
DiGRA	Digital Games Research Association
DM	Dungeons Master
GOP	Game Ontology Project
HUD	Head-Up Display
IF	Interactive Fiction
LARP	Live Action Role-Playing Game
MMOG	Massively Multiplayer Online Game
MMORPG	Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game
MOO	MUD Object Oriented/Multi Object Oriented
MUD	Multi-User Dungeon
NPA	Non-Player Agent
NPC	Non-Player Character
PBBG	Persistent Browser-Based Game
PC	Player Character
POV	point of view
PPCM	Pivot Player Character Model

SL	Second Life
VG	Video Game
VW	Virtual World
XP	Experience Point

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Towards the Study of the Player Character

Characters are the core elements in most video game genres, particularly the ones emphasising the importance of the storyline, the protagonist's development, or the art of simulation (e.g., computer role-playing games, massively online RPGs, action-adventures, first-person shooters, life-simulations, and multi-genre god games). From the player's perspective, the player character forms a crucial part of gameplay as they see the gameworld and act within it through the PC's eyes. Whether it is Commander Shepard (*Mass Effect* 2007), a *World of Warcraft* elfish protagonist, Niko Bellic (*Grand Theft Auto IV* 2008), or a peculiar *Spore* creature, their experiences constitute the focal point of the game. Although player characters occur in all the above game types, no other genre features such a complex character development system as a computer role-playing game. Therefore, it constitutes an accurate methodological sample. The creation of the player character in cRPGs relies upon a levelling system based on experience points, and a rich customisation process including the allocation of numerous attributes, and very often the adjustment of the PC's appearance, class, race, and name. Because the player is given a lot of freedom in the process of character creation, the PCs in cRPGs have the chance to become complex constructs rather than metres of a skilful hand-eye coordination of the player (see such action adventures as *Prince of Persia* 2008, *Tomb Raider* 1996, and *Assassin's Creed* 2007, 2010).

To keep the proposed methodology as consistent as possible, I shall confine myself to one game type only, and will not include other genres, such as massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). This decision has been influenced by a genre-centred approach supported by Espen Aarseth, according to whom a systematic outline of the gaming

experience may be achieved by finding the mechanical correlations between its elements; and this may be achieved only taking into consideration the structural rules operating in a given video game genre (Aarseth 2003, p. 3). The introduced model, however, after necessary modifications, may be adapted to other VG genres.

Different media employ different means of creating characters. Although VG characters have been scrutinised from many different perspectives (see section 1.2 and Chapter 5 for details), a uniform methodology has not been formed yet. My aim thus is to propose a systematic way to perform an analysis of all the various elements that constitute the player character in computer role-playing games.

1.2 Previous Work

The diverse body of literature on video game characters accumulated in the past two decades, and it seems to be unveiling an emerging pattern, according to which researchers scrutinise them. Some studies display a strictly mechanical approach to characters, and analyse them from the point of view of functions they perform within the gameworld, disregarding their representational traits (Aarseth 2004; Adams & Rollings 2007; Carr 2002; Frasca 2001; Howard 2008; Lankoski 2003; Newman 2002; Novak & Krawczyk 2005; Perlin 2004; Pisarski & Sikora 2008). Others focus on the characters as the drivers of agency, and emphasise the active role of the gamers who embody the PCs and make crucial decisions during the gameplay (Carr 2002; Lankoski 2003; Perlin 2004). Some researchers attribute agency to non-player characters, which, unlike player-characters, are not controlled by the player, but by the game's AI (Parsler 2010). As far as agency and meaningful interaction are concerned, there have also been studies into video game character typology, based on the extent to which the players can interact with them (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al.2008; Wolf 2002). In accordance with yet another methodological perspective characters are viewed as representational gendered icons. A lot of studies have focused on the hyper-sexualised appearance of game characters (Rubenstein 2007; Schmieder 2009; Graner Ray 2004; Turkle 1984, 1995), or on the representation of female PCs (Cassell & Jenkins 1999; Bryce & Rutter 2005; Kennedy 2002; Richard & Zaremba 2005; Schleiner 2000). Finally, characters have been viewed as the player's embodiment, in which case the double-situatedness of the body

and the cybernetic feedback loop come into question (Boellstorff 2008; Dovey & Kennedy 2006; Doyle 2009; Ensslin 2009; Morie 2007; Taylor 2002, 2004; Turkle 1999).

1.3 Contribution to the Field and Methodology

Although video game characters have been studied from so many different perspectives, so far an attempt to develop a more homogeneous methodology has not been made. This study aims to fill that void by proposing a methodological toolkit for player character research in offline role-playing games, and by applying it to three selected cRPG games (*The Witcher*, *Fallout 3*, and *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines*). Such a genre specific model offers a systematic method for player character research. More importantly, thanks to its ordered structure, it may be consistently applied across a wide variety of games. The structural part of the model aims at establishing a structural layout for the player character's rich network of moves, relying on the repetitiveness in the game's mechanics. Although previous attempts to design consistent video game methodologies have been made (Konzack 2002, Aarseth 2003, Consalvo & Dutton 2006), none of them focuses on characters exclusively, and is supported by detailed case study analyses.

The methodology introduced in this thesis is referred to as the Player Character Grid (see Chapter 6). It encompasses two planes, the structural and the referential one. The first one entails the Pivot Player Character Model, which perceives the character as a functional element within the game system. This player-centric framework entails five components: the player character (PC), non-player characters (NPCs), objects/props, interface, and agency. The referential plane, on the other hand, places the character in a socio-cultural context, and allows for its wider interpretation surpassing the in-game system.

The proposed methodology builds upon a vast body of research, performed not only in video game studies, but also in fiction, film, and most predominantly in drama (see Chapters 3 and 4 for more detail). The overall structure of the Grid (the planes) combines two different analytical approaches that seem to prevail in VG studies – the structuralist (focused on rule mechanisms) and the cultural approach (related to socio-cultural meaning) (Bogost 2006; Dovey & Kennedy 2006). Joining both methods will allow us to encompass the complexity of the player character and the medium it is expressed in. This analytical perspective has been

partially inspired by Alex Woloch's attempt to combine the two sides of the theoretical conflict (the opposition between a character as a human (or anthropomorphic) figure and a character as a function within a system) in his study on fiction characters (Woloch 2004).

The structural plane of the Grid partially corresponds with the tripartite model introduced by Aarseth (2003), and with Consalvo's & Dutton's qualitative template (2006). Aarseth's model assumes the analytical inclusion of the following three dimensions: gameplay (the player's actions), game-structure (the rules), and game-world (fictional content). Similarly, the close analyses performed by means of the Player Character Pivot Model (see Chapters 7, 8, and 9) look at the PC development from the point of view of the actions executed by the player in a particular in-game fictional setting, and in accordance with the game's rules. Consalvo & Dutton's methodological template, aimed at a systematic study of games, points towards the importance of four elements: Object Inventory, Interface Study, Interaction Map and Gameplay Log. Although my methodology focuses on the player character rather than on the game as a whole, the first two components introduced by Consalvo & Dutton seem to be very relevant, and therefore have been included in the structural part of the Player Character Grid. It is the interface that illustrates the PC's development and includes the PC's customisation menus. The inventory, on the other hand, constitutes a crucial part of the interface, and includes various objects that contribute to the PC's development path (see close analyses in Chapters 7, 8, and 9).

The direct methodological influence for my structural analysis comes from theatre theory (see Chapter 6 for details). Anne Ubersfeld's semiological dramatic character research performed in *Reading Theatre I* (1999) constitutes the main driving force behind the structural part of the model of the PC in cRPGs. Her criticism of the concept of the dramatic character is comparable to the VG player character's experience on many levels, and contextualises the PC's virtual existence in a given gameworld.

1.4 Outline of the Thesis

Since the methodology proposed in this thesis focuses on the player character in offline cRPGs, I shall begin with a historical evaluation of this particular video game genre. Chapter 2 thus discusses the development of the computer role-playing game from early miniature

wargames, tabletop RPGs, through gamebooks and interactive fiction (IF), to Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), Massive Multiplayer Online RPGs (MMORPGs) and Live Action RPGs (LARPs). More importantly, it provides a definition of the offline role-playing game and delineates its main characteristics.

Chapter 3 provides a wider theoretical framework for the player character toolkit by outlining relevant video game methodologies. A diverse body of research is divided into two exemplary trajectories in VG studies – structuralist and cultural approaches. The chapter juxtaposes both conceptual frameworks and discusses their applicability to the Player Character Grid presented in Chapter 6.

While Chapter 3 depicts two ontological approaches to video game studies and places the current study in the existing body of research, Chapter 4 constitutes an overview of theories and analytical methods used in the analysis of characters in fiction, drama and film. Similarly to the previous chapter, the examined theories are placed on a continuum between structuralism and cultural theory. The first and second parts of the chapter focus on character analysis in fiction and drama. The final part approaches selected methods used to analyse and interpret film characters, including synthespians and figures generated entirely by means of digital technology.

Chapter 5 further narrows down the subject by sketching approaches that have been used to study video game characters exclusively. The first part of the chapter outlines various methodological strands which focus on: characters as functions, characters as drivers of agency, representational gendered icons, and as players' re-embodied realisations. Since the PC combines graphical representation with a human agent, the role of the player is also emphasised. Therefore, the second part of Chapter 5 summarises various research projects concentrating on players.

Chapter 6 is the innovative core of this thesis as it introduces the Player Character Grid, which combines the methodological trajectories discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

Finally, Chapters 7, 8, and 9 apply the Player Character Grid to, and provide close analyses of, the three selected computer role-playing games: *The Witcher* (CD Projekt Red 2007), *Fallout 3* (Bethesda 2008), and *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* (Activision 2004).

1.5 Choice of Examples

Each of the three video games I selected for the close analysis is a computer role playing game. My intention for this selection is to address a wide range of variables within the game systems. First of all, the chosen titles belong to three different thematic genres. *The Witcher* – portraying gameworlds filled with mages, dwarves, elves, and ghuls – exemplifies the fantasy genre, which belongs to the traditional thematic scope of cRPGs. *Fallout 3* is set in a post-apocalyptic science-fiction scenario, while *VTMB* belongs to the vampire genre.

More importantly, however, the games differ slightly in their character development systems, and this distinctive feature is crucial from the point of view of player character methodology introduced in this thesis. Since a methodological tool needs to be applicable to a great variety of cRPG characters, the more heterogeneous the games, the higher the relevance value of the research method. In *The Witcher* (2007) the character development system focuses solely on the PC's combat skills and all the 15 available traits advance the PC in the swordsman career. The game does not allow the player to modify the character's appearance or to change its sex or name.

Fallout 3 is a lot more flexible in this respect. Not only may the PC's appearance be customised according to the player's needs, but also the name and sex may be selected. The character's attributes are distributed across seven primary statistics (S.P.E.C.I.A.L. – Strength, Perception, Endurance, Charisma, Intelligence, Agility, and Luck). There is also a second set of values (Derived Statistics), which are determined automatically depending on the combination of Primary Statistics (S.P.E.C.I.A.L.). Players can allocate points to 13 skills, three of which are set as their primary Tag Skills. Furthermore, every action taken by the PC in the gameworld is assigned a Karma value, which represents the character's morality system, and affects the PC's development during the game.

In terms of the complexity of the PC's development system, *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* may be placed in the middle of the spectrum. Its statistics appear to be far more complex than *The Witcher*, but do not reach the level of elaboration presented in *Fallout 3*. *VTMB* offers the ability to customise the sex of the vampire avatar, and select one the seven available clans of the Camarilla sect. Alternatively, the PC's history may be selected as well.

The PC's attributes are derived from a complex statistics system, which allows for the allocation of points between numerous attributes, and disciplines. It should be also noted that, unlike in the majority of computer RPGs, in *VTMB* the PC does not gain experience points for killing hostile NPCs.

The games selected for the purpose of close analyses performed in Chapters 7, 8, and 9 display a lot of variability of gameplay and character customisation solutions. Therefore, they are considered to be reliable examples in the cRPG genre. My choice of the examples, however, does not exclude other possibilities. Other researchers may select titles of their own liking, and use them as case studies for the methodology proposed in this thesis.

Chapter 2

Offline Computer Role-Playing Games: Their Evolution and Significance for Role-Play

Since this thesis focuses on the player character (PC) in offline computer role-playing games (cRPGs), the specificity and the history of this particular genre should be outlined here. Although player characters exist in many different types of video games, it is the role-playing games that have granted them special powers via a complex creation and levelling-up system. None of the other game types draws an equal amount of attention to a highly detailed attribute allocation, which in consequence influences the course and outcome of the gameplay. Of great significance is the extent to which players identify with their avatars as a consequence of the bond developed during a laborious process of PC customisation. However, before reaching their current shape, role-playing games have undergone numerous changes and transformations. This chapter will discuss those alterations and outline the development of the cRPG genre, from early miniature wargames and tabletop RPGs, through gamebooks and interactive fiction (IF), to Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), Massive Multiplayer Online RPGs (MMORPGs) and Live Action RPGs (LARPs). As I will further demonstrate, all of the above genres have contributed to the development of the contemporary computer role-playing game.

Before introducing the historical background, I shall provide a definition of computer role-playing games and delineate their primary characteristics. A lot of video game genres overlap and include diverse elements borrowed from various other games. Therefore, to be able to define and discuss a cRPG genre, it is crucial to determine its characteristics. The difference between online and offline versions of cRPGs will also be elaborated upon, and the reasons for the main focus on the latter explicated.

2.1 Defining Computer Role-Playing Games

> But where did the CRPG come from? From what deep, dark dungeon did they crawl? How has the genre evolved into the amazing games we enjoy today? If you've ever wondered about these and other CRPG-related questions, or if you just like reading the very best writing you can find on the net about gaming – then grab a mug of your best ale and prepare to read an article only an author of Armchair Arcade would ever dare to draft! (Barton 2007)

Today, cRPGs are one of the most popular genres in the video game industry. However, such classics as Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (2006), *Fallout 3* (2008) or BioWare's *Neverwinter Nights* (2002) did not appear out of nowhere. Modern computer role-playing games have been heavily influenced by many different VG genres. Before discussing their origin and answering the questions posed by Matt Barton, let us define the cRPGs, for their rationale is not as clear-cut as it may seem.

In order to provide an inclusive definition of cRPGs, we have to scrutinise a few other genres, which directly influenced their current shape – the text adventure (or interactive fiction), strategy and multiuser online games, such as MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons), MMOs (Massively Multiplayer Onlines), or more recently MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games). As Barton notices, "the CRPG often blends with other genres, and it can be difficult to isolate precisely those features that exclusively define it" (2008, p. 3). Although no single two cRPG games seem to work according to the same formula, following Barton, we can identify several common characteristics (2008, p. 5):

a) Level-up system
b) Emphasis on tactical combat; statistical system
c) Combat support system
d) General store (where characters can upgrade equipment or sell goods)
e) Puzzles and mazes (particularly common in the adventure genre)
f) Requirements for eating, drinking or resting in order to replenish energy levels (less common)

Regardless of all the other features of cRPGs, the numerical levelling system based on the accumulation of experience points seems to be the predominant variable differentiating role-playing games from other, similar genres (Barton 2008, p. 7; Tresca 2011, location 1896[1]). In case of computer RPGs, the gameplay is of course carried out on an electronic platform. Daniel Mackay contributes to the discussion, delivering a succinct definition based on the following equation: Computer Role-Playing Games = Role-Playing Games (Fantasy Literature + War Games) + Computer Program Language (2001, p. 24). Such a compact definition may seem comforting as it explains the nature of a cRPG game in a simple mathematical statement. However, we should remember that cRPGs, especially the current ones, are complex constructs, which oftentimes entail components typical for other genres. Therefore, any definition should not be used without close examination of a concrete game. Mackay also outlines five different characteristics of cRPGs, which have been derived from their tabletop counterparts and modified to better accommodate the modern platform (Mackay 2001, p. 24):

1) 3D, first person perspective, immersive gameplay;[2]
2) non-player-character interaction (the possibility for interaction between the PC and other in-game characters);
3) responsive environment (gameworld that responds to the PC's actions);
4) quantified assessment of character abilities (PC's development depicted by numerical values, such as attribute, health, and experience points among others);
5) access to a map of the game environment (the ability to place the PC against the topography of the gameworld).

However, as will become evident in section 2.2, the shape of current cRPGs has been moulded for years by applying numerous solutions and giving up others. Role-playing games

[1] The pagination in Tresca's publication is unavailable since the version referenced in this Chapter has been acquired in the Kindle e-reader format, which displays locations instead of page numbers.

[2] In the past, most of the computer RPGs were not characterised by a 3D first-person perspective. There were a few exceptions to this rule, e.g. *Akalabeth: World of Doom* (1979), or *Dungeons of Daggorath* (1982), which featured first person wireframe graphics, and *Meridian 59* (1996) offering a 3D first person perspective. Most cRPGs, however, presented a 2D top down view (e.g., *Ultima I: The First Age of Darkness* 1981) or an isometric perspective (e.g., *Diablo* 1996; *Diablo II* 2000; *Fallout 2* 1998). In his analysis, Mackay refers to the modern platform, in which the 3D first person perspective seems to constitute one of the differentiating characteristics of the latest cRPG titles (e.g., *Dragon Age* 2009; *Fallout 3* 2008; *Fallout: New Vegas* 2010; *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* 2011). A lot of modern cRPGs also feature a 3D third person perspective (e.g. *Fable* series) or provide the player with a choice of different perspectives (e.g., *The Witcher*, *Fallout 3*).

did not always display a gameworld map, and there were times when the interaction with NPCs was rather limited or non-existent. Before delving deeper into all those intricacies and the history of the genre, let us briefly discuss the affinities of cRPGs with the three other VG genres suggested by Barton: adventure games, strategy games, and MUDs or MMORPGs.

2.1.1 CRPGs versus Adventure Games

As Barton notices, there are so many hybrid games linking different genres that it becomes difficult to assign them to a single category. Computer RPGs may often be confused with adventure games or interactive fiction (IF), their earlier incarnation. After all, they all involve finding items, and developing characters by gaining new abilities. However, in cRPGs the majority of in-game items are assigned a statistical value (Barton 2008, p. 6). The combat system is also very different in both genres. Typical adventure games (such as *Prince of Persia, Tomb Raider,* and *Assassin's Creed*) rely upon skilful hand-eye coordination of the player, while cRPGs (*Neverwinter Nights*, *Dragon Age, The Witcher*) require statistical planning and gradual development of the character's inventory. Only after acquiring good armour and weapons, additional spells or useful perks (*Fallout*) are we able to confront a demanding opponent. In short, "a CRPG needs randomness (e.g. dice rolls) and a formal promotional system (e.g. if a player kills ten orcs, he gains 1,000 experience points, which promotes him to level 2 fighter)" (Barton 2008, p. 7). In adventure games the experience gained by the PC corresponds rather to the level of skill mastered by the player, not their avatar. In case of interactive fiction, a text-based predecessor of a graphical adventure game, the gameplay also differs from that applied in cRPGs to a great extent. IF games, such as *Zork*, focus predominantly on puzzle solving. Also, tasks are solved by entering the right command in the parser, and there is no random element to the outcome of the quest. The same rule applies to early adventures – "[t]hrowing the bucket of water at the dragon's face in Sierra's adventure game *King's Quest* (1984) will always take care of the dragon, whereas no two battles with various dragons in BioWare's CRPG *Baldur's Gate II* games are identical" (2008, p. 5).

2.1.2 CRPGs versus Strategy Games

Strategy games, similarly to cRPGs, involve a lot of statistical consideration, tactical combat, resource management and exploration. These features are foregrounded in games such as Blizzard's real-time strategy (RTS) *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans* (1994) or turn-based strategy *Heroes of Might and Magic* (1995) (Barton 2008, p. 8). However, what differentiates them from typical computer RPGs is the player's perspective and tactics involved in the gameplay. In strategy games the player acts as a god-like figure, who pulls the strings from above. In cRPGs, on the other hand, the player almost always indentifies themselves with a single character. As far as tactics is concerned, instead of embodying one character, the player controls entire armies. The individual soldiers in strategies do not gain experience points and as a consequence do not level-up as it is in case of cRPG protagonists. Even if cRPGs involve large battles, the player is put in the middle of the havoc and performs smaller tasks that contribute to the outcome of the whole military scenario. Despite the differences outlined, Barton admits that "CPRGs borrow heavily from both adventure and strategy games, and finding a pure specimen is difficult" (2008, p. 10).

2.1.3 CRPGs versus MUDs and MMORPGs

The final distinction discussed by Barton places cRPGs in opposition to Multi-User Dungeons and Massive Multiplayer Online RPGs. In terms of game mechanics, those two genres are the closest to cRPGs as they both involve the levelling system based on experience points mentioned above. They also focus heavily on character customisation – in MUDs this is done by means of textual description, while in MMORPGs players use complex interface to adjust their characters appearance, select class and race, and allocate numerous attributes. However, while those two game genres share many characteristics, the gameplay is substantially different (Barton 2008, p. 10). Multi-User Dungeons and MMORPGs focus primarily on social interaction with other players, occupying the same gamespace. Modern MMORPGs include such social structures as guilds (e.g. *World of Warcraft*), which are joined by players of different races and classes that complement one another on the virtual battle field. While cRPGs are mostly about lonesome combat and levelling up in a coherent story scenario, their online counterparts are more preoccupied with completing oftentimes disconnected quests, raiding other guilds, or levelling-up to obtain respect in the gamer

community. In this respect, MMORPGs have a lot more in common with Live Action Role-Playing games (LARPs) than with single-player offline RPGs (2008, p. 11).

2.2 History of Role-Playing Games

As Marinka Copier notices, "[…] from a game-historical perspective I would argue for the importance of studying digital RPGs in the context of analog ones" (2005, p. 4). Let us therefore outline the historical roots of the genre, beginning years before the invention and implementation of personal computers. The genre has evolved quite exponentially since the first cRPG prototypes, particularly in terms of interface and graphics. There is a myriad of different game genres that influenced cRPGs and contributed to their current shape. In his study, Barton divides the history of Role-Playing Games into the following six stages (2008, pp. 11-12):[3]

1) The Dark Age: 1974-1979
2) The Bronze Age: 1979-1980
3) The Silver Age: 1980-1986
4) The Golden Age: 1986-1993

   The Early Golden Age
   The Golden Age Part I
   The Golden Age Part II

5) The Platinum Age: 1996-2001
6) The Modern Age: 2001-today

While Barton presents the evolutionary path of cRPGs chronologically, Tresca looks at individual types of games that contributed to the rise of cRPGs as we know them today. Every chapter examines one of the following seven genres, which contributed to the rise of the cRPG genre discussed in the final chapter:

1) Collectible card games and miniature wargames
2) Tabletop role-playing games
3) Play-by-post and browser-based games
4) Gamebooks and interactive fiction
5) Multi-user dungeons

[3] The characteristics of each stage together with examples will be discussed in the following section of this chapter.

6) Massive Multiplayer Role-Playing Games
7) Live Action Role-Playing Games
8) Computer Role-Playing Games

For the purpose of this Chapter, I will first adopt Tresca's typology and focus on a few crucial gaming genres, which constitute the backbone of today's cRPGs: wargames and sport simulations, tabletop RPGs, MUDs and MMORPGs, LARPs. Having provided the genre overview, I will present an evolutionary path of the cRPG game, paying particular attention to various interface solutions developed over time and still visible in modern computer role-playing games. In this case, a historical overview of the cRPG will be based on a genre typology. Such a starting point will enable me to focus on the most crucial contributions to and developments of the computer role-playing game without running the risk of overwhelming the reader with too many dispersed examples. Since this thesis is not of historical nature, a concise review of the cRPG serves the purpose of defining the genre in question.

2.2.1 Early Contributions – Wargames, Sport Simulations and J. R. R. Tolkien

The most direct and frequently quoted inspiration for modern cRPGs seems to be Gary Gygax and Dave Anderson's *Dungeons & Dragons,* the first fantasy pen-and-paper role-playing game published in 1974 (Barton 2008, p. 30; Howard 2008, p. 10; Mackay 2001, p. 15; Tresca 2011, location 242). This game directly influenced the first documented computer role-playing game – *Akalabeth: World of Doom* (1979). Richard Garriott, its creator, admitted having spent several hours in front of *D&D*. *Akalabeth* included a lot of the elements present in modern cRPGs, such as "the choice of character class, attributes, a store from which to buy weapons and armour, a levelling system based on experience points, strategic combat […] and a large area to explore" (Barton 2008, p. 1). The gameworld was seen via first-person perspective using wireframe graphics.

However, before gamers were presented with the first computer RPGs in the second half of 1970s, decades of various tabletop simulations had passed. As Barton maintains, the origins of cRPGs may be traced as far back as the early 19th century, when tabletop wargames were used to train Prussian officers. One of those games, *Kriegspiel* (1811) "involved dice and an experienced officer who could umpire the game based on his own combat experience",

performing a function similar to that of a Dungeon Master in *D&D* (Barton 2008, p. 16). According to Mackay, "[r]andom dice rolls simulated the chance factor associated with battlefield encounters" (2001, p. 13).

In the 20th century, several gaming clubs were established and the first mass-market wargame was published. In 1913[4] the British sci-fi author H. G. Wells expanded upon the original *Kriegspiel* and designed the first modern wargame aimed at amateur gamers - *Little Wars: A Game for Boys from Twelve Years to One Hundred and Fifty and for That More Intelligent Sort of Girls Who Likes Games and Books* (Tresca 2011, location 692). A few decades later Charles S. Roberts created *Tactics* (1953) and established Avalon Hill, the main publisher of cardboard war and strategic tabletop games. Later productions involved many aspects used in cRPGs, such as hexagonal movement and the use of dice (random element). At that time all miniature wargames were based on historical events. The first game that shifted the historical perspective towards a fictional one was Tony Bath's Hyboria campaign based on the *Conan the Barbarian* stories by Rober E. Howard.[5] Although "[it] is often cited as the first fantasy-based wargame" (Tresca 2011, location 700), it did not include any fantastic creatures or magic spells, which are common in the role-playing genre.

The most influential miniature wargame of that time, and the first one to implement fantasy elements was *Chainmail* (1971) designed by Gary Gygax and Jeff Perren. Not only did they include fantasy creatures (J. R. R. Tolkien's hobbits, balrogs, ents), but also focused more on individual heroes rather than nameless troops (Barton 2008, p. 17; Mackay 2001, p. 15). The players could now cast spells and fight against various fantastic creatures. *Chainmail's* Fantasy Supplement introduced many by now archetypal fantasy concepts, including elementals, dragons, fireball, lightning bolt, and polymorph spells (Tresca 2011, location 868). It is the game that led most directly to *D&D* (Barton 2008, p. 17), which subsequently contributed to the rise of early cRPGs.

Another important early contribution to cRPGs came from tabletop sports simulation games, such as *All Star Baseball* (1941) and *Strat-O-Matic* (1961) among others. Those games

[4] The date of publication varies depending on the source. According to Tresca, H. G. Wells's game was born in 1913 (2011, location 692), while Mackay maintains that it was in 1915 (2001, p. 13).
[5] Since that time Conan has appeared in numerous tabletop role-playing games and video games, including the most recent Funcom's MMORPG *Age of Conan* (2008).

"attempt to recreate the excitement and anticipation of baseball using a combination of cards and dice" (Barton 2008, p. 13). *Strat-O-Matic* uses cards to represent every baseball player and five different types of dice: three six-sided and one twenty-sided die. It should be noticed here that players did not control specific players, but were rather simulating the position of team managers, commanding generals or gods above the action (Barton 2008, p. 8; Tresca 2011, location 803). The use of dice to generate randomness in a game soon became the most distinctive element in tabletop role-playing games. Whether statistics is used to model the "imaginary sporting events or battles with fantastic creatures" (Barton 2008, p. 15) is not that relevant. Irrespective of the thematic scope and the setting involved, the above genres – wargames and tabletop sport simulations – adapted similar mechanisms to deal with unpredictability and random events. Tresca differentiates between four major elements used in wargames that were later adopted by role-playing games and *Dungeons & Dragons*: hit points, armour class, morale, and saving throws (2011, location 753).[6]

Finally, one of the most apparent early contributions to cRPGs involves the writings of J. R. R. Tolkien:

> His work influenced much of what would later become staples of the fantasy genre, such as our conceptions of magic, elves, dwarves, orcs, and so on; and plenty of role-playing games (computerized or otherwise) borrow directly from his stories. (Barton 2008, p. 18)

The significance of Tolkien's ideas became visible with the advent of the first tabletop and computer RPGs, whose fantasy-like settings were filled with Tolkienesque creatures – "cave-dwelling dwarves, aristocratic elves, and the occasional dexterous hobbit" (Barton 2008, p. 23). The influence of Tolkien on the genre has been also acknowledged by Mackay, whose definition of role-playing games is reduced to an equation "that explains the origin of the role-playing game as a marriage between the literary fantasy tradition and the tradition of tabletop war gaming: Fantasy Literature + Wargames = Role-Playing Games" (2001, p. 17). Tresca devotes the entire first chapter of his *Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games* to the

[6] Hit points stand for the amount of damage a character can withstand before dying; "armour class determines how easily a character can be struck by a weapon"; the term 'class' may refer to profession; morale may be defined as the will to fight; and finally "saving throws are an additional mechanic for dealing with dangerous situations" (Tresca 2011, location 760, 768).

significance of *The Lord of the Rings* (2011, ch.1). Finally, Castronova sums up the Tolkien phenomenon thus: "In the short run, today, all we see is the fact that almost every synthetic world that's been created has been modelled on Middle-earth" (2005, p. 298). While it is certainly true that the setting in most of the cRPG titles seems to feature the fantasy scenario (e.g., *Oblivion, Neverwinter Nights, The Witcher, Dragon Age, Fable series, Diablo* and many others), there are numerous cRPG games that are not designed according to the Tolkienesque standard but indeed explore other thematic genres (e.g., *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines, Mass Effect* series*, Fallout* series, and many others).

Looking at the above first examples of early game genres and phenomena, which influenced role-playing games, we can observe two bifurcating paths – one of them focuses on the history of RPGs in terms of their game mechanics, while the other one is more concerned with the subject matter, originating from the fantasy worlds created by Tolkien. In this chapter I will be mostly concerned with the development of cRPGs from the point of view of their interface and the character persona. Since a lot of cRPG developers have broken with the fantasy tradition and introduced other settings (*Fallout*, *Mass Effect, Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines*), the thematic scope of role-play is not as crucial to this Chapter and indeed my thesis as a whole.

2.2.2 Tabletop Role-Playing Games

Unlike wargames, in pen and paper role-playing games players do not gain power by building large armies, but by levelling-up and expanding the pool of abilities available to their player characters. As I will demonstrate in this section, *Dungeons & Dragons* and other fantasy tabletop role-playing games exerted a major influence on computer RPGs. As Barton notices, "[o]n a more general level, the mathematics behind most CRPGs are derived (or outright copied) from various editions of Tactical Studies Rules [published by Gary Gygax and Dave Arnerson in 1974], though developers have felt free to modify them" (2008, p. 23). Before focusing on characteristic elements deployed in the mechanics of tabletop RPGs, let me describe the genre and briefly outline its origins.

Tresca defines pen-and-paper RPGs as games that "consist of a set of rules by which players engage in role-play. There is usually a core set of rulebooks which contain the game's

mechanics and overall setting, sometimes divided between player books and game master books" (2011, location 830). Marinka Copier refers to the *D&Ds Player's Handbook*, which describes the RPG experience as follows:

> […] you create a unique fictional character that lives in your imagination and the imaginations of your friends. One person in the game, the Dungeon Master (DM), controls the monsters and people that live in the fantasy world. You and your friends face the dangers and explore the mysteries that your Dungeon Master sets before you. (qtd. in Copier 2005, p. 2)

The first game of this kind was born between 1971 and 1974. In 1971 Dave Arneson, an avid wargamer, demonstrated his fantasy raid to Gary Gygax, who was so impressed with Arneson's ideas that he offered him a hand in improving the rules for the *Fantasy Game*. Because they did not manage to find a publisher, the designers of what would soon become the first fantasy RPG, changed the name of their project to *Dungeons & Dragons* (Archer 2004, p. 43). The game was officially published in 1974 and since that time several further editions have been created. Arneson and Gygax's *D&Ds* featured four different races (humans, dwarves, elves, and hobbits) and three classes (fighting-man, magic-users, and clerics). The game was also the first one to introduce character attributes influencing the statistics of the gameplay: Strength, Intelligence, Wisdom, Dexterity, Constitution, and Charisma. "This was a quantum leap from wargames of the past, as the statistics described an individual person, not a unit" (Tresca 2011, location 876).

Miniatures were no longer required (as it was in case of wargames) to enjoy the game. Instead, players were given cardboard counters as an alternative. As the genre was expanding, new classes were introduced: paladin, thief, monk, assassin, and druid. Since the first edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* was quite complex, other fantasy RPGs tried to simplify the rules to make the game accessible to a bigger audience. The first such attempt was made in 1975 with the release of *Tunnels & Trolls* by Ken St. Andre. The game provided similar statistics, classes and adventures, but used only six-sided dice (as opposed to *D&Ds,* which simulated various outcomes by means of six types of polyhedral dice: d4, d6, d8, d12, d20 and two d10) and provided a clearer explanation of the rules (Tresca 2011, location 892). A year later *Chivalry & Sorcery* (1976) appeared. The game featured a medieval 12th century

France and “was most noteworthy for creating the term ‘game master’” (Tresca 2011, location 895). With the advent of computer power, tabletop RPGs naturally evolved into digital counterparts. However, this does not mean that the classic pen-and-paper genre ceased to exist. Since the publication of the first *D&Ds* in 1974, numerous other fantasy role-plays were created and a few further editions of *D&Ds* were issued, the latest one in 2007.

Let us now have a closer look at various *D&Ds* solutions, some of which were later implemented and elaborated upon in the game mechanics of cRPGs. First of all, as Tresca emphasises, role-playing is a shared activity. During a *D&Ds* session, gamers occupy the same space at a table and cooperate to overcome obstacles. In the RPG genre team work is particularly important as “no one character is good at everything” (Tresca 2011, location 956). Members of a team balance one another by choosing specific roles that complement others. Therefore, the class system – so well established in modern MMORPGs and multiplayer cRPGs – is such an important element in the mechanics of the game. A class may be defined as a “character type or profession prescribed by the game rules” (Archer 2004, p. 159). In fantasy games classes correspond to mythical archetypes – in the first games those archetypes were drawn from Tolkien’s literature, while later editions incorporated new classes. Gygax explicated the roles performed by each of his classes: the fighter takes the role of infantry, the thief is a spy and the cleric acts as a medic, and a magic-user (Gygax 2007).

Characters in *D&Ds* are not only varied in terms of their class and the roles they take. They are also assigned certain abilities or attributes, the value of which is adjudicated through dice rolling. The six ability scores introduced in *D&Ds,* and implemented across gaming genres, include: Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma (Tresca 2011, location 994). In tabletop RPGs experience points constitute the determinant of the character’s power. These can be gained either in combat or through puzzle solving.

“One aspect of RPGs that is often overlooked but figures as prominently as combat in *D&Ds* is equipment lists” (Tresca 2011, location 1018). The characters, thus, may collect and carry with them various objects that might come in handy when fighting opponents. In tabletops, such a solution meant that players had to catalogue every item they owned to stay alive.

This is no longer a problem in cRPGs, as all the necessary props, armour and weapons are stored in the player character's inventory managed by the computer.

It is also worth mentioning that "[u]nlike a story wherein a character's fate is predetermined, the protagonists of a role-playing session have uncertain fates" (Tresca 2011, location 1041). The downside of such freedom is the fact that RPG characters may actually die. In order to keep them alive and preserve the so called continuity, the designers tailored game mechanics and offered the following solutions: luck mechanic (in *D&D* known as 'saving throw'), the ability to resurrect, and the possibility to replace the character with a family member (Tresca 2011, location 1041). The second feature is sometimes observed in modern cRPGs and MMORPGs – in *Neverwinter Nights* the PC can teleport and in *WoW* resurrect from death.

Apart from the players embodying characters, in a tabletop RPG the most significant role is played by the Dungeons Master (later referred to as the Game Master), who not only acts as a referee, but also as a narrator. The broad scope of the gameworld is determined by the DM, and that space is then shaped by the characters (Tresca 2011, location 1057). Because the Dungeon Master builds the game universe and interprets its rules for the players, s/he may be compared to a parser used in interactive fiction (IF) or to a game engine "that would later be simulated (but never fully replicated) by computer and MMORPGs" (Tresca 2011, location 1080).

To sum up the overall experience players have been exposed to over years, let me refer to Rod Edwards, who distinguishes between three kinds of such experience in role-playing games: gamist, narrativist, and simulationist. Players focused on the gamist nature are focused on winning scenarios and engage with the role-playing game like any other form of gaming. Narrativists enjoy story, and "simulationists attempt to accurately and realistically reflect the imagined world" (Edwards 2001). Edwards' division into gamist, narrativist, and simulationist brings to mind an earlier categorisation of gameplay experience in MUDs led by Richard Bartle (1996). In accordance with his observation the gaming scenario envolves four crucial aspects: achievement, exploration, socialising, and imposition. The first one focuses on game-related goals and in this respect matches Edwards' category of the gamist experience. The three remaining types of experience do not have much in common with the

gameplay taxonomy proposed by Edwards. Exploration involves experiencing the game's topology and physics, while socialising and imposition include interaction with other players – in the first case for communictive purposes, and in the second one with the aim of applying a weapon to another player's character. The most apparent difference between the two categorisations relates to the fact that Edwards does not take into consideration the social factor while in Bartle's research the narrative does not seem to play an important role.

At different stages of their development tabletop role-playing games accommodated various tastes, evolving from being predominantly focused on the win-lose scenario to becoming means of interactive storytelling. As Tresca notices, "[i]nitially, *Dungeons & Dragons* was largely gamist, doing little to encourage in-depth role-playing or any form of storytelling" (2011, location 964). Mackay observes a similar process and emphasises how RPGs evolved from simple hack-and-slash games towards complex gameworlds with a backstory and characters. *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* – an updated version of *D&Ds* including three rulebooks released between 1977 and 1979 – did not focus on fighting exclusively, but was more concerned with giving the players the ability to make moral decisions and shape their character's path (Mackay 2001, p. 19).

Putting all the nuances aside, we may say that there is certainly one thing all tabletop role-playing games have in common:

> [they all] require a statistics-based rule system to provide structure for the playacting and make believe; without them the game would seem hopelessly arbitrary and probably not much fun to play. What we'll see over the course of this history of CRPGs is this tension between math and narrative, with some games hiding most of the math from the player, whereas others foreground it. (Barton 2008, p. 22)

Computer role-playing games owe a great debt to their tabletop counterparts. Not only has the rule-system been adopted and expanded upon, but also numerous interface solutions discussed in this section have been used; not to mention the visual fantasy setting and archetypal character types, such as warrior, priest, mage and others (Mackay 2001, p. 23).

2.2.3 Gamebooks and Interactive Fiction

This section focuses on paper-based gamebooks and their more complex incarnation – digital text-based interactive fiction (IF), also referred to as text adventure. Gamebooks may be defined as "an early form of hypertext fiction, [which] laid the foundation for solo play that would be later explored in computer role-playing games" (Tresca 2011, location 1406). In gamebooks, the player does not have the power to change the content, but only to influence the pace of the interaction by pursuing a branched path and making decisions based on the input provided on the numbered pages. A similar format was used by Julio Cortazar in 1963 for *Hopscotch*, which could be read either linearly, like a traditional novel, or by "hopscotching" according to the "Table of Instructions" provided by the author. Alternatively, the reader could choose their own path and traverse the 155 chapters to their own liking. A less ambitious variant of this type of storytelling was presented to the readers in the form of the Choose Your Own Adventure series, which was introduced with *The Cave of Time* in 1979 by Edward Packard (Tresca 2011, location 1427).

The first gamebooks largely followed the purely narrative scenario, while later productions incorporated an abridged version of RPG statistical rules. Their evolution started with Steve Jackson's *Fighting Fantasy* line (1982), which enriched the traditional gamebook format not only with three statistical attributes (skill, stamina, and luck), but also with a combat system. The player had to roll dice for their character and the opponent, and the numerical value would determine the outcome of the duel.

In 1984, the *Fighting Fantasy* gamebooks were released for the Commodore 64 and ZX Spectrum. Although a few decades have passed, a similar trend may be observed in the Modern Age[7] of games we are experiencing at the moment. In 2009 Tin Man Games published five interactive fantasy gamebooks for iPad and iPhone, in which the reader/player controls the direction of the story and participates in battles resolved by a dice-based system. As we see, the latest incarnation of gamebooks also applies the random element of dice rolling, the only difference being their digital realisation on the screen.

[7] A periodisation proposed by Matt Barton, according to whom the Modern Age in game design started in 2001 and is still lasting. For further information, see Barton's periodisation outlined on page 6.

The gamebook format restricts the actions of the players to a great extent. They can make choices, but the result of these will only lead them to yet another choice, which will either end in success or failure, signifying the end of the game (Tresca 2011, location 1486). However, those simple and seemingly interactive vehicles of story-telling made a crucial transition from traditional narratives to interactive fiction (Tresca 2011, location 1479).

Daniel Keller defines interactive fiction (IF) as text-based computer games, in which "[a]n author uses a software program to create a potential narrative, programming moments that permit the player to type in directions that allow her to advance the narrative and explore the setting" (Keller 2007, p. 278). Players move from one place to another, collect objects, fight with the characters populating the world, and more importantly solve numerous puzzles. This "combination of puzzle and story is one major element that separates IF from regular prose fiction, hypertext fiction", and gamebooks (Keller 2007, p. 292). All the above actions are attained by means of simple textual commands interpreted by the parser, which changes the game's universe respectively. The parser constitutes a part of the program's structure – it is a mechanism that analyses and interprets lexical data provided by the player; "[it] interprets natural language and filters it so that it affects the world" (Montfort 2007, n.p.).

While gamebooks, discussed above, are about picking the right path, IF requires entering the correct keywords in the game's parser. In IF, the conflict is never left to chance; its outcome depends on the player's choices and their textual input. However, it should be noticed here that although the player is "free to type whatever she wants, her level of interaction is limited by the author's design" – only a limited range of actions that have been defined by the game's author can be performed (Keller 2007, p. 278).

The interactive fiction or adventure game genre was founded by Will Crowther, the original author of *Colossal Cave Adventure* (also known as *ADVENT*, *Colossal Cave*, or *Adventure*), a text-based cave simulation designed in 1975 and distributed on the ARPANET, the precursor of the Internet (Anderson 1985; Barton 2008, p. 25; Tresca 2011, location 1441). It was available on large mainframe computers, which at that time cost a few thousand dollars, so the audience was limited to the students and lecturers at universities, employees at bigger companies, and well-educated, upper middle class families (Keller 2007, p. 280).

In 1976 Don Woods started working on expanding Crowther's work, upgrading cave explorations and adding fantasy elements. In 1977 *Adventure* reached its final version. Since both designers were heavily influenced by *D&Ds*, their game was focused predominantly on treasure hunting and exploration. Players could traverse virtual caves typing simple commands – such as, 'go west' – interpreted by the game's parser (Howard 2008, p. 15).

"Although primitive even by the standards of later text-based adventure games, *Colossal Cave Adventure* established a new gaming paradigm" (Barton 2008, p. 25). Later titles, such as Infocom's *Zork* (1977) and Sierra On-Line's *King's Quest* (1984) are direct descendants of the first attempts made by Crowther and Woods. The genre became so popular at the time that, Infocom managed to release "more than thirty text-based games encompassing a wide range of genres: fantasy, mystery, sci-fi, comedy, romance, adventure, horror" (Keller 2007, p. 283). Some of the most popular and successful computer games by Infocom, except for the acknowledged *Zork* series, were for instance *Planetfall* (eighth game released in 1983) and *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy (*14th game released in 1994). Both adventures were available on multiple platforms, which further influenced the popularity of the genre.

In 1978 Jon Thackray and David Seal created *Acheton*, a game with more than 400 locations, filled with monsters and mazes (Tresca 2011, location 1449). The basic idea was untouched – players still explored the imaginary setting described by means of text, they solved puzzles and interacted with objects – but since the parser was a lot more refined, the commands could be more complex. In the *Zork* games for instance, the player is not limited to verb-noun commands ('open mailbox' or 'read leaflet'), because the parser is able to interpret a lot more sophisticated sentences, such as 'put the lamp and sword in the case', 'look under the rug', or 'take the iron key from the table and unlock the wooden door' (Keller 2007, p. 278).

It is important to realise that *Colossal Cave*, *Zork*, and other IF games cannot yet be described as cRPGs, although some of their elements were used in later computer role-playing projects. Text-based interactive fiction games were much closer to the adventure genre than anything else. Features such as statistical-based combat or skills system, so crucial to role-playing games, were absent in this genre (Barton 2008, p. 26). The characters in IF explore the virtual world, solve puzzles, and combat dragons, but they do not acquire

any new abilities and as a consequence do not level up. However, despite all those differences, the legacy of interactive fiction had a substantial impact on modern cRPGs and MMORPGs, emphasising the importance of puzzle solving and exploring the gamespace.

With the advent of more powerful and widely available personal computers, the purely text-based games were slowly being replaced by the first cRPGs, offering primitive graphics. The shift became even more visible in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when two companies, Legend Entertainment and Magnetic Scrolls, released IF games offering graphics as a side option – players could turn off the graphics at any point during the gameplay and rely on textual description only (Keller 2007, p. 286). As Keller remarks, "[i]t wasn't too long before the text parser vanished, replaced with a point-and-click interface" (2007, p. 286). However, before examining this transition (section 2.2.6), let us first focus on text-based multiplayer online games.

2.2.4 MUDs and MMORPGs

Some designers took Crowther's and Wood's ideas and further explored the linear IF genre,[8] while others combined the text-based exploration with statistical elements already used in RPGs (and to a much lesser degree in gamebooks) and created multiplayer textual worlds, in which combat regained its significance. The first games of this kind are lost to the history as they were not documented; others survived and wrote the history of the new multiplayer online genre. The earliest example is Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle's *MUD* (1978), which "allowed many players to explore the virtual world together, teaming up to fight monsters" (Barton 2008, p. 28). As the text-based multi-user dungeon crawling became more popular, the acronym MUD (multi-user dungeon) no longer denoted a specific game, but the whole genre. Similarly to Baron, Tresca defines MUDs as "text-based collaborative computer games that allow users to interact with each other"; they are also known as MUGs (multi-user games), MUSHes (multi-user shared hallucinations), and MOOs (multi-object-oriented) (2011, location 1557).

[8] For instance, *The Child Murderer* by Michael Zerbo (1994), *Treasure Hunt* and *Kelly's Rescue* by Peter Clement and René van Hasselaar (1995), or more recent titles presented at the Annual Interactive Fiction Competition, such as *Rover's Day Out* by Jack Welch and Ben Collins-Sussman (2009), *Broken Legs* by Sarah Morayati (2009), or *Aotearoa* by Matt Wigdahl (2010).

The origins of MUDs go back to *Dungeons & Dragons* and to the first attempts to transfer this form of entertainment onto a multi-user platform. A lot of students seemed to have created games in the PLATO learning system (a network of terminals connected to the mainframe computer), which were later deleted from the machines. Such was the fate of *pedit5,* an early cRPG allegedly created by Rusty Rutherford (Barton 2008, p. 30). The first documented example of a multi-user adventure game was Trubshaw's and Bartle's *MUD,* mentioned in the previous paragraph, which ran on the Essex University network. Like most of the later projects created in 1970s and early 1980s, it was written for the mainframe DEC PDP-10 computer. It should be noted here that in the early years of MUD development, personal computers were rather an exception than a rule.

In 1978 Alen E. Klietz designed *Milieu*, which could be played by up to 16 players simultaneously. The game became very popular among Minnesota High school students, who played it on the networked mainframe computers. Soon *Milieu* was renamed to *Scepter of Goth* and released commercially. *Aradath* and *Galaxy* (Mark Jacobs 1984) were the first multi-user games that could be enjoyed via a commercial network belonging to AOL (America Online). A year later the first commercial MUD in the UK was released – *Mirrorworld* (1985) could be enjoyed via British Telecom's Prestel and Micronet networks (Tresca 2011, location 1592). In 1989 James Aspnes created TinyMUD, which allowed players to create their own worlds. At that time, however, this innovative solution of user-generated content was excelled by the social aspect of the game. The main aim of TinyMUD and similar games was to encourage socialisation (Barton 2008, p. 42; Taylor 2006, p. 23). At the beginning of the 1990s, the first fully commercial MUD was released – *Legends of Future Past* (Jon Radoff, Angela Bull 1992) – and it operated until 2000, when the first graphical MUDs sprang up online (Tresca 2011, location 1607).

The most characteristic element of MUDs is related to the abovementioned social aspect of gameplay. Thanks to the Internet chat environment, the experience of text-based dungeon crawling was supplemented with live interactions with other players traversing through the same world. This social interaction happening in real time featured in MUDs, according to Tresca, very accurately simulates the "typical role-playing setup around a gaming table" (2011, location 1557). He also emphasises the fact that "[t]he focus of gaming shifts from the game mechanics to the social bonds created within the game" (Tresca 2011, location 1614).

Another important innovation when compared to single-player text-based adventures (IF and gamebooks) is the extent to which the character in the game can be adjusted. Most MUDs offer a very similar experience to *D&Ds* in terms of character personalisation and combat. For instance, *RetroMUD* (1994) includes the following attributes: agility, charisma, constitution, dexterity, intelligence, perception, luck, size, strength, and wisdom (Tresca 2011, location 1645). Players also have numerous race and class combinations at their disposal. Such solutions stand in opposition to IF and gamebooks, which featured jack-of-all-trades characters, but continue the *Dungeons & Dragons* tradition, encouraging specialisation and team play. As we will see in the next paragraphs, a similar rule applies to MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games). Although most MUDs did not introduce any changes to the classes used originally in *D&Ds,* they expanded "playable races beyond traditional Middle-earth tropes, and cemented standardized rules for eating, sleeping, age, and size long before they were formally introduced into tabletop play" (Tresca 2011, location 1885).

Of great significance in MUDs is also the role of the computer, which performs tasks traditionally handled by a Dungeon Master. The gameworld is filled with programmed non-player characters or mobile objects abbreviated as ro(bots) or mobs, usually signifying hostile opponents, whose aim is to kill the player character (Tresca 2011, location 1683). More sophisticated characters encountered in the gameworld are referred to as nonplayer characters (NPCs). An example of an NPC may be the mentor, who introduces the player to the gameworld and its rules (Tresca 2011, location 1683). Castronova quantifies one final, invisible role, that of the artificial intelligence operating the world.

Choosing the character's class and race sets them on the development path in the game. Certain combinations of attributes will prove more effective in direct combat with the NPCs, and as a result the player will collect points more quickly. By acquiring levels and points the players build up their status in the game, which contributes to the 'avatar capital' (Castronova 2005, p. 113).

This levelling-up and the accumulation of power became even more visible in massively multiplayer online role-playing games, where textual descriptions were replaced by fully-fledged graphical representations. Mackay proposes the following equation to define

MMORPGs: Online Role-Playing Game = Computer Role-Playing Game + Internet Access (2001, p. 25). Tresca offers a similar description, defining MMORPGs as graphical multi-user dungeons (MUDs), and blends of computer role-playing games (CRPGs) and MUDs (2001, location 2310). Before discussing specific features of the genre, let us have a brief look at its history.

Vast MMORPG gameworlds populated with thousands of gamers were born only after the Internet became widely available in the 1990s. Before that time, players were either confined to using a few networked computers or private network providers, such as AOL (America Online). The first game to operate in a multiuser format was *Maze War* (1974) – a first-person shooter (FPS) created for the Imlac PDS-1. *Maze War* offered a three-dimensional view and supported up to 8 players at the same time. Three years later, one of the first graphical MMORPGs was designed. *Moria* (1977) offered first-person perspective and a three-dimensional wireframe view of dungeons. *Avatar* (1979), the next multiplayer project, created at the University of Illinois, not only included six *D&Ds* attributes (strength, intelligence, wisdom, dexterity, constitution, and charisma) and ten races, but, more importantly, expanded the number of simultaneous players to 15 (Barton 2008, p. 34; Tresca, location 2331). In the mid 1980s the designers were still confined in terms of how many players could participate in the gameworld at the same time. For instance, *Habitat* (1985) for the Commodore 64 could not support more than 16 payers at once.

The situation changed in the 1990s when more households obtained daily access to the World Wide Web. Officialy, the first online RPG was *Neverwinter Nights*, launched by Don Daglow and Cathryn Mataga and running on AOL networks from 1991 until 1997 (Archer 2004, p. 86). As Archer notices, "[u]ntil then all multiplayer role-play games used text, not graphics, to display the action – getting pictures on the screen seemed like an unattainable holy grail" (2004, p. 86). The graphics, however, were limited to simple isometric and occasionally 3D animations displayed on the left side of the screen. Most of the interface visible to the player was still displayed in a textual format. Up to 500 people could play together online. The first player guilds started to form. According to Barton, it was the first big step from text-based MUDs to online games, incorporating advanced graphics (Barton 2008, p. 160).

The first realtime three-dimensional MMORPG available on the Internet was *Meridian 59* released in 1996 by 3DO. It used three-dimensional graphics and supported 250 players on each of its 12 servers (Tresca 2011, 2341). It also established a flat monthly fee instead of an hourly rate.

Further years brought such, by now classic, titles as *Ultima Online* (Origin Systems 1997), *EverQuest* (Sony Online Entertainment 1999) or the *Dark Age of Camelot* (Mythic Entertainment 2001). In 2004 Blizzard Entertainment released *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), which has been dominating the field ever since. As Tresca notices, "[it] didn't just outperform the other MMORPGs, it created new records around the globe, becoming the market share leader in North America, Europe, and China" (2011, location 2373). In January 2008 Blizzard Entertainment announced that the number of *World of Warcraft* subscribers exceeded 10 million worldwide (Leigh 2008).

The MMORPG genre seems to have spread its wings after the late 1990s. In fact, it became so popular that it marked a noticeable shift from the standalone, single-player cRPG to massively multiplayer online role-playing games (Barton 2008, 356).

Similarly to MUDs, MMORPGs offer a gamespace for multiple players, who can interact with one another and with the NPCs at the same time. There are, however, at least two aspects that make MMORPGs distinct from their predecessors: graphics and size (Tresca 2011, location 2310). The first improvement has an immense effect on the gameplay experience. The players no longer have to rely on textual descriptions, but when it comes to combat they are actually able to admire the visual impact of their weapons and spells. Even more importantly, the graphics affected the avatars themselves. Detailed customisation processes allowed players to adjust even the smallest details of their character's appearance. In *World of Warcraft* they can even shape their avatar's body, change hair colour or skin complexion. "This form of personalization provides a personal connection between player and character that didn't exist previously" (Tresca 2011, location 2451). Of course, apart from 'skinning' the avatars (adjusting their appearance), the players can allocate a number of attributes and gain achievements, experience points and various objects throughout the game.

The second aspect mentioned by Tresca focuses on the size of the MMORPGs. In comparison to MUDs, those gameworlds are so extensive that it becomes difficult to travel simply on

foot. For instance, in order to get to some remote locations, in *World of Warcraft,* the avatars have to hop onto Zeppelins or use various teleportation points. Some avid gamers managed to calculate the actual size of *WoW.* The result is astonishing – the land area including all swimmable water for both continents in *WoW* amounts to 234.6 square kilometres (90.6 square miles) (How big is *WoW* 2010). Such vast gameworlds, inhabited by thousands or millions of players, pose a great problem in terms of control on the part of the coding authority. Therefore, human intelligence has been replaced by artificial intelligence, traversing the gameworld in the form of non-player characters.

However, the biggest appeal of MMORPGs, similarly to MUDs and tabletop RPGs, is their social aspect. Taylor highlights this correlation between MMORPGs and *Dungeons & Desktops* by emphasising the specificity of design, which encourages the formation of a community players belong to (Taylor 2006, p. 32). Barton summarises the issue in a few simple words: "[i]f MMORPGs and tabletop RPGs are fun to play, it's because we enjoy playing them with other people" (Barton 2008, p. 431).

When discussing the social aspect of gaming, we have to realise that MUDs and MMORPGs are not the only online RPG genres. The essence of social play is also attained by persistent browser-based games (PBBGs), many of which "strip away the graphics and interactive environments of MMORPGs" (Tresca 2011, location 1313). PBBGs, as the very name suggests, are computer games played over the Internet using only a web browser, and are persistent, i.e. they require multiple playing sessions in order to make progress (The PBBG Project). Therefore, browser-based puzzle or card-games cannot be included in the PBBG category – they lack the longevity element of gameplay. Persistent browser-based games encompass a wide variety of genres, such as strategy, sport or more importantly RPGs. Because of their Internet-based nature, most designers incorporate multi- or massively multi-player elements into their games. PBBGs may be text-based, or they may include browser plug-ins such as Flash or Java to create a graphical environment (The PBBG Project). A lot of popular PBBGs, such *Neosaurs* (Microsoft), *Sherwood Dungeon* (Maid Marian), and *Battlestar Galactica Online*, run on Facebook. There are also browser based MMORPGs, which greatly resemble their application-based counterparts, but do not require any special software pre-installed on the computer. Some of them include: *Duels* (Oxygen Games), *Dead Frontier* (Gamigo), or *Dungeon Empires* (Gamigo). PBBGs may be perceived as a subset of

massively multi-player online games, which are entirely browser-based and as a consequence do not require any external applications (The PBBG Project).

2.2.5 Live Action Role-Playing Games

When discussing the evolution of cRPGs and the issue of multiplayer experience, we should not forget about their most realistic incarnation – Live Action Role-Playing Games (LARPs). LARPs are games in which large parties of players physically act out their roles. Contrary to tabletop RPGs, they do not take place at a table, but involve "the addition of physical reality to construct diegesis" (Montola 2003; qtd. in Tresca 2011, location 2705).

This can be done at a gaming convention (Costikyan 2007, p. 2), or at any appointed place that can be arranged into a gamespace, such as rented buildings, forests, or other confined areas (Dormans 2006). The groups of players are generally a lot larger than in case of RPGs. If well organised, even a hundred players could take part in a LARP session. Those, however, do not last a couple of hours, but up to several days.

Role-playing games incorporate three distinct types of experience: narrative (story construction), social (simulation), and ludic (gameplay or game mechanics) (Costikyan 2007, p. 2; Dormans 2006; Lindley 2005). All those elements are important for role-play, however, and the prevalence of one factor over another depends on the game's medium. As Costikyan emphasises, "LARPs are generally more focused on physical role-playing and storytelling rather than a complex system of game mechanics" (2007, p. 2). Usually there are no dice in LARPs (with exceptions that involve oversized dice rolling) and conflict is resolved by means of "different resolution mechanics [that] include[s] rock, paper, scissors, hand signals, or a deck of cards" (Tresca 2011, location 2664). Some LARPs tend to avoid using any meta-gameplay solutions (they either focus entirely on social interaction, or incorporate physical combat), so that the immersion into the act of role-playing is not disturbed.

Live action role-playing focuses predominantly on storytelling; therefore the gameworld is generally recreated more precisely than in tabletop games (Costikyan 2007, p. 2). In addition to that players identify closely with the characters they embody, and they are "expected to be in character first and then signal their desire to speak or act out of character second, the reverse of a tabletop game" (Tresca 2011, location 2743). All those procedures bring LARPs

close to improvised acting, although, as Dormans notices, they still retain some typically ludic elements, such as rules to govern combat, magic and healing (Dormans 2006).

The close links of LARPs with improvisational theatre should not come as surprise. After all, this form of role-play has always been with us. According to Tresca, any childhood play that involves acting out in an imaginary world could be perceived as a precursor of live action role-playing (2011, location 2610). Such ludic behaviours may also be related to Roger Caillois' mimicry games, which focus on the player's unregulated improvisation in an imaginary world. "Play can consist not only of deploying actions or submitting to one's fate in an imaginary milieu, but of becoming an illusory character oneself, and of so behaving" (Caillois 1961, p. 19). The player, thus, temporarily suspends their own personality in order to simulate a fictional character. Although such a condition applies to any RPG, only in LARPs do players combine the fictionality of the performed role with their own physicality.

Except for an involuntary mimicry play, the origins of LARPs may be dated back to the commedia dell'arte tradition of the 16th century (Tresca 2011, location 2610). Also referred to as Commedia all'improvviso, this form of theatrical role-play was to a great extent based on improvisation derived from a schematic narrative (Pavis 1998, p. 69). Similarly to LARP players, each actor improvises on the basis of a loose scenario and the characteristics of their role. The sketchy scenarios in commedia dell'arte may be reduced to a combination of dramaturgical constants, such as recurrent storylines of love restrained by old men or instances of mistaken identity (1998, p. 69). In LARPs, on the other hand, the players are constrained by the fixed rules of the game and its physics. The gameplay's narrative is embroidered upon a gaming scenario and role-playing set within it. *The Dictionary of the Theatre* summarises commedia dell'arte with the following statement, which may as well be referred to LARPs – "[t]he art of this genre is to develop plots endlessly, using limited stock of figures and situations" (Pavis 1998, p. 70).

The twentieth century popularised and institutionalised live action gaming. Tresca mentions the Model League of Nations, which formed LARPs as a recreational pastime in 1920s, and Jacob L. Moreno, who used the LARP format in psychotherapy, calling it psychodrama (Tresca 2011, location 2610). Fantasy live action role-playing, which is the most popular incarnation of LARPs, was not established until 1966, when the Society for Creative

Anachronism (SCA) was founded. In 1980 students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) created the Assassin's Guild, and played games incorporating live-combat focused on assassinating the opponent. During that time LARPs became especially popular. Their heyday was much influenced by *Dungeons & Dragons*, which contributed to the development of different formats of fantasy role-play, be it pen-and-paper, live action, or computer RPG games.

2.2.6 Computer Role-Playing Games

Since the cRPG genre has been defined in detail at the beginning of this Chapter, this section will constitute a historical overview of computer role-playing games, drawing particular attention to the evolution of various solutions applied in game mechanics. So many cRPG games have been designed over the past few decades that it is near impossible to discuss every single one of them. A number of detailed publications on the history of the genre already exist (Archer 2004, Barton 2008, Mackay 2001, Tresca 2011). This section, thus, will only examine selected titles, which have been considered the most significant to the evolution of the genre.

The origins of computer role-playing games coincide with an early history of MUDs. The first attempts to create an electronic version of *D&Ds* were made as early as in the mid 1970s, when the fans of tabletop role-playing would transfer their worlds onto mainframe computers, such as DEC's PDP-10, making use of the PLATO learning system. A lot of those projects are lost to history as they were not documented on hard copies. Such was the fate of *pedit5,* an early cRPG allegedly created by Rusty Rutherford (Barton 2008, p. 30).[9] Because no evidence of those early projects exists, the first computer role-playing games for personal computers are believed to be: Joseph Power's *Wizard's Castle* (1979); Dona Brown's *Eamon: Edu-Ware's Space* (1979); Epyx's *Dunjonquest: Temple of Apshai* (1979); and Richard Garriott's *Akalabeth: World of Doom* (1979). The last two titles should be the most familiar to modern gamers as they launched successful franchises until 1980s and 2000s respectively (Barton 2008, p. 49).

[9] *Pedit5* may be also an example of an early MUD. Because the game was created on the PLATO system, it could be played by a few gamers at the same time.

After the initial attempts to remediate tabletop RPGs, *Ultima I: The First Age of Darkness* (1981) marked the beginning of what Barton refers to as the Silver Age – an experimental period in the cRPG history, during which the prototypes of the genre were designed (2008, p. 64). As Barton recalls, the reviewers were thrilled by the very size of the game, which offered settings from the Middle Ages to the Space Age. As far as mechanics is concerned, *Ultima* offered character development, and featured a first-person perspective space flight and combat. The system of character development differs from the previous *D&Ds* in that "instead of rolling randomly for stats, the player is given 90 points to distribute across six categories: strength, agility, stamina, charisma, wisdom, and intelligence" (Barton 2008, p. 65). The distribution of points also depends on the choice of one of four different character classes available: fighter, cleric, wizard, or thief. As we will see in this section, such a system of point allocation was incorporated in many other titles that followed. The second Garriott's game *Ultima II: The Revenge of the Enchantress* (1982) introduced further new solutions, which later on would become standards in cRPGs. The most important improvement involved the ability to talk to non-player characters (2008, p. 66). A year later Lord British published *Ultima III: Exodus*, implementing multiple characters and tactical turn-based combat system.

Another influential game of the early 1980's was *Wizardry: The Proving Grounds* (1981). Players were given the possibility to create their own parties of up to six characters. They had five different races at their disposal (humans, elves, dwarves, gnomes, hobbits), four classes (fighter, mage, priest, thief), and more interestingly three moral alignments (good, neutral, evil). Similarly to *Ultima*, there are several attributes (strength, I.Q., piety, vitality), among which the players have to distribute random points (2008, p. 70).

An interesting and innovative solution was also offered in *Dungeons of Daggorath* (1982). Similarly to *Akalabeth* and *Wizardry*, it offers a first-person perspective, and the player's main aim is to face and kill an evil force while traversing the dungeons. However, what makes *Dungeons of Daggorath* unique is the real-time fatigue system, which is represented by a pulsating heart at the bottom of the screen. Depending on the level of stress experienced by the player, the heart rate changes. This system replaced the numerical hit point systems prevalent in other games (Barton 2008, p. 80). It is also worth emphasising that by 1983 the majority of the conventions visible in later CRPGs had been established.

Therefore, most current cRPGs may be described as combinations of elements that originated in the Silver Age games (Barton 2008, p. 86).

The Early Golden Age – the next period in cRPG history – started with adapting mainframe games like *Rouge* to personal computers. Among many other games of that time, *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* was born. "It was the first game to offer a character creation system based on a series of questions about moral dilemmas" (Barton 2008, p. 114).[10] Instead of rolling dice to allocate various attributes, the players had to answer a number of questions, which would determine the choice of one of eight virtues available in the game. Once the virtue was established, the character would be assigned to one of eight different classes: shepherd (humility), tinker (sacrifice), bard (compassion), druid (justice), fighter (valour), ranger (spirituality), paladin (honour), or mage (honesty). Garriott's system was created to accommodate to players' wide range of personalities and interests (Barton 2008, p. 115). A similar – although far more complex – system is used in Bethesda's *Fallout 3* (2008), when a player character needs to take the Generalised Occupational Aptitude Test (G.O.A.T) to determine their tag skills or specialisations. Those skills constitute a crucial gameplay element as they determine the player character's type and inform later choices made in the game – "a fighter will tag combat skills whereas a diplomat may choose speech, barter and science" (Fallout Wiki).

The magic system is yet another innovation in *Ultima IV*. In order to cast spells, the mages for instance have to acquire necessary ingredients. Although this solution was quite popular in tabletop *AD&Ds* (*Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*), it was not used in cRPGs before (Barton 2008, p. 116). An example of a modern game that makes use of this system is *The Witcher* (2007), which will be discussed closely in Chapter 7. The *Ultima* series very accurately illustrates gradual changes cRPGs went through over years – while the first game was a close adaptation of *D&Ds*, focused on fighting monsters and treasure hunting, the fourth title gave up a simple hack and slash gameplay in favour of a more complex experience based on the player's virtue system (Howard 2008, p. 16).

[10] A similar solution has been used in *Fallout 3* (the G.O.A.T. test) and in *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* (the initial player character creation system). Both games will be further analysed in Chapters 8 and 9.

The next period in the history of cRPGs (The Golden Age Part I: 1987-1993) was marked by rising popularity of the genre, and the technological changes. Apple II and Commodore 64 were slowly being replaced by Commodore Amiga, Atari ST, and Apple Macintosh. This technological step meant that new ludological content was created for those improved machines. Barton gives several examples of cRPGs of that era. I will focus only on those few that introduced the most innovative solutions to the genre.

One such innovative game was *Pool of Radiance* (1988), which was the first to allow its players to customise the portraits and icons of their characters. The game offered a collection of interchangeable heads and torsos that could be altered during gameplay (Barton 2008, p. 147). It was a popular system in the times when most cRPG games did not offer the option to customise the avatar's icons. Instead, players tended to have standardised portraits at their disposal.

The False Prophet, on the other hand, initiated the introductory cinematics, so popular in modern titles. The game was the first one to begin with an animated video cut scene. During that era the non-player characters were also revived. Barton gives an example of *Ultima VI: The Black Gate* (1992), in which NPCs no longer stand immobilised in one place, but actually walk about, "engaging in their daily activities – they even go to bed at night" (2008, p. 179).

According to Barton, the latter half of the 1990's (The Platinum Age: 1996-2001) brought about the best cRPGs ever made – *Baldur's Gate*, *Elder Scrolls*, and the *Diablo* series amongst others. Further technical improvements allowed for the implementation of fluid movement in a three-dimensional gameworld. One of the first games to offer such an experience in "fully-textured polygons, rendered on the fly in first-person perspective" was *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss* (Origin 1992) (Barton 2008, p. 288). Similar solutions were implemented in *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) and *DOOM* (1993), although those titles belong to the FPS genre and don't have much in common with a cRPG game, other than the first-person perspective used in *Ultima*. However, cRPG designers soon spotted the potential of 3D gaming and the appeal of fast gameplay dependent on hand-eye coordination. As Barton notices, they had two examples to follow for 3D gaming: they could either focus on typical cRPG elements and exploration or they could adapt the FPS model, adjusting cRPG elements to the shooter engine (2008, p. 292). Both models seem to have found their proponents.

In 1996 Blizzard North released *Diablo*, which may be described as an action cRPG. Instead of focusing on tactics, the gameplay relied on fast reflexes and the dexterity of the player. Also, in comparison to other role-playing games, it featured a much more basic character development system – there were only three player character types to choose from: warrior, rogue, and sorcerer (Barton 2008, pp. 317-318). All those simplifications in game mechanics pushed *Diablo* towards the adventure and Japanese RPG (JRPG) genre.[11] *Diablo II* (2000) was not as simplistic as its predecessor – it included five classes (paladin, barbarian, amazon, necromancer, sorceress), and a levelling system "enhanced with a graphical skill tree system that helps sustain a player's long term interest in developing a character" (Barton 2008, p. 321). Several years later, a similar graphical system was incorporated in *The Witcher* (2007), which will be discussed in detail in chapter 7.

The discussion on cRPG games in the second half of the 1990s would be incomplete without mentioning Interplay's *Fallout* (1997) and its sequel *Fallout 2* (Black Isle Studios 1998) – turn-based isometric games placing the player in the middle of a postapocalyptic world.[12] Although the game does not feature any character classes, there are numerous other ways of developing the PC's stats. The player can choose among eight different active skills that influence a range of activities, such as lock-picking, first aid, repair, disarming traps, and stealing. "In addition, the character will receive a perk every three levels. Perks are new abilities that can have drastic effects on gameplay; and some can be selected multiple times for even stronger effects" (Barton 2008, p. 340). A lot of those solutions will be used and further elaborated upon in the most recent *Fallout 3* (Bethesda 2008).

The most recent computer role-playing games of the Modern Age (2001-today) seem to bifurcate into two directions – the first entails a shift from offline single-player cRPGs to MMORPGs; while the second diverts towards console Japanese RPGs (Barton 2008, p. 362). Indeed, a lot of modern cRPGs resemble action adventure games or first-person shooters (e.g., *Heavy Rain*, *Mass Effect*). One of the most popular titles published after 2001 includes BioWare's *Neverwinter Nights* (2002), a game that offered a moving camera with zoom, and

[11] JRPGs rely predominantly on hand-eye coordination of the player rather than a detailed statistical adjustment of the character. Their plot is a lot more linear compared to classic computer role-playing games. As far as graphics is concerned, JPRGs do not tend to be realistic, but offer a stylised and cartoon-like look.

[12] Isometric perspective is a form of graphics projection, which rotates the viewpoint and by doing so creates a pseudo-3D perspective. It presents the game's environment in a more detailed way than a simple top-down perspective.

better graphics than its predecessors. However, what made it unique was not its graphically appealing gameworld, but the possibility for user-generated content (Barton 2008, p. 371). The players were given a toolset, which allowed them to design their own modules and share them with other gamers.[13] A title that represents the second trend, discussed by Barton particularly well, is *Fable* (2004) by Lionhead Studios. The game was designed for the console market, and its fantasy-like aesthetics brings to mind Japanese RPGs. The storyline is also quite linear compared to other cRPGs, which offer a more complex story structure or a sandbox-like gameplay (e.g., *Oblivion*, *Mass Effect*, *Fallout 3*, *Dragon Age*). *Fable* offers an interesting way of character development – depending on a set of skills developed by the character throughout the game, his appearance changes. "A player favoring melee combat will see the character becoming more muscular, for instance, as well as accumulating permanent battle scars" (Barton 2008, p. 380).

Another hugely popular modern cRPG designed with consoles in mind is Bethesda's *Oblivion* (2006), the fourth of the *Elder Scrolls* series. The players were given an enormous gameworld to explore and over a thousand non-player characters to meet. The designers improved the AI system, so the way NPCs respond to the player is very believable. The game also includes very realistic facial animation and lip movement synchronisation.

The Modern Age has seen many other influential cRPG examples, such as *Final Fantasy* series*, Zelda: Ocarina of Time,* Mass Effect, *The Witcher*, *Dragon Age: Origins*, *Fallout 3*, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* series, *Vampire the Masquerade: Bloodlines* (2004), and many others. The market is being flooded with endless titles, displaying a great variety of technical solutions. Generally, modern cRPG games tend to focus a lot more on action (the aspect prevalent in JRPGs) than strategic combat. As Barton emphasises, early cRPG games (e.g., *Ultima* and *Wizardy*) focused predominantly on exploration, combat, and parties development – "from ninety-pound weaklings into ferocious engines of destruction" (2008, p. 427). Storylines and characters were of secondary importance. Most of the early cRPG games may be referred to as hack'n slash focused on stats and combat. With the passage of time, however, computer role-playing games concentrate more on characters and captivating storyline. Howard makes a similar observation, stating that:

[13] Powered by Aurora, the same engine as *Neverwinter Nights, The Witcher* (2007) also granted its fans the opportunity to create and share their own game levels.

> A pattern of evolution similar to that in adventure game appears in the history of early computer role-playing games, which began as technical reproductions of hack-and-slash dungeon exploration from *Dungeons and Dragons*, out of which some examples of meaningful action could appear. (Howard 2008, p. 16)

As we will see in section 2.3, there was also a divide between cRPG games emphasising role-play (e.g. *Ultima Online*) and those concentrating on roll-play (e.g. *Diablo*). Barton summarises the development of the genre thus: "There is still a great deal of room […] for more story- and character-driven CRPGs, ones that privilege role-playing over roll-playing, dramatics over statistics" (2008, p. 433).

2.3 Online versus Offline cRPGs and the Significance of Role-Play

As has been presented in this Chapter, role-playing games exist in many different forms, some of which rely on a multiplicity of players (tabletop RPGs, LARPs, MUDs, MMORPGs), while others focus on a standalone gaming experience (cRPGs). As Dorman observes, "the differences in medium and means affect the nature of the roleplaying games", adding that "the four types of games [pen-and-paper RPGs, LARPs, cRPGs, and MMORPGs] are related but sometimes can be very different" (2006, n.p.). From the point of view of this thesis, which discusses the role of the player character in computer role-playing games, the latter two genres are particularly significant. What then are the features that make the experience of playing online and offline computer RPGs so distinct? To embrace the complexity of this question, let us yet again refer to the three factors that characterise role-playing games: story construction, simulation, and game mechanics (Costikyan 2007, p. 2; Dormans 2006; Lindley 2005). This point of departure will allow me to consider various differences between online and standalone cRPGs on a more abstract level.

The players of an MMORPG genre tend to be preoccupied with simulation and game mechanics. After all, the most crucial aspects of massively multiplayer online RPGs are of a social nature, combined with various ludic challenges, such as levelling-up, obtaining new weapons and armour, and completing side quests to achieve the latter. Games like *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft* create a parallel universe, in which players can socially interact with one another through their avatars. In this sense, MMORPGs are much closer to

the original tabletop gameplay than their offline counterparts. In their research on *Ultima Online* players, Castulus Kolo & Timo Baur (2004) found that their motives of play were predominantly related to the social experience of gaming. As they report:

> About two-thirds of the players mentioned the potential to interact with several thousand fellow players or participating via one's character in a virtual 'society' as an essential motive to log onto [the game]. (Kolo & Baur 2004, n.p.)

Compared to the importance of the social aspect, the motives related to the improvement of skills, or climbing up the in-game hierarchy, play a minor role (Kolo & Baur 2004, n.p.). Social interactions within an online role-playing scenario may involve such activities as: fighting, trading, or joining various guilds and taking part in raids on a larger scale.

Standalone computer RPGs, contrary to MMORPGs, provide the player with an explicit goal to achieve. Usually, these goals are connected with the resolution of a story that constitutes a backbone and a driving force for the offline gaming experience. In this type of games, the narrative and ludic aspects are of primary importance. The players constantly develop their player characters, acquire new achievements, unlock unexplored locations and discover twists and turns in the underlying storyline. Analysing the different natures of MUDs and cRPGs, Barton makes a distinction between their social aspect and the goal of the game.[14] As he states, most cRPGs have a predefined goal and "part of the satisfaction of these games comes simply from finishing them. MUDs, on the other hand, never really end" (2008, p. 427). Even if the player achieved the highest level and completed all the side quests, there are still plenty of reasons to stay in the game. Barton enumerates a few, such as staying in touch with friends, helping novices, and building content (2008, p. 427). In offline cRPGs, however, the social experience of a virtual environment is not a dominant factor. Those games are not designed with a multi-player experience in mind. However, we must not forget that offline role-playing is not a totally solitary experience. The non-player characters (NPCs), which populate virtual worlds and engage in social exchange with the PC, are becoming more intelligent and responsive to the player's actions.

[14] Although in his observations Barton refers to MUDs, we may extrapolate that the same arguments are valid for MMORPGs, which are essentially graphical versions of text-based MUDs, and the main goal of both genres centres around the social aspect of gameplay.

In light of those key differences between online and offline role-playing games, we should consider the question of whether cRPGs fulfil necessary prerequisites that allow for 'true' role-play. Such doubts are grounded in certain assumptions about cRPGs mentioned by Dormans, who remarks that "it is not uncommon for pen-and-paper roleplayers to dismiss computer roleplaying games for lack of story, drama and actual 'roleplaying'" (2006, n.p.). To answer the above question and address the stipulations raised by tabletop fans, a working definition of role-play needs to be established.

Since many different definitions of role-playing in the gaming context exist, for the purpose of this section I will refer to those few which contribute to the problematic debate on whether standalone cRPGs include role-playing aspects at all (Copier 2006, Dormans 2006, Gygax 1987, Montfort 2007, Mortensen 2007). According to Copier, role-playing denotes "the activity of acting out or assuming a particular role [and] can be done in many forms and within many games, not only in role-playing games" (2006, p. 4). Although a role-play element may be realised in various types of games, for Copier offline RPGs cannot be placed among them:

> From a commercial perspective, digital offline games like *Baldur's Gate* (Bioware, 1998 onwards) are also considered RPGs. I would argue that these games don't necessarily encourage role-play because players cannot add their own information or discussion over the rules as in table-top, live-action and online role-playing. Therefore I would consider offline RPGs being *adventure games* (always having fixed rules and quantifiable outcomes) rather than role-playing games. (Copier 2006 p. 5)

While Copier discredits the role-play dimension of standalone RPGs on the basis of their fixed rules and quantifiable outcomes, Montfort, in his definition of role-play, concentrates predominantly on the importance of the sociality aspect. He juxtaposes interactive fiction and adventure games – which do not offer the possibility to play a real role – with *Dungeons & Dragons*, a game genre that not only allows players to define their character's traits, develop and level up the PC, but more importantly offers the possibility of acting in front of other players, and this makes the gaming experience more social (Montfort 2007, p. 140).

Contrary to Copier and Montfort, Dormans (2006) emphasises role-play in offline cRPGs. His list of different types of role-playing games – except for pen-paper LARPs, and MMORPGs – encompasses standalone computer role-playing games, in which "a single player controls a single character or an entire party in an electronically simulated environment" (Dormans 2006). The social aspect of role-playing, so important for Montfort, does not seem to be an issue here. According to Dormans, even first person shooters may involve some role-playing – its nature is fluid and is determined by the medium and means used. Adopting this point of view, we may assume that role-playing experience differs depending on the type of game within the RPG genre, and the individual solutions incorporated by the designers. This emphasis on the importance of such a flexible attitude towards role-play will be elaborated upon in further paragraphs of this section.

Gary Gygax, the father of RPG games and a co-designer of the classic *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) defines role-playing as "acting out a make-believe position" (Gygax 1987, p. 17). He gives an example of a child pretending to be an adult, a male acting out a female character in a theatrical performance, and a gamer playing the role of a secret agent (1987, p. 17). This definition seems to be broad enough not to exclude any type of game. However, in order to narrow down its scope, Gygax introduces the concept of 'role assumption', which he perceives as an imperfect and simplified version of role-play. As opposed to role-playing, role assumption does not require the player to create and personalise their character, and offers limited choices, in many cases prescribed by the game (1987, p. 84). As Tresca notices, Gygax "considers role assumption as good training for role-playing games, but a different and lesser game form" (Tresca 2011, location 1479).

A similar concept, differentiating between acting out a role and assuming it, has been introduced by Montfort, who attempts to describe the relationship between the interactor in interactive fiction (IF) and their player character in terms of dramatic play. Because the experience of playing a character in IF is so distinct from role-playing games, Montfort proposes to refer to the former as 'steering' rather than playing (2007, p. 140). Such a metaphor "suggests that the player character is a sort of vehicle from which a world can be seen and otherwise experienced" (Montfort 2007, p. 140). As the author further explains, in interactive fiction "there is no real role to play, only an existing story that waits to be discovered" (Montfort 2007, p. 141). The player only steers the PC through a world, in which

all the strategic decisions and the character's reactions have been scripted by the designer. Although Montfort focuses predominantly on IF, he emphasises the applicability of his theory to graphical adventure games that do not require their players to play the roles, but rather to steer the characters through the gameworld (Montfort 2007, p. 142).

Most of the definitions or role-play presented above require the fulfilment of the following criteria:

a) the possibility to influence the course of the game by discussing the rules with a game master or equivalent (Copier 2006)
b) the inclusion of the social aspect (multiplayer gaming), and the possibility to level up the character by developing their traits (Montfort 2007)
c) the possibility to create and personalise the character (Gygax 1987).

Additionally, Montfort juxtaposes 'real' role-playing with its less developed equivalent – 'steering' (2007, pp. 140-142). In accordance with this observation, the player character becomes a metaphorical and literal vehicle, which enables the player to traverse the gameworld. Unlike role-playing, steering the character does not demand their individualisation and customisation by the player. Therefore, the characters in video games other than cRPGs are steered rather than played (see Lara Croft in *Tomb Rider* or Mario in *Super Mario Bros*). As Montfort observes, steering takes place when the player merely directs the character to perform mechanical actions, and "there is no real role to play, only an existing history that waits to be discovered" (2007, p. 141). Dormans, on the other hand, adopts a broader perspective, according to which role-playing may be fulfilled by different types of RPG games (including offline ones), but its nature differs, depending on the nature of the medium (tabletop RPG, offline cRPG, online MMORPG).

A similarly broad perspective has been adopted by Torill Mortensen, who perceives role-play as a continuum ranging from "free-form role-playing used in theater and therapy to the strict, formal world or re-enactment" (2007, p. 297). According to the researcher, RPGs "inhabit an area from somewhere to the right of free-form, and all the way up to re-enactment" (2007, p. 297).[15] Although she admits that the definition of role-play is

[15] Mortensen refers to fantasy role-playing games developed since the 1990s. She does not mention computer RPGs, either online or offline.

a matter of dispute for various RPG groups, for her it involves anything from improvisation to re-enactment. The latter term is understood as acting out historical events, where the focus on data and historical accuracy is more important than the character's role itself.

The discussion of various aspects of role-playing in different VG genres would not be complete without bringing up Brenda Laurel's study on theatre and computers (1993). In the context of the above debate about what defines role-play with reference to cRPG games, Laurel's theoretical framework might be perceived as somewhat extreme. She draws from dramatic theory not only to discuss games, but more predominantly to scrutinise human-computer interaction. She perceives theatre as a perfect tool to improve the communication between humans and the machines. Regardless of whether we refer to the player-character interaction as role-playing, re-enactment or steering, the underlying mechanism is based on some kind of communication between the player and the game itself.

As it reads in the foreword to Laurel's book: "[t]o think of human interaction as drama is to think broadly" (1993, p. xv). Keeping this assumption in mind, I decided to expand on Mortensen's idea of a role-playing continuum, and add Montfort's 'steering' as the furthest point to the right from free-form role-play (see fig. 2.1).

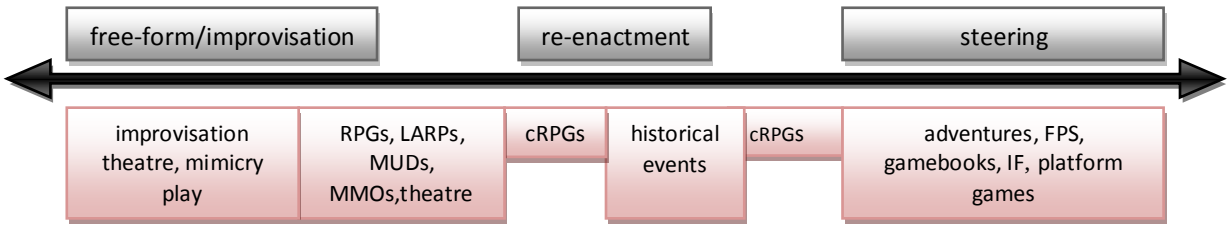

Figure 2.1 Role-Playing Continuum

This enhanced graphical representation of role-play will allow us to incorporate a wider range of video game genres (including offline computer RPGs, adventure games, gamebooks and interactive fiction), and to understand role-playing from a broader perspective. It should also be emphasised that various degrees of role-playing experience may be incorporated between the three flag points on the continuum. After all, a lot of video game genres include various forms of role-play, either closely related to tabletop RPGs or diverging from them to a degree that it becomes difficult to define those games by means of role-play elements originally incorporated in pen-and-paper RPGs. As some of the above definitions of role-play

have demonstrated (Copier 2006, Montfort 2007), the tabletop RPG model influences the way game-play is understood in video games today. Therefore, computer RPGs, especially those experienced offline, are deprived of the role-playing aspect – they are not shared with other players, they do not permit direct questioning of rules, and some of them do not allow for a highly personalised character profile (compare character profiles in *The Witcher* to a highly customisable PC in *Fallout 3*).[16]

Mortensen also adds three more valid points to the discussion on role-play. She states that in order for good role-play to take place, each character should have a history and a relevant background that will help the player act out convincingly in accordance with them (2007, p. 298). Similarly to Monfort (2007) and Gygax (1987), she also mentions the necessity to develop the PC according to the player's preferences (2007, p. 298). More importantly, however, Mortensen acknowledges the significance of the decisions made by the players during gameplay – will they kill an NPC, will they take their offer, will they run away instead and miss the quest opportunity? As she emphasises, "[i]n tabletop games these decisions are what make up the role-playing" (2007, p. 299). To this I would add all the other types of RPGs, including standalone computer role-playing games, in which players constantly make decisions, influencing not only the game's storyline, but, more importantly, their PCs' development path. In *Mass Effect,* for instance, depending on how 'good' the player is in the game, their character gains features of a paragon or a renegade.[17] *Fallout 3* incorporates a similar system based on moral choices, in which every decision we make (even as simple as stealing a can of food from someone) has a Karma value assigned to it. The character starts with a neutral Karma, and depending on the actions, can either receive negative or positive Karma points, on a sliding scale from -1.000 (very evil) to +1.000 (very good) (Hodgson 2008, p. 29).

If we look at various role-playing aspects mentioned in this section, it turns out that offline computer RPGs contain most of them. The player characters are highly customisable, they

[16] Geralt *of Rivia*, the player character in *The Witcher* can only be developed as far as his swordsmen skills are concerned. The PC's physical attributes or their sex cannot be changed due to the fact that the character in *The Witcher* is based on a literary character. In *Fallout 3* on the other hand, the player can control a wide range of the PC's attributes, including sex choice and a very detailed facial customisation process. The processes of PC customisation in those games will be elaborated upon in detail in Chapters 7 and 8.

[17] In *Mass Effect* the PC's morality is measured by means of Paragon and Renegade points obtained during gameplay. Depending on the balance between the Paragon and Renegade scales, the dialogue options with certain NPCs alter.

develop over time and the decisions made throughout the gameplay oftentimes influence the PC's personality traits.[18] Of course, the level of complexity varies from game to game; therefore it is vital to take into consideration the fluid nature of role-playing, and treat it as a continuum rather than a narrow set of actions performed in a specific game scenario. To expand the understanding of role-playing and make it more suitable for a range of video games, I propose a definition, the central point of which is the decision-making process discussed by Mortensen. If the decisions made during the gameplay lead to the modification of the PC's attributes and influence its development path, we are dealing with role-playing. If, on the other hand, the choices have an impact exclusively on the game's storyline and do not trigger any changes in the PC, we are dealing with steering, a much less complex form of role-playing. The first scenario may be observed in tabletop RPGs, MMORPGs, and offline cRPGs (e.g., *Fallout 3*, *Dragon Age*, *Oblivion*), where the PC is developed through a detailed customisation process. The selectable character's attributes available to the players may be distributed in numerous different combinations, leading to the construction of a more or less unique character. Pisarski & Sikora give an illustrative example of *Neverwinter Nights* (2002), which includes so many character's races, classes, attributes and skills that the players are overwhelmed with over 8,000 combinations (2009, p. 190). Steering, on the other hand, is present in IF, gamebooks, and adventure and action-adventure games (e.g., *GTA IV*, *Prince of Persia* series, *Dante's Inferno*), in which the characters are not customised by the players, but serve as mere vehicles for travelling in the gameworld.

Such a definition does not take into consideration the social aspect of role-playing as understood by Montfort (2007, p. 140). In many modern cRPGs non-player characters are becoming psychologically complex, and so at some point it may be possible to treat them on an equal footing with their human counterparts present in MMORPGs. A well scripted artificial intelligence (AI) can create a sufficiently immersive role-playing scenario for the player character. In tabletop games and LARPs, players use their own bodies to act, their own voices to speak and their own brains to process information. In MMORPGs, although the players are able to communicate with other human players by means of in-game chats, their gestures and actions within the game are limited by its mechanics, interface, and rule-

[18] Numerous examples supporting and developing this statement may be found in the close analyses conducted in Chapters 7, 8, and 9 with reference to *The Witcher*, *Fallout 3*, and *Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines*.

set. Offline RPGs transfer that simulation onto yet another level, requiring the player character to act vis-a-vis artificial intelligence. Modern cRPGs are far more complex than their roll-playing hack'n slash predecessors, which focused on "battling wave after wave of monsters and being rewarded with experience points and treasure" (Barton 2008, p. 432). In those early computer RPG games (e.g., *Ultima* and *Wizardy*) the emphasis was on stats and combat rather than storylines and characters (Barton 2008, p. 427), in which case the gameplay did not resemble a classical role-play.

In the light of different arguments concentrating on the significance of the social aspect of role-play, it may seem surprising that even Montfort admits that in Michael Mateas & Andrew Stern's *Façade* (2005) "the interactor is invited to take on a role" (Montfort 2007, p. 142). *Façade* does not involve any other human players, and its rules cannot be discussed with a human agent directing the game. In this respect the experience of playing *Façade* is similar to a standalone cRPG game. What is it then that makes this interactive drama an unquestionable role-playing experience as its authors perceive it? As its creators state, "*Façade* uses unconstrained natural language and emotional gestures as a primary mode of expression for all characters, including the player" (Mateas & Stern 2007, p. 186). This new type of computational representation does not concentrate on the accumulation of experience points, the allocation of PC attributes, or the levelling-up of the character, but focuses solely on the interaction with "believable characters and the story-like pleasure of participating in and influencing a long-term, well-formed dramatic progression"(Mateas & Stern 2007, p. 183). *Façade* constitutes a simulation of a social situation, in which the player assumes a role of Grace and Trip's friend, and uses unconstrained textual commands to lead the dialogue. This moment-by moment interaction with NPCs is handled by a parser instead of the dialogue trees present in computer role-playing games. However, a set of linguistic structures understood and processed by the system is not infinite. Even *Façade* has its limits and a restricted number of predefined scenarios.

Following the above example, we can see that the presence of other human agents behind the player characters is not necessarily a prerequisite for role-playing to take place. The degree of agency in the role-play experience depends on how convincingly the artificial intelligence is able to respond to the player's input. Thus, the more complex the PC/NPCs interaction in cRPGs becomes, the closer they move to the left on the role-play continuum.

2.4 Concluding Remarks

This chapter provided a theoretical foundation for the reminder of the thesis. It established a definition of a computer role-playing game and presented a historical overview of the genre. The cRPG turned out to have multiple roots. It has been derived not only from its tabletop counterpart, but also from wargames, early sport simulations, and gamebooks. Other related genres discussed in this chapter included MUDs, MMORPGs, and live action role-playing games. Finally, the computer role-playing game has been scrutinised together with its contemporary permutations. The third section (2.3) concentrated on the differences between online and offline cRPGs and the difficulty of defining role-play with reference to such a wide array of role-playing ludic forms. The act of role-playing in games involves so many different aspects that it becomes extremely confining to limit its definition to tabletop RPGs, from which role-playing originated.

Such a rich and intricate history and numerous offsprings of the genre contribute to its complex nature. Establishing a theoretical framework and providing a working definition of a cRPG will enable the researcher to make an informative choice of the games to be close-analysed in Chapters 7, 8, and 9.

Chapter 3

Exemplary Trajectories in Video Game Studies: Structuralist and Cultural Approaches

To provide a solid academic background for the research in question, an applicable methodology with regards to computer role-playing games (cRPGs) and player characters needs to be developed. This chapter will thus begin with a brief outline of relevant video game research methodologies, placing the current analysis in a wider theoretical context. To systematise the diversification of approaches, two exemplary trajectories in video game studies will be demonstrated. Following Dovey & Kennedy (2006) as well as Ian Bogost (2006), on one end of the spectrum I placed the structuralist approaches – relating to how games *work* in terms of rule mechanisms – and on the other end, the cultural ones – focusing on what games *do*, what their cultural meanings are and what effects they have socially and psychologically. The aim of this chapter is to juxtapose the structuralist strand with the cultural one and to discuss the applicability of both structural and cultural analysis to the Player Character Grid, which will be introduced in detail in Chapter 6.

3.1 The Place of the Toolkit on the Methodological Map for Video Game Studies

Since game studies is a young and interdisciplinary field of study, it is subject to extensive colonisation on the part of other disciplines, which are already deeply rooted in academia. A few years ago the formation of an independent discipline – whose methodology was still in the making – and the foundation of undergraduate and graduate programs in game studies, was perceived to be a questionable manoeuvre. It was only in 2001 that the first *Game Studies* journal was established and the first academic conference took place. In 2002 DiGRA (Digital Games Research Association) – the first professional society dedicated to the study of digital games – came into being in Finnland. Today those "early formative steps into the institutionalisation and establishment of games as legitimate subject of academic study" (Mäyrä 2006, p. 105) are considered to be milestones in the field. As Espen Aarseth further observes:

> the cultural genre of computer games is finally recognized as a large-scale social and aesthetic phenomenon to be taken seriously. In the last few years, games have gone from *media non grata* to a recognized field of great scholarly potential, a place for academic expansion and recognition. (2004, p. 45)

Various other academic fields still keep influencing video game studies and multi-disciplinary approaches are proliferating. However, more recently analyses of video games have become more self-aware and in most cases the distinctiveness of games as media forms in their own right has finally been accepted. After a few years of heated debates (especially the alleged battle between narratologists and ludologists),[19] it seems as if game researchers were increasingly more prone to acknowledge that "it is of primary importance [for] computer games [to be] recognized and studied as games and not simply as a new form of hypertext, literature, drama or cinema" (Eskelinen 2001). This does not necessarily have to lead to the complete disregard of narratological features in video games, but the specificity of the

[19] See Gonzalo Frasca's *Ludologists Love Stories Too: Notes from a Debate that Never Took Place* (2003).

medium needs to be taken into account and narrative theories have to be tailored to video games and their multimodal and interactive nature.[20]

It should be also noted that the discipline is expanding at a flying pace and the number of publications every year is overwhelming. As Tanya Krzywinska states:

> Academic interest in digital games continues to grow apace and there is now a growing body of published work that is cumulatively defining primary issues and moulding the contours of digital games research. (2005, n.p.)

Bearing in mind the above observation, the crucial questions to be answered are what methodological approaches remodel those contours, and how this particular study fits in with the existing body of research. According to Gordon Calleja, "[t]he diversity of approaches has created a number of disagreements about the ways in which games can be studied" (2007, p. 11). As Buckingham further observes, this disciplinary promiscuity may be clearly observed when, for instance, browsing through Routledge's *Video Game Theory Reader* (Wolf & Perron 2003), which "features contributions drawing from literary reception theory, psychoanalysis, art history, postmodernism and cognitive psychology" (Buckingham 2006, p.11). Various theories derived from "narrative theory, film studies, social semiotic theory, sociology and audience research are also applicable – albeit not without thoughtful adaptation" (Buckingham 2006, p.11). The second edition of *The Video Game Theory Reader* (Wolf & Perron 2008) also includes a wide range of multidisciplinary approaches to game analysis, some of which focus on game design (Zimmerman, Konzack 2002), embodiment (Gregersen & Grodal 2008), emotional experiences (Järvinen 2007), media convergence (Elkington 2008), language noise in online game spaces (Consalvo 2008) or the notion of difficulty in games (Juul 2008). For several researchers (Bogost 2006; Dovey & Kennedy 2006; Mäyrä 2009), the *status quo* of recent video game research consists in academic boundary-crossing – which leads to methodological hybridity – and depending on the classification, seems to bifurcate into the following directions: on the one hand we have the structural or functional analysis cultivated by ludologists, and on the other end of the spectrum we have game research mediated through culture (Dovey & Kennedy 2006, p.

[20] Multimodality refers to various modes of presentation, including auditory, textual, and visual elements.

86).[21] Two auxiliary statements posed by Ian Bogost with respect to video game analysis constitute a very accurate summary of the two approaches. According to Bogost, we may either focus on how games work or we can "turn to what they do – how they inform, change, or otherwise participate in human activity" (Bogost 2006, p. 53). In his research, Bogost turns away from what he calls 'pure functionalism' (i.e. how games work) and focuses on the 'expressive capacity of games' (2006, p. 53). As he further explains:

> Functionalist questions about videogames – what they are, or how they function – are not invalid or even unwelcome. But equally, or dare I say more important questions exist: what do videogames do, what happens when players interact with them, and how do they relate to, participate in, extend, and revise the cultural expression at work in other kinds of artefacts? (2006, p. 54)

As much as I agree with Bogost in that an informed video game analysis should not be confined exclusively to the game's mechanics, I do not perceive the expressive analysis as being of greater significance. Both approaches seem to be valid in their own right, however, we should remember that the primary features of games are ludic, and in the absence of those structural elements the medium would not be referred to as games at all. A more balanced perspective, which attributes the same level of significance to both sides, has been provided by Frans Mäyrä:

> In methodological terms, for most uses and purposes, the analysis of a game as an abstract structure without any consideration of its playing practices would be deemed insufficient, as would a study of game players not informed by some system-oriented analysis and understanding of the ludic nature of [a] particular game and its gameplay. (2009, p. 314)

Although the macroanalysis of video games – pertaining to the general human condition and the players' behaviours – is unquestionably valuable, it would not perform its function without a solid ludological background. It is only possible to refer to what video games do, having established their *modus operandi* and, more importantly, having provided the very definition of 'gameness'. The responsibility for such a core analytical foundation falls upon

[21] The discussed approaches are humanities based. In fields such as psychology, computer science, and education other perspectives may be used.

the structuralist camp. However, it should be noticed that video games have been analysed from so many different angles that in many cases it is not possible to classify a given approach with respect to either of the two above mentioned categories. Very often various theories complement one another, which allows for extrapolation from game mechanics and other in-game phenomena (such as avatars, objects or quests) onto the outer world (Juul 2005, 2009; Newman 2008; Taylor 2006; Yee 2005, 2009). The present study adds to both, the functional and the cultural body of research by providing a bottom-up pragmatic approach to the character analysis in cRPGs (via the Player Character Pivot Model in the structural plane), and also by implementing a cultural dimension, which allows researchers to perform an expressive cultural interpretation.

The exemplary categorisation into structure and culture-focused research is further explained in figure 3.1, which demonstrates the bipolar division in video game studies as discussed above. Since human nature tends to create categories and recognise patters in all possible manifestations of its existence, they must fall prey to oversimplification. The graph should thus be treated as an attempt to present the complexity of selected methodological approaches by means of a basic visual representation. At the same time, we should remember that the division into structural/functional and cultural approaches is relative and constitutes only one of many possible perspectives. All the theories mentioned in the graph constitute examples, and may be replaced with other suitable instances of structuralist and cultural research in video game studies.

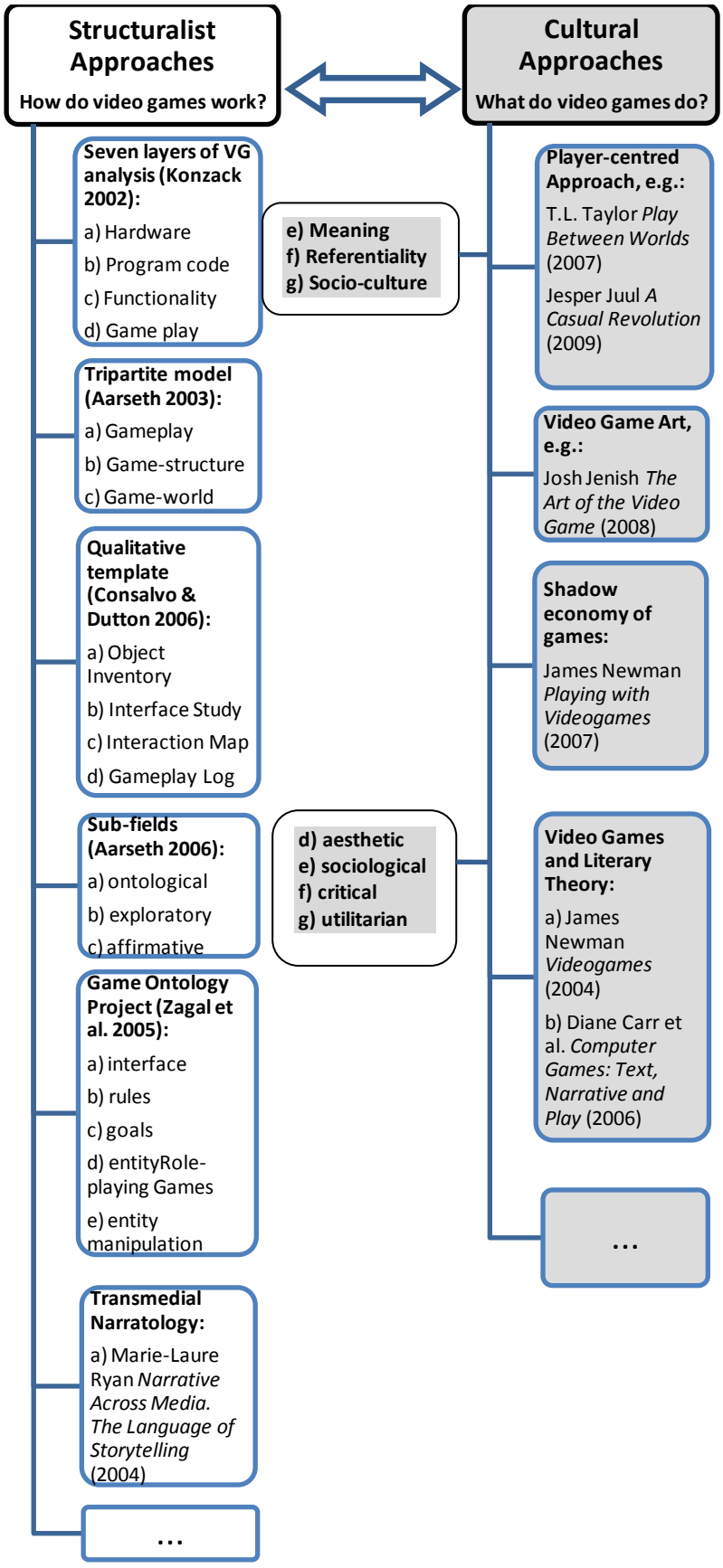

Figure 3.1 Two Exemplary Trajectories in Video Game Studies

3.2 A Preliminary Introduction to the Pivot Player Character Model

In the subsequent section, chosen structuralist approaches will be discussed with reference to the Pivot Player Character Model, which constitutes the structural plane of the Player Character Grid. The Grid and model in question will be elaborated upon in detail in Chapter 6, but in order to demonstrate its correlations with the structural mode of thinking, I shall outline its key principles here. The Pivot Player Character Model includes five major components: the player character itself, non-playable characters, props and inventory, interface, and agency. The player character (PC) is the core element of the Pivot Player Character Model, and all the other components, such as NPCs or props surrounding it, are analysed from the PC's angle. The reason for implementing such a perspective seems to be self-evident in computer RPGs. It is the PC's actions that seem to be the window to the game's mechanics as seen through the player's eyes. It is the PC's choices that change the course of the storyline within the game and indispensable quest information is disclosed by the NPCs by means of dialogue options available to the PC. It is also up to the PC whether certain objects are to be collected and made use of in the course of the gameplay. Since the game's main character is only an empty avatar impersonated by the human player, a meaningful and contextualised analysis of various in-game components may be carried out only in relation to the game's central figure. It should be stressed here that the attribute 'empty' is only valid when we take agency as our point of reference. Without the human player, the avatar cannot interact with the gameworld and make choices related to the storyline. In this sense the avatar may be perceived as an empty form revived and controlled by the player. If, however, the focus is on the avatar's physical representation, its rich textual and multimodal meanings need to be acknowledged, and this approach is contained within the cultural plane of the Player Character Grid.

The interplay between the model's elements will be further discussed in Chapter 6. Its theoretical foundations will then be applied to the following cRPG games: *The Witcher* (CD Projekt Red 2007), *Fallout 3* (Bethesda 2008) and *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* (Activision 2004).

3.3 Structuralism in Game Studies: In Search of Game 'Science'

3.3.1 Structural Approaches in Linguistics and Literary Studies

Before discussing the actual structural videogame methodologies and their significance for the structural part of the model introduced in this thesis, we shall look at the structural studies in games from a wider perspective. To be fully able to understand the structural and/or formal underpinnings in the video game methodologies proposed predominantly by ludologists, we need to briefly revisit the roots of structuralism.

The most significant contributions to the structural thought may be found in the operational rules of semiotics introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure in the early 20th century. De Saussure wanted to create concrete foundations for his newly developed discipline and therefore general linguistics focused on the formal language system (*langue*) rather than on speech in general (*langage*) or the speech of an individual (*parole*). The aim of the Swiss linguist was to liberate language from its constraints caused by the ever-present historical approach, which supposedly constituted the indispensable context for the linguistic sign. De Saussure perceived language as an abstract system of complementary signs, devoid of its external context. It was to be studied synchronically, as a complete system of interrelations between sounds and their meaning at a given point in time (Eagleton 2001, p. 84). Semiotics turned into pure language study with an abstract sign system at its centre (Burzyńska & Markowski 2007, pp. 202-204).

The first literary theoretical school to draw from scientific linguistic methods was Russian Formalism. Its proponents developed a formal method, which helped them define the principles of poetic language. Formalists (Viktor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson amongst others) avoided analysing literary texts with reference to contexts other than linguistic ones. Formalists would analyse individual literary aspects and contrast them with the literary system as a whole (Burzyńska & Markowski 2007, p. 124), emphasising the importance of literary devices and perceiving them as the most significant phenomena. These devices, or 'priems', are central to the analysis of poetic language and narrative structure. Their role is to strip the utterance of its semantic and sonic neutrality and by doing so, to disturb the conventional and clichéd perception of it. If the language is used in a specific and non-

standard way, it has a defamiliarising effect on its recipient, generating what is referred to as 'ostranenie'. In poetry this might be achieved by means of unique word combinations, which lose their semantic transparency and become 'visible' yet again. Prose, on the other hand, accomplishes defamiliarisation by the unconventional linguistic construction of a story, which does not succumb to linearity (Burzyńska & Markowski 2007, p. 123). This linguistic presentation of the story constitutes the narrative construction, referred to as a plot (Rus. *sujet*). Such an approach deprives the literary artifact from any connection to the external context or historical background. Experiencing the literary work artistically, be it poetry or prose, was thus reduced by formalism to experiencing its form.

Just like formalism, structuralism disregards the content of the literary work and focuses entirely on its form (Eagleton 2008, p. 83). As Eagleton notices, "[l]iterary structuralism that flourished in the 1960's is an attempt to apply to literature the methods and insights of the founder of modern structural linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure" (2008, p. 84). Its expansion was visible in many disciplines in the humanities: linguistics, structural anthropology and literary studies – which may be further subdivided into linquistic poetics and literary grammars, the latter being to a great extent influenced by the morphological analyses of folk tales performed by Vladimir Propp in the 1920s (Burzyńska & Markowski 2007, pp. 200-201). Reducing a pool of researched folk tales to seven 'spheres of action' and 31 elements or 'functions', he came to the conclusion that every single tale constitutes an intricate system of correlations between 'functions' and 'actions'. Propprian analysis of literary texts was based on the structural mode of thinking present in linguistics.[22]

Structuralism, as the very name suggests, focuses on the analysis of structures and the mechanics behind them. Individual units comprising the whole system do not have any meaning on their own, but only when combined with other units (Eagleton 2008, p. 82). In other words, "[individual elements] do not have a 'substantial' meaning, only a 'relational' one" (Eagleton 2008, p. 82). Although the surface principles of structuralism seem to be convergent with formalism, they are more concerned with 'deep' structures of literary texts. The proponents of the Prague School would abandon the mechanical approach to literature, so dear to Russian formalists (although Roman Jakobson, being a link between the two

[22] Propp's ideas will be further elaborated upon in section 4.2.1 in Chapter 4 (page 89).

movements, must have exerted some influence on the Prague structural thought). Instead of perceiving a literary work as a 'sum of devices', structuralists concentrated on its dynamic unity, where all the elements relate to one another and succumb to the primary constructional principle in a given system. Structuralism crossed the rigid boundaries of the formal concept of literature as an autonomic linguistic system and started studying its relations to other cultural systems as well (Burzyńska & Markowski 2007, p. 208).

Linking all the aforementioned approaches may lead us to the following simplified conclusion. De Saussurian general linguistics focused on the abstract sign system and forming the early structural thought, it assigned meaning to individual elements only in relation to other surrounding components. Russian formalism, on the other hand, concentrated on specific properties of poetic language and on the application of mechanical methodology, which reduced a literary text to a combination of various techniques and devices. And finally, structuralism examined deep structures underpinning literary texts. All of the above approaches to human sciences operate in accordance with very analytical and mechanical principles governing our perception of, in this case, linguistic and literary phenomena. It should be noticed, however, that structural analysis may be applied to various other spheres of life. As Terry Eagleton observes:

> You can view a myth, wrestling match, system of tribal kinship, restaurant menu or oil painting as a system of signs, and a structuralist analysis will try to isolate the underlying set of laws by which these signs are combined into meanings. It will largely ignore what they 'say' and concentrate instead on their internal relations to one another. (2008, p. 84)

By the same token, structural approaches – sometimes referred to as functional (Bogost 2006, pp. 49-54) – are applicable to videogame studies. The following section presents an overview of selected structural methodologies and models applied to the analysis of video games. Interestingly, the golden days of structuralism in literary studies were already fading out in the mid 1960's and were gradually forced out by 'critical structuralism', later referred to as poststructuralism (Burzyńska & Markowski 2007, p. 308). Researchers began to challenge the principles of structuralism and the following questions arose: "Was language all there was? What about labour, sexuality, political power" (Eagleton 2008, p. 97)? Drawing

from Eagleton, we may ask a similar question in relation to video games – is game mechanics all there is? And what is the reason for such a high recognition of structural thought in game studies today? Presenting a selected body of structural research applied to video games, I shall discuss this methodological phenomenon in the following section.

3.3.2 Structural Approaches in Videogame Studies

As Dovey & Kennedy notice, "[Roger] Caillois' structuralist approach to naming the formal elements of play and of games has become dominant in a number of attempts to define what a computer game is" (2006, p. 25). Caillois' *Man, Play and Games*[23] was published at the beginning of the 1960s, at which time structuralist approaches were still prevalent in the humanities. Trying to discover specific principles and well-defined categories for the classification of a multitude of games, he proposed a division into:

> four main rubrics, depending upon whether, in the games upon consideration, the role of competition, chance, simulation, or vertigo is dominant. […] these [are called] agon, alea, mimicry and ilinx, respectively. (Caillois 2001, p. 12)

In addition to that, he arranged different games on a continuum ranging from play phenomena involving free improvisation (*paidia)* to those demanding some effort, skill and ingenuity (*ludus*), at the same time being highly dependent on rules.

Although it clearly did not relate to video games, Callois' extensive work became a point of departure for many contemporary researchers, interested predominantly in the mechanics of video games. Similarly to Callois, ludologists focus on the structural qualities and attempt to find out what "distinguishes [video] games from other kinds of mediated experience" (Dovey & Kennedy 2006, p. 85). Structuralist critics (Aarseth, Eskelinen, Juul, Salen & Zimmerman, and Zagal among others) tend to perceive rules as the most significant aspect of games. As Dovey & Kennedy point out, Eskelinen, like the majority of video game researchers belonging to the ludological camp, "suggests that games should only be studied in relation to what makes them a game (the rules, the materials, the events that constitute the gaming situation)" (qtd. in Dovey & Kennedy 2006, p. 87). In the article ("The Gaming

[23] The original French edition (*Les jeux et les hommes*) was published in 1958. Its first English translation (*Man, Play and Games*) followed in 1961.

Situation") published in 2001 – when video game studies was still a fledgling and under-theorised discipline – Eskelinen emphasised the importance of in-game components, temporal, causal, spatial and functional relations and properties, and more importantly rules and goals present in video games. Those unique elements, as he claimed:

> should suffice to set games and the gaming situation apart from narrative and drama, and to annihilate for good the discussion of games as stories, narratives or cinema. In this scenario stories are just uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games, and laying any emphasis on studying these kinds of marketing tools is just a waste of time and energy. (Eskelinen 2001, n.p.)

Eskelinen's strong opinion was formed in opposition to the extreme interpretation of *Tetris* proposed by Janet Murray, who claimed that the game depicts the "constant bombardment of tasks that demand our attention and that we must somehow fit into our overcrowded schedules and clear off our desks in order to make room for the next onslaught" (Murray 1998, p. 144). A few years later Murray confirmed her point yet again, asserting that all games involve storytelling, even abstract ones, such as checkers or *Tetris* (Murray 2004). Although not all new media scholars abide by Murray's viewpoint, a lot of them – especially those with an academic background in literary studies – have tried to analyse games from a narratological perspective (for instance, Buckingham 2006; Carr 2006; Jenkins 2004; Kücklich 2003a, 2003b; Ryan 2004, 2006; Simons 2007). This situation partially contributed to an even more vehement rise of antagonistic attitudes towards the way video games should be analysed. The first issue of *Game Studies* (2001) emphasised this academic debate related to the relevance of narratological approaches to the study of games. In his "Brief note on games and narratives", Jesper Juul – similarly to Eskelinen – expresses his scepticism "towards the study of games from within existing paradigms", especially when applying the narrative source domain to games (Juul 2001). Juul explores the following three reasons why games cannot be described as narrative:

> 1) Games are not part of the narrative media ecology formed by movies, novels, and theatre. 2) Time in games works differently than in narratives. 3) The relation between the reader/viewer and the story world is different than the relation between the player and the game world. (Juul 2001, n.p.)

This urge to form a discipline independent from other, more traditional fields provided fertile ground for the structural methodologies.

Although at first glance, ludology and narratology in video game studies seem to be placed on the opposite sides of the ontological continuum, one must be careful when making such a distinction. The supposed bipolarity stems from the fact that both methodological approaches seemed to be contradicting each other. The arguments constructed by most vehement narratologists were undermined by the proponents of ludological study of games (Aarseth 1997, 2003; Eskelinen 2001; Järvinen 2003, 2007; Juul 2003, 2005; Konzack 2002; Salen & Zimmerman 2004), who focused on their uniqueness and differentiation from other academic fields, especially the literary ones. However, as Marie-Laure Ryan points out, the phenomenon of narrative has been also explored in technical terms, among many others (Ryan 2004, p. 2). Such a research perspective seems to place narratology in close proximity to ludology as the technical approach is closely related to structuralist thought in that it removes context from narrative structures. Ryan also mentions analyses done in linguistics and discourse analysis (2004, p. 5). Such studies, however, as promising as they seem to be on a formal level, tend to focus predominantly on language-based narrative, whereas Ryan – especially in *Narrative across Media* – leans towards a medium-independent definition. She refers to the study of narrative across media as to 'narrative media studies' or 'transmedial narratology' (2004, p. 35). Ryan's narratological research with reference to video games challenges the assumptions made by ludologists, who claim that the concept of narrative is not applicable to games. She states quite the opposite and to support her thesis – as if she was contradicting herself – she plants the arguments along the ludological path. If, as she states, games are narratives or possess narrativity, there are two crucial questions to ask; the functional one relates to the role of narrative within the game system, and the methodological one to the way in which the concept of narrative may be applied to game studies (Ryan 2006, p. 276). Ryan and the proponents of transmedial narratology (Carr 2006, Jenkins 2004, Salen & Zimmerman 2004) are no less structuralist in their arguments than ludologists, which paradoxically (in the light of the heated debates between narratologists and ludologists) places them on the same methodological strand. Diane Carr admits that narrative theory may be a good tool to undermine the narrative nature of computer games, and by doing so, it becomes somewhat relevant to computer game studies (Carr 2006,

p. 31). Although both ‘camps’ allegedly try to refute their opponents' reasoning, they do so by means of similar functional tools. When Ryan claims that the concept of narrative can make ‘ludologic’ contributions to the new discipline, she suggests that “various roles and manifestations of narrative in computer games” be explored (2006, p. 289). Those narratives, according to her, may manifest themselves, for instance, in:

- The narrative script that is designed into the game
- The narrative that players write through their actions, actualizing a particular sequence of events within the range of possibilities offered by the built-in script
- The narrative that lures players into the game (cut scenes and background information that introduce the game; text on the box)
- The narrative that rewards the player (cut scenes that follow the successful completion of a mission)
- The micro-stories told by non-playing characters
- (For games with recording devices): The narratives that players make out of the materials provided by the game

  (Ryan 2006, p. 289)

We may expand the above list by adding another point related to meta-narratives negotiated through paratextual channels, such as fora, newsgroups and blogs.

In spite of the fact that technical and transmedial narratologists have a lot in common with ludologists in terms of the methodology used, they operate on different levels. Both examine video game structures – be they ludic or narrative – but taking contradictory assumptions as starting points, they will always run parallel. However, despite the methodological divide it is worth pointing out that the field which most vehemently contributed to the popularity of rule centred structuralism in game studies is also quite structuralist in its nature.

As early as in 1997, Espen Aarseth conducted structural research encompassing a wide variety of cybertexts, including digital and non-digital literary hypertexts, adventure games and MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons). "[His] final aim [was] to produce a framework for a theory of cybertext or ergodic literature and to identify the key elements for this perspective" (Aarseth 1997, p. 17). To achieve this, he devised seven variables and assigned possible values to each of them, which created "a multidimensional space of 576 unique media [or genre] positions" (1997, p. 60). Having done this, he applied correspondence analysis and reduced "this multidimensional space to two synthetic axes, with a two-dimensional position for each of the texts and categories" (1997, p. 60). In his subsequent publications (2001; 2003; 2004) – this time related specifically to video games – Aarseth emphasises how important it is to create a new methodology for game analysis, so that those new phenomena are not analysed with established tools, such as film theory or narratology. In one of his papers he outlines an exemplary structural methodology comprising the following three dimensions: gameplay, game-structure and game-world. As Aarseth concludes, the holistic tripartite model seems to be applicable to almost any game, from football to chess (2003, p. 3).

Although ludologists constitute quite a strong group of scholars, who have been trying to free video game studies from the constraints of other disciplines, their methods are subject to criticism on the part of researchers more inclined towards the referential and social dimension of games, emphasising their broad cultural significance rather than raw structures. Referring to Aarseth's methodology introduced in *Cybertext* (1997), Ian Bogost argues that "he is primarily concerned with the functional, rather than the 'material or historical' aspects of [cybertext]" (Bogost 2006, p. 50). As much as Bogost understands the relevance of structural and functional methods used by ludologists, he ascribes more importance to the type of research which goes beyond mere structures and theoretical or empirical models built upon them. A similar point of view is shared by Dovey & Kennedy, who maintain that "[t]he focus on rule sets and play theories has been a very useful point of departure for an early understanding of the specificity of the computer game but remains incomplete as an analytical resource" (Dovey & Kennedy 2006, p. 85). As they further explain:

> Mainstream games today are rich in representational pleasures that overlay and enhance the gameplay mechanic. It is also evident that this level of representational 'realism' is highly desired and actively sought by designers and, importantly, players. It seems rather futile and unnecessarily limiting for an emergent discipline to seek to establish its methodological or analytical specificity through a refutation of this dominant contemporary trend or to argue for the exclusion of the analysis of these elements of the computer game. (2006, p. 88)

However accurate the above argument seems to be, it should be stressed that with reference to a highly structured phenomenon, such as games, a representational analysis on its own would not reflect the entire structural complexity of the medium. This leads us back to the questions posed in this section – is game mechanics all there is, and why has the structural approach to game analysis become so popular among ludologists? Games in general comprise an interesting cultural phenomenon from the ludological point of view as they are primarily based on rules and structures. A game can be totally abstract and it may not necessarily be possible to interpret its content in terms of a narrative or representational references. It will always, however, be underpinned by rules governing its existence as a game. Since "the [structural] method is analytical, not evaluative", it constitutes extremely accurate means of analysis for mathematical systems, such as video games or games in general (Eagleton 2001, p. 83).

Despite considering the structural method as highly applicable to video games, I do not abide by Eskelinen's radical opposition against the study of games from the narratological or cinematic perspective. To my mind, broad cultural approaches to video game studies may be of great significance to the discipline as a whole, although they cannot form the backbone for game analysis as they are too diversified. They relate to the outer representational layer, and cannot provide a systematic model for the study of games. It may not be possible to interpret the content of a game solely by means of a theoretical structural model, disregarding all the external cultural references in favour of rigid structures and forms. A structural or functional method, however, is an extremely useful tool in trying to analyse the principles and stages of player character in-game experience in a given video game genre. Neither of the two approaches to video games suffices and is able to encompass the

complexity of the medium, so a comprehensive and detailed game methodology must be a joint venture. Despite this, it should be stressed that – as in the case of de Saussurian general linguistics – only the structural method gives the possibility to create a strong analytical basis for the newly shaped discipline. Such a methodology allows for a systematic overview and classification of the processes behind the representational dimension.[24]

Therefore, a comprehensive model for player character analysis should not only involve a purely representational description applicable to a concrete game, but should operate at a higher level of abstraction to be used in a variety of games. Various elements comprising the PC persona, need to be taken into consideration in order to make the picture complete. Focusing on the most significant area in cRPGs – in this case, the player character's experience in cRPGs – allows for the creation of a tangible structural model applicable to a variety of video games of this particular genre. This genre-centred approach supports Espen Aarseth's statement relating to a method for the analysis of massively multiplayer games and puzzle games. Aarseth considers it to be highly unlikely to effectively examine games like *EverQuest* and *Tetris* by means of the same methodology (Aarseth 2003, p. 2). Also, since in every game the experience differs on the representational level, a good way to outline and systematise it, would be to find the basic mechanical correlations between its elements or, in other words, to reduce the game elements to a common denominator. To do this, we need structural rules, unresponsive to the art of interpretation.

The aim of the structural part of the methodology presented in this thesis is to break down the deep structure of cRPGs, and to single out the principles of gameplay experience as seen through the player character's eyes. It should be noted here that the structure in question refers to the representational layer involving the structural elements observed by the player. The game's interface, which incorporates both mechanics and representation, is a helpful tool in dissecting the constituent elements of gameplay. I do not focus on the very core of video games, which would be their algorithmical code. The deepest structure underlying the representational gameworld is not normally exposed to the average player. Translating the above correlation into "[…] the unique dual materiality of cybernetic sign production, [we

[24] The structures analysed are directly accessible to the player and do not constitute the underlying game code, algorithms and/or computer design. The game's mechanics and rules are depicted by means of abstract elements, the relations between them and structural patterns built upon them.

may observe] the resulting difference between strings of signs as they exist in the game (textonic game elements) and strings of signs as they are presented to the player (scriptonic game elements)" (Aarseth 1997, p. 40). Thus, the structural plane of the Player Character Grid (Pivot Player Character Model), elaborated upon in detail in Chapter 6, takes into consideration the scriptonic game elements.

3.3.3 Towards a Structuralist Model of the Player Character

As stated above, the methodological toolkit discussed in this chapter relates primarily to the structuralist approach. Its elements partly correspond to (but are not limited to) the tripartite model introduced by Aarseth (2003)[25] and to a certain extent tie in with Consalvo's & Dutton's qualitative template (2006). Aarseth's methodological criteria refer to what he calls "games in virtual environments" (2003, p. 3). As Gordon Calleja explains "[Aarseth's] conceptualization accounts for the fact that the artefacts we call digital games, video games or computer games are virtual environments whose design is informed, to varying degrees, by a set of game elements" (2007, p. 35). Accurate examples of such games would range from *Tetris* to *EverQuest, Fallout 3* or *World of Warcraft*, while purely abstract dice and card games like *Poker* or *Blackjack* would be excluded from the category (Aarseth 2003, p. 2).

Juxtaposing *Tetris* with equally abstract games of *Poker* and *Blackjack* may seem dubious in this context. The only clarification given by Aarseth refers to the fact that digitised versions of traditional board games should not be included in his definition of games as virtual environments. According to Aarseth virtual environment games – primarily focused on "controlling and exploring a spatial representation" (2003, p. 3) – may be characterised by the following three dimensions: "gameplay (the players' actions, strategies and motives), game-structure (the rules of the game, including the simulation rules) and game-world (fictional content, typology/level design, textures etc.)" (2003, p. 3). Taking into account the third dimension and the spatial determinant, I am more inclined to classify less abstract ludic forms (e.g. adventures, cRPG, MMORPGs, FPS games, strategy games among others) as games in VEs, and to consider games such as *Tetris* as borderline cases.

[25] Aarseth differentiates between three dimensions that characterise every game in a virtual environment: gameplay, game-structure, and game-world (2003, p. 2).

The structural part of the Grid (Pivot Player Character Model) places the character at the centre of analysis. Not only does it focus on gameplay, but also examines the relations between PCs and NPCs. At the same time, it describes the elements the PC interacts with in the gameworld. As Aarseth observes, "the combinations of [the three dimensions specified in the above paragraph] could define more narrowly defined research areas, such as […] role-playing (play & world)" (2003, p. 4), which seems to be the case in the study proposed here, encompassing all the elements characterised in Aarseth's tripartite model: play, structure and world.

The Pivot Model also incorporates two components investigated previously by Consalvo & Dutton in their methodological template, namely Object Inventory and Interface Study. The two researchers aim at "creating a preliminary template for critical/textual game analysis [which] is meant to serve as one way (likely among others) for game analysts to approach games in a way that is systematic" (Consalvo & Dutton 2006). The four discussed areas of analysis, the first two being of vital importance to my current study, comprise: Object Inventory, Interface Study, Interaction Map and Gameplay Log.

As far as the first category is concerned, Consalvo & Dutton propose to catalogue in-game objects, which can be placed in the inventory during the gameplay. Categorisations could relate, for instance, to the object's qualities, its purpose of use or its cost, depending on the analysed game. A detailed inventory may be helpful in conducting further research associated with the role of in-game objects, its economic structure or the rationale behind props accumulation. Close analyses of concrete games performed in Chapter 7, 8, and 9 will demonstrate how in-game objects may shape the PC's development within the gameworld. Furthermore, the relationship between props and agency will be explored, particularly its dependence on formal and material constraints, the latter of which are partially reflected in the objects' responses to the actions performed by the player. All the possibilities within the gameworld, set by formal constraints (player character's aims, the rules of the game) are made accessible on the material level through, for instance, object reactions and their availability (Pisarski & Sikora 2007, p. 192). As Pisarski & Sikora further explain, formal affordances and constraints may be associated with the game's storyline, while material affordances and constraints may be determined by the character's appearance and/or actions as well as by the game's mechanics (2007, p. 192). Translating the above rules into

a specific game, we may observe the following correlation. Since the PC in *The Witcher* is meant to fight, not surprisingly our avatar is able to collect and use found weapons. However, he cannot, in any way, interact with a flask placed in Adalbertus Aloysius Kalkstein's (master alchemist) chamber because the object does not correspond with the player character's attributes designed for this particular gameworld. By the same token, since our PC (Geralt of Rivia) is by definition a brave witcher trying to solve the mystery behind the Salamandra criminal organisation, he does not have the power to attack his fellow witchers. The formal affordances related to the storyline's design and the rules of the game do not allow Geralt to turn his back on the other witchers and, for instance, join the evil Professor and his mage in the Prologue. Since no such possibility was taken into consideration at the design stage, there are no material affordances available for the player (e.g. additional dialogue options that would allow Geralt to switch the sides).

The diagram in figure3.2 illustrates the discussed relations between formal and material affordances and constraints placed on the continuum. The greater the balance between formal and material affordances and constraints, the higher the credibility of the player character's actions. This correlation has been described by Pisarski & Sikora in relation to *Neverwinter Nights*. As they observe, in that particular game the number of formal affordances does not correspond to the proportional number of material affordances. Despite having eight different character types at our disposal, in a conversation with an NPC we are still faced with only a few repetitive dialog options. Oftentimes, the NPCs' reactions are exactly the same, be it in relation to an evil mage or a good paladin (Pisarski & Sikora 2007, p. 196).

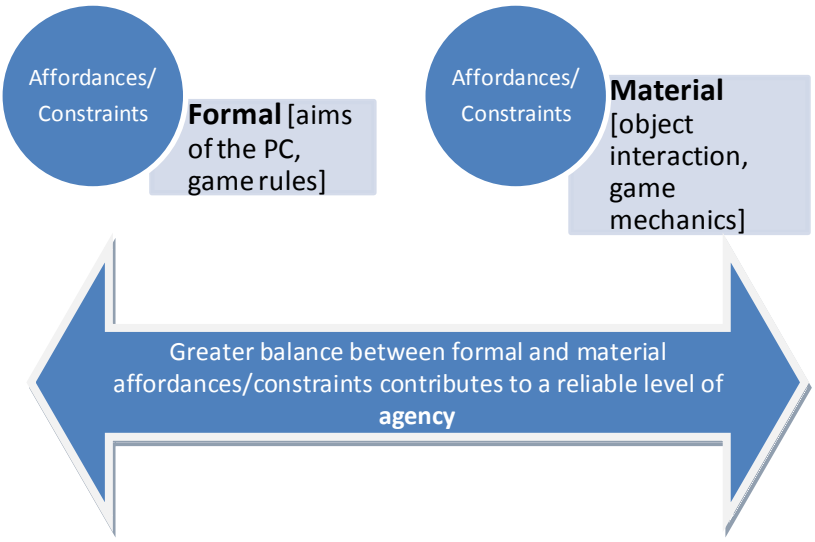

Figure 3.2 Constraints and Affordances

The study of Object Inventory or the character development associated with it leads us to the question of interface design. Consalvo & Dutton (2006, n.p.) define the interface as:

> any on-screen information that provides the player with information concerning the life, health, location or status of the character(s), as well as battle or action menus, nested menus that control options such as advancement grids or weapon selections, or additional screens that give the player more control over manipulating elements of gameplay.

Examining the interface may branch off into many directions. For instance, "it can help us see what information is privileged […] or what information is absent or difficult to find" (2006, n.p.). We are also given the possibility to track down the character's development path. Additionally, as Consalvo & Dutton observe, a close analysis of the interface may give us the possibility to determine the essential and non-essential aspects of gameplay in a particular game (2006, n.p.). In relation to Interface Study, the close readings performed in this study will focus on how the interface represents player characters' progression and the expansion of their attributes within selected gameworlds. Depending on the game's purpose and its mechanics, different interface elements are exposed by the designers. This correlation will also constitute the subject matter of the analysis proposed in this study.

3.4 Poststructural Approaches

Following Roland Barthes – a leading figure of poststructural thought – we may raise the question of the multiplicity of meanings and reading practices liberated from the constraints of forms and systems. For him, a literary text was "a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds" (Barthes 1970, p. 5). Defining text as a wider cultural phenomenon, we may observe how this perspective is applied to the analysis of the representational layer in video games. The content of a concrete VG may be examined from an endless array of angles and does not have to be limited to one accurate model reduced to a network of interrelations between signs. If the Barthesian reader has been elevated to the role of the co-creator of a literary text, the status of a gamer has been built upon this notion even more so. For instance, in cRPGs such as *Fallout 3* there is an extensive network of moral choices available to the player. Not only is the meaning of the game's content examined from different viewpoints, but also the very content may be altered, depending on the decisions made by the players. The meaning in video games is thus to a great extent unstable and may be freely created by the users, who epitomise an ideal poststructural reader.

Having discussed the applicability of structural concepts to video games and to the PPC model, I will conclude this chapter by outlining how poststructural approaches may inform cultural VG analysis. As Burzyńska & Markowski observe:

> As a result of poststructural criticism of the traditional (modern)[26] model in literary studies, the current literary theory is underpinned by cultural contexts, involving a diversified universe of cultural discourses, which support the practice of literary interpretation. (2007, p. 343)

In other words, the universal system-based theory has been replaced by culturally and historically varied analytical concepts used to scrutinise concrete texts rather than abstract systems. A similar attitude may be recognised in cultural studies approaches to video games (Dovey & Kennedy 2006, p. 86). The postructural agenda seems to correspond with Ian Bogost's methodological approach to the study of the expressive capacity of games, which lays bare the functionalist separatism, allegedly cultivated by

[26] As opposed to postmodern.

ludologists. As much as I acknowledge the significance of cultural video game analyses, I do not think the juxtaposition to its structural counterparts should be based on negative premises. I shall stress here that both approaches operate on different analytical levels. The structuralist approaches, as I have demonstrated in this chapter, are mostly suitable for the analysis of video games as forms and models. The cultural applications, on the other hand, focus predominantly on content interpretation, relations between games and players or the analysis of a rich gaming culture.

Examining the exemplary list of entries under cultural approaches in figure 3.1, we may observe how various types of video games research participate in and build upon rich cultural expressions. The examples provided in the diagram (fig. 3.1) give an overview of non-structural studies, which focus on different aspects of games, with their thematic content as one of the possible areas of study.

For instance, in three distinct parts of *Playing with Videogames* – which are devoted to video games as representational systems, configurative performances, and technology – James Newman examines the multitude of supporting cultural texts created by gamers. A vast array of game-related phenomena encompasses: fanart, fanfic, music (e.g. the C64 Sid collections), cosplay, walkthroughs, and mods, amongst many others. As the author himself notices, "[b]y recognizing the existence and importance of game-related music, toys, books, magazines and websites, we begin to appreciate how much more there is to videogaming than playing videogames" (Newman 2008, vii).

Similarly to Newman, who leaves the in-game world in order to focus on the external cultural phenomena surrounding it, T.L. Taylor in *Play Between Worlds* (2006) crosses the 'magic circle' of *Everquest* to examine a few crucial aspects of multiplayer culture, both in the online and offline game space. Drawing from her own experience as an MMORPG player, she investigates the very notion of play, which – as it turns out - may be perceived to be a tiresome and repetitive task. To support her point, she takes a closer look at 'power gamers' or the so called gold farmers of China, who "slay dragons in *World of Warcraft*, to gain items which they give to their in-game 'bosses', who sell the items for in-game currency, which is then sold for real currency to western players, who use the in-game currency to buy items for their characters, to make the game easier" (Taylor 2006, p. 133).

She also questions the stereotypes concerning female gamers by examining *Everquest* players and points to the political problem of game space ownership. Taylor's ethnographic project is not based on any structural model representing all MMORPGs and tested in the empirical setting, but constitutes a diversified case study of player behaviours within and outside the gameworld.

Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play (2006), a volume edited by Diane Carr and David Buckingham also constitutes a rich cultural overview of video games, which are analysed from the point of view of: narrative, genre typology, online fandom, motivation or gender, amongst others. Despite a great diversity of topics, there is no predominant methodology applicable to all the analysed areas. Each author deals with a chosen aspect of video games in their own right, forming a myriad of approaches. The only 'umbrella concept' linking all the different analyses seems to be the relationship between the text and the player, resulting in combining textual analysis with audience-based research. The first few chapters, thus, focus on the textual dimension of games, which includes the playable as well as the representational layer. The issues covered in this section of the book touch upon genre, narrative, gameplay, space and navigation (Buckingham 2006, p. 12). "The focus progressively shifts from the game to the player's relationship with the game – to the avatar and the roles available to the players […] and to the manifestations of that relationship in fan art […]" (2006, p. 13). Finally, as Buckingham states, social aspects of gaming and the relations between players are examined with relation to the following areas: online multiplayer gaming, console co-playing in a domestic setting and the degrees of internal (involving the act of play) and external (involving fan culture) agency (2006, p. 13).

Those three exemplary publications constitute just a fraction of cultural research, which may be viewed through the prism of poststructuralist approaches. Since the close analyses applied in this thesis examine the player character's experience by means of a structuralist method, the cultural end of the spectrum will not be elaborated upon any further. It is worthwhile, however, to place the research conducted here in a wider theoretical context and to justify the choice of methods supporting the study.

3.5 Concluding Remarks

To conclude this chapter, I would like to return to the apparent paradox associated with an affirmative stance towards structuralist approaches in video games research. Despite the fact that poststructuralism and deconstruction have questioned the structuralist agenda, they seem to be the main driving force for ludological analyses of games. This functional tradition in video game studies was successfully propagated by Espen Aarseth in his, by now classic, *Cybertext* (1997). As Bogost observes, the operating principles of this tradition "rely principally on configuration – the arrangement of *I Ching* hexagram or the arbitrary progression through a virtual space in *Zork*" (Bogost 2006, p. 51). For Frans Mäyrä and other ludologists the essence of video games lies in their ludic qualities (Bogost 2006, pp. 52-53) and those rule-based attributes are notably susceptible to structuralist or functional approaches, which concentrate predominantly on the analysis of the configuration of various in-game elements such as character features, objects and the game-inherent constraints and affordances facing the player.

Bogost perceives the structuralist ludic approach as an isolationist one, which "privileges the ludic over the literary […] [and] the material at the cost of the expressive" (2006, p. 53). However, such a structured approach seems to be yielding fruitful results in the case of highly structured cultural phenomena, defined primarily as systems governed by rules and resulting in quantifiable outcomes (Salen & Zimmerman 2003). All seven game definitions discussed by Jesper Juul (2003, 2005)[27] emphasise the importance of the rule governed formal system of games (cf. Huizinga 1950, Caillois 1961, Suits 1978, Avedon & Sutton-Smith 1971, Crawford 1982, Kelley 1988, Salen & Zimmerman 2003).

As Chapter 6 will demonstrate, the detailed Player Character Grid is fully operational across the cRPG genre. More importantly, it gives a thorough analysis of the principles according to which PCs operate within the gameworld. Hopefully, such a conscious overview will constitute a detailed map of the PC customisation mechanisms and their involvement with the ludic environment. Although the Player Character Grid takes into account the importance of the representational player character analysis, it will not elaborate upon it,

[27] See a range of academic game definitions discussed by Jesper Juul in "The Game, the Player, the World: Looking for a Heart of Gameness" (2003) and in *Half-Real* (2005).

but focus entirely on the structural evaluation of the elements surrounding the PC. However, when needed the structuralist model may serve as a backbone and a springboard for further research – including non-ludic studies, which involve the expressive quality of games. Its basic application, however, remains within the bounds of video games as formal systems of components, without which gameness would be deprived of its most crucial ludic aspects.

Coming back to the roots of structural thought flagged in section 3.1.1 and diverging from literary and linguistic theory, the type of descriptive analysis in video game studies presented here may be also indirectly compared to Vladimir Propp's formal research performed in *The Morphology of the Folktale* (1968), where he examines the plot components of Russian folk tales and in conclusion introduces 31 narrative functions and seven character types (1970, pp. 25-65; pp. 79-80). Propp studies "the tale according to the functions of its dramatis personae" (1970, p. 20) and as he further notices "[they] are the basic components of the tale […] [and] serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled" (1970, p. 21). The structural part of the Player Character Grid (Pivot Player Character Model) narrows down the possible formal research and establishes fundamental building blocks of the player character persona in computer role-playing games. Instead of focusing on the functions performed by different player characters in chosen cRPG games, the PPC model provides structural components, which illustrate the PC's experience in different cRPG gameworlds. The scheme proposed by Propp constitutes the basis for the creation of an infinite number of folktales. The scheme discussed in this thesis can become a foundation for the development and interpretation of an infinite number of player character experiences in the cRPG genre. The Pivot Player Character Model aims at establishing a structural layout for the player character's rich network of moves, relying on the repetitiveness in the game's mechanics. As far as close readings are concerned, Propp remarks that:

> At this point we have to examine individual texts of the tales to close range. The question of how the given scheme applies to the texts, and what the individual tales constitute in relation to this scheme, can be resolved only by an analysis of the texts. (1970, p. 65)

In order to verify the applicability of theory to the actual games, close analyses of chosen cRPGs in Chapters 7, 8, and 9 will demonstrate how the model's blocks are filled with game-specific content.

Having mapped out the rationale for the Pivot Player Character Model I will now move on to Chapter 4, in which the focus will be on the methods of character analysis in fiction, drama, and film. Those various approaches will lead to Chapter 5, in which numerous approaches to the study of the VG character will be singled out.

Chapter 4

Character Studies in Literary Fiction, Drama, and Film

Whereas the previous chapter outlined two general ontological approaches to video game studies and placed the current project in the existing general body of research, this one provides an overview of theories and selected analytical methods used specifically in the analysis of characters in fiction, drama and film. Similarly to Chapter 3, the reviewed theories are placed on a continuum between structuralism and cultural theory. This spectrum between two poles is manifested particularly strongly in literary theories of the twentieth century, which will be discussed in the first and second part of the chapter and presented in the context of character analysis in fiction and drama. The section following the referential and structural approaches will demonstrate Alex Woloch's distributional matrix – a theoretical framework of characterisation, combining structuralism and referentiality by means of the distribution of attention. The final part will be devoted to various methods used to analyse and interpret film characters, including computer generated ones. Such an outline allows me to place the proposed methodology of player character research in video games in a wider theoretical context and determine the origins of my methodological toolkit, which will be introduced in detail in Chapter 6.

4.1 Character Studies and Opposing Theories

With reference to fiction, character studies or theoretical perspectives on characterisation may be shortly defined as "the literary representation of imagined human beings" (Woloch 2004, p. 14).[28] They seem to reflect the pattern concealed in the two trajectories (structural and cultural) in video game studies, demonstrated in the previous chapter. This spectrum of approaches related to characters accompanies the broad ontological division within twentieth-century literary theories into structuralist and referential approaches. In the introduction to *The One vs. the Many* Alex Woloch discusses various instances of what he refers to as the antinomies of theory in the context of characterisation. He begins the outline of this theoretical conflict with the emphasis on "the tension between the authenticity of a character in-and-of-himself and the reduction of the character into the thematic or symbolic field" (2004, p. 15). He illustrates this opposition between a character as a human figure and a character as a function within a system by referring to Russian formalists (Vladimir Propp, Boris Tomachevski), who perceived the protagonist not as the central person in the story, but as a central device responsible for amalgamating the motifs in the text (2004, p. 15). Supporting this assertion, Woloch contrasts Hélène Cixous' "referential basis of character" with Algirdas Julien Greimas' "cognition of character [as] mediated through syntactic structures" (2004, p. 16). To present the complexity of various theoretical antinomies, Woloch invokes and discusses further juxtapositions, including: formalist vs. referential, structural vs. humanist, formal vs. mimetic, structure vs. individuality, language vs. reference (2004, p. 17), narrative form vs. implied person, discourse vs. story and form vs. content (2004, p. 38). Despite such a great diversification in terminology, the duality of theoretical approaches to character analysis and interpretation may be reduced to "the tension between the structural and referential axes of characterization" (Woloch 2004, p. 30).

Although the opposing views discussed by Woloch refer to literary examples, according to the author they may also operate in pictorial or cinematic art. Drawing on Woloch's assumption, I will demonstrate how structural and referential approaches influenced character studies in literary fiction, drama and film.

[28] I shall extend Woloch's succinct definition by adding anthropomorphic figures such as animals, fantasy creatures, robots etc.

However, before probing deeper into the intricacies of analytical approaches to fictional characters, I would like to clarify the terminological difference between characterisation and character studies. The prevailing interpretation of the former concept refers to the method of character representation used by the author. In the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* it is defined as:

> The representation of persons in narrative and dramatic works. This may include direct methods like the attribution of qualities in description or commentary, and indirect (or 'dramatic') methods inviting readers to infer qualities from characters' actions, speech, or appearance. (2001)

Character studies, on the other hand, constitutes a more comprehensive reference to a wide range of theoretical approaches and methods of analysing fictional characters. Thus, characterisation is the writer's (filmmaker's, etc.) tool, and the theories used in character studies are part of the critic's analytical toolkit.

Discussing the plethora of literary theories of character analysis in *The One vs. the Many*, Alex Woloch refers to them as theories of characterisation or theoretical perspectives on characterisation. According to Woloch, those theories reflect not only methods of character construction, but also, and most importantly, approaches to character analysis. In this thesis, I will use the term character studies in order to refer to various theories, approaches and methodologies applied to the analysis and interpretation of character personas in literary fiction, drama, film and video games respectively.

4.2 Literary Fiction

Literary theory has been under constant development, bringing to life new schools of thought, methods and styles of academic reflection, which resulted in the rise of – not one unified approach to literature and its various aspects – but multiple theories. Since characters constitute the pivotal element of literary fiction, means of their analysis have been also greatly influenced by those ever-changing perspectives.

Anna Burzyńska and Michał Paweł Markowski distinguish between two competing literary approaches prevalent in the twentieth century – the interpretational-hermeneutic and the

analytical-scientific (2007, p. 25). The first one, according to them, created diverse interpretational discourses, and as a result opened literature to new contexts, multiplying its meanings and references. The latter one, quite on the contrary, developed schemes and models, attempting to construct stable scientific foundations for literary studies (2007, p. 25). The analytical-scientific movement includes such academic concepts as: Russian formalism, structuralism or structural semiology (e.g. Umberto Eco's theory of interpretation). The interpretational-hermeneutic approach, on the other hand, incorporates: literary psychoanalysis, hermeneutics and, more recently, deconstruction, academic feminism, postcolonialism, gender and queer or cultural studies.

I will start my theoretical overview of character studies by placing selected literary theories of the twentieth century on the aforementioned continuum between structure and reference. I should stress that characterisation will be discussed only in the context of those literary theories which most clearly illustrate the conceptual breach between structure and reference. Section 4.2.3 will briefly introduce Alex Woloch's distributional matrix (2004), a framework placing character at the intersection of structure and reference and hence offering a working compromise between the two poles.

4.2.1 Structural Approaches

A series of debates (referred to as the anti-positivist breakthrough) on the methodology of research, which took place at the turn of the 19th century, resulted in establishing humanities as a separate scholarly field, requiring its own distinct methodology (Burzyńska & Markowski 2007, p. 26). Scholarly interest concentrated on the specific attributes of a literary piece, including the nature of its interpretation and the specificity of the creative process. These ontological questions – on the qualities of literature and its features distinguishing it from other linguistic forms – created the basis for the newly emerged discipline (Burzyńska & Markowski 2007, pp. 26, 27).

Ferdinand de Saussure's aim was to turn linguistics into a science. Literary critics likewise envisaged a literary theory with scientific foundations. This drive to place literature at the centre of a truly scientific humanistic discipline resulted in establishing its methodology

upon the foundations of structuralist and formalist linguistics, which gave rise to a universal, objective (context-independent) systemic literary theory.

One of such universal theories related to character studies was the methodology developed by Vladimir Propp in the late 1920's. In his *Morphology of the Folktale* Propp suggests a unique method of literary analysis, according to which every folk tale consists of fixed, universal elements. The term morphology is defined as "a description of the tale according to its component parts and the relationship of these components to each other and to the whole" (Propp 1968, p. 19). Those structural regularities demonstrate certain recurring actions. On the assumption that names and attributes of characters may change, but the actions they perform on a more abstract level stay identical, Propp reduces one hundred folk tales into "seven 'spheres of action' and thirty-one fixed elements or functions" (Eagleton 2008, p. 91). These functions are directly related to and originate from characters or dramatis personae, and refer to a pool of recurring actions performed by the protagonists in various folk tales. As Propp himself explains, "[f]unction is understood as an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action" (Propp 1968, p. 21). It also comprises a stable and fundamental element of the tale, which is not dependent on a concrete agent. Absentation, interdiction, violation, reconnaissance and villainy are among thirty-one various functions proposed by Propp. Even more important from the point of view of character studies is the differentiation between seven different spheres of action, which specify the types of agents present within the storyworld. These are as follows (Propp 1968, pp.79-80):

a) The villain
b) The donor/provider
c) The helper
d) The princess
e) The dispatcher
f) The hero
g) The false hero

The Propprian character model became the most prominent point of reference derived from literary theory and used by cRPG game designers and developers (Howard 2008; Novak

2005). Its recognition stems from the fact that it is based on functions corresponding to character types, and in the case of video games, characters – both playable and non-playable – are mostly defined by what they do and how they react to other characters' actions. Propp's work therefore may act as a general framework, which is then filled in by specific content, depending on the actual game. For instance, in the opening scene of *The Witcher* the protagonist (Geralt) fights against the enemies, who manage to steal the mutagens and sets off to find the robbed property and the intruders (function: beginning counteraction; departure). At the same time, the hero finds himself on a quest to recover his lost memory (function: lack). There is a set of different functions assigned to each of the seven types of agents. Surely, not all of them need to be present in a particular gameworld. Some constitute essential elements of almost every narrative game (e.g., the hero, the villain, the dispatcher or quest-giver), yet others do not have to be present at all (e.g., the princess, the false hero).

Although the above structural method was quite concise, a few decades after its publication the role of a literary character was narrowed down even further. In *Semantique Structurale* (1966),[29] A. J. Greimas introduced his concept of an *actant*, a structural unit denoting the character's role associated with a given function as opposed to an actor – a concrete persona in a concrete story (Burzyńska & Markowski 2007, p. 292). Applying the above relation between an actant and an actor to a particular video game, we may assume that the witcher in *The Witcher* (CD Projekt Red 2007) is an actant (or role/function) while its concrete realisation in that game – the player character Geralt of Rivia – an actor. Greimas introduced six different types of actants: Subject and Object, Sender and Receiver, and finally Helper and Opponent. As Terry Eagleton notices, "these can subsume Propp's various spheres of action and make for an even more elegant simplicity" (2008, p. 91).

While Greimas reduced Propp's 31 functions and seven spheres of action to a succinct typology of six actantial types, Tzvetan Todorov suggested an even more structurally concise method. He performed a "grammatical analysis of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, in which characters are seen as nouns, their attributes as adjectives and their actions as verbs" (Eagleton 2008, p. 91). Todorov's structural analysis may be perceived as a microstructure of

[29] An English translation was provided in 1983.

the idea of a literary grammar, which was developed in the 1960's by the French narratologists, influenced to a great extent by the early morphological analyses of folk tales performed by Propp in the 1920s (Burzyńska & Markowski 2007, pp. 200-201).

At this point, it is also worth pointing out that a structural analysis of characters was also employed by an American comparative mythologist – Joseph Campbell. In Campbell's work myths serve only as a cultural-historical background for the analysis of the role of the universal character. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (first published in 1949) Campbell introduces the idea of the monomyth, which denotes the archetypal hero's journey and refers to a basic experiential cycle common to a great variety of narratives from different cultures and distinct historical periods.[30] The crucial assumption underpinning Campbell's research was based on the conviction that "mythology [is] everywhere the same, beneath its varieties of costume" (1993, p. 4). He further based his idea of the monomyth on what he refers to as the nuclear unit - "the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation-initiation-return" (1993, p. 30). This mythological universal pattern is further supplemented with eight stages of the hero's transformation (1993, pp. 315-356):

a) The Primordial Hero and the Human
b) Childhood of the Human Hero
c) The Hero as Warrior
d) The Hero as Lover
e) The Hero as Emperor and as Tyrant
f) The Hero as World Redeemer
g) The Hero as Saint
h) The Departure of the Hero

The above monomythical structure and archetypal character roles were extracted from a range of mythological examples (e.g., stories of Prometheus, the Buddha, Moses or Jesus) and, according to the researcher, constitute the confirmation of the morphological homogeneity of the adventure (Campbell 1993, p. 38). Constructing his hypothesis upon the monomyth model, Campbell concludes:

[30] The term *monomyth* was borrowed by Campbell from James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake.*

> whether presented in the vast, almost oceanic images of the Orient, in the vigorous narratives of the Greeks, or in the majestic legends of the Bible, the adventure of the hero normally follows the pattern of the nuclear unit above described: a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return. (1993, p. 35)

Many modern products of culture, especially comic books, Hollywood films and video games, seem to be based on the Campbellian model. While some artefacts reflect the monomythical structure unwittingly, others deliberately draw from Campbell's theory. Such was the case of George Lucas' *Star Wars* movies, for the making of which Lucas openly admitted having used *The Hero with a Thousand Faces.* Disney Studios, on the other hand, used a memo based on Campbell's book as a guide for scriptwriters, and as a result the productions of such films as *The Lion King* or the *Beauty and the Beast* were influenced by it. Christopher Vogler, a Hollywood development executive and the author of the memo, developed it into a fully fledged book entitled *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (2007), which transferred Campbell's theory to the realm of film production. The hero's archetypes and the stages of the journey introduced in *The Writer's Journey* are directly drawn from the mythical formula of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces.* Vogler differentiated between twelve different stages (The Call to Adventure and The Refusal of the Call among many others) and eight character types, such as: heroes, shadows, mentors, herald, threshold guardians, shapeshifters, tricksters and allies (Vogler 1985; 2007).

As we have seen, early twentieth-century structural linguistics and Russian formalism exerted a great influence on analytical-scientific approaches to character studies. Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* demonstrated how those linguistic theories could contribute to a truly 'scientific' analysis of a literary content, based on categories and patterns rather than on the subjective experience of the reader. Those highly structural methods of analysis devoid of external socio-cultural context seemed especially attractive to modern practitioners, such as Christopher Vogler. The possibility to boil down the complexity of almost every story to a unified pattern and to implement a typology of characters verified by hundreds of myths, seemed too hard to resist for the Hollywood production studios.

"The differentiations of sex, age and occupation are not essential to our character, but mere costumes which we wear for a time on the stage of the world. The image of the man within is not to be confounded with the garments" (Campbell 1993, p. 385). This image underneath constructs what Campbell refers to as the archetypal hero, what Propp calls the functions of dramatis personae, and A. J. Greimas names an actant. The experience of an actual actor, reflecting an individual realisation of the actant, does not seem to be a significant issue for the structuralist theorists.

However, such a simplified and almost mathematical theory of literature, reducing a rich plethora of characters, motifs and stories into lexical categories or a list of recurring patterns – no matter how promising scientific methods may be – seems to ignore that literature and its meaning is fully explicated only with reference to the world in which it exists. And that world, as we shall see in the following section, is far more complex than the Cosmogonic Cycle.[31]

4.2.2 Referential Approaches

As Burzyńska & Markowski observe, after the post-structuralist breakthrough in literary theory, which undermined literature's universal and homogeneous nature, the essentialist approaches significantly declined (2007, p. 37). It seemed as if the early structuralist paradigm prevailing in literary theory in the first half of the twentieth century had been superseded by the interpretive paradigm. Literary critics seem to have given up constructing theoretical models in favour of providing prolific interpretations, taking into account a rich socio-cultural framework. Such a shift in theory – previously based on the assumptions from the opposite end of the structure-reference spectrum – was to a great degree triggered by Jacques Derrida's concept of deconstruction and further strengthened by the polemics around the notion of interpretation, which was reinforced in the 1990s by Umberto Eco.

However, in order to establish a strong theoretical approach based on the art of interpretation, it was necessary to first define its boundaries and possibilities. Umberto Eco's semiotic theory of interpretation – which ironically is also structurally informed – was a significant contribution to the field. It was based on the assumption that "any act of

[31] Cosmogonic Cycle refers to the archetypal journey of the character as described by Joseph Campbell.

interpretation is a dialectic between openness and form, initiative on the part of interpreter and contextual pressure" (Eco 1994, p. 21). In other words, although the text cannot be determined by a definite authorised meaning, and the reader plays an important role in constructing its significance, interpretation is a highly constrained process, which does not allow for complete interpretive freedom (Eco 1994, pp. 2, 6; Burzyńska & Markowski 2007, p. 259). The classical debate based on the distinction between the author's intention (*intentio auctoris*) and the text's independent existence (*intentio operis*) was supplemented with the third dimension related to intention of the reader (*intentio lectoris*) (Eco 1994, p. 50; Burzyńska & Markowski 2007, p. 33). The practice of interpretation, thus, should focus on the structure of the literary piece, a hypothetical intention of the author and, finally, on all the aspects brought into the work by the reader.

An American neopragmatist, Richard Rorty, on the other hand, insisted that the analysis of internal structures and mechanisms of text be abandoned in favour of an entirely unconstrained reading experience, which – according to the philosopher – is not a process of linking interpretation with the discovery of the text's 'true' meaning (Burzyńska & Markowski 2007, pp. 34-35). A reader should not "ask […] the author [or] the text about their intentions but simply beat the text into a shape which will serve his own purpose" (Rorty 1989, p. 60).

Rorty's statement may be perceived as the extension of Roland Barthes' act of annihilating the author's role in the process of interpretation. This symbolic death of the author gave way to the reader's interpretive activity. Barthes, thus, undermined the postulate that a literary text should be read in accordance with the so called author's intent (Burzyńska & Markowski 2007, p. 320). This methodological principle of intentional fallacy is reflected in the creative role of the reader and their shift from a mere reproducer to the co-author of a literary text (2007, p. 320). The importance of the reader's role in the process of interpretation was further acknowledged by the proponents of the reader-response criticism (Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser). In accordance with this theory a literary piece is no longer something objective with an external point of reference and "existing independently of any experience, but is the experience of the reader" (Culler 2011, p. 137). As Terry Eagleton emphasises, "[f]or Fish, reading is not a matter of discovering what the text means, but a process of experiencing what it does to you" (2008, p. 74).

Although the researchers did not agree on a unified method of interpretation, its influence on literary theory as a whole is undeniable. As a result, the 21st century is witness to a vehement transformation of a traditional literary theory into what Burzyńska & Markowski refer to as cultural poetics. The field of literary interpretation has been broadened by all possible cultural contexts and discourses, including: politics, ethics, ethnicity, race, gender or sex (2007, p. 40). Cultural poetics, exemplifying the interpretational-hermeneutic approach, originates from a broad post-structuralist and postmodernist thought, which encompasses not only the abovementioned interpretation theory, but most importantly rich cultural theory (i.e. criticism).

This most prominent approach in current literary theory, based on a wide historical-socio-cultural context, forms a part of an even more comprehensive discipline of cultural studies. The latter term, however, denotes a broader field of academic enquiry, which is used in the analysis and interpretation of a wide spectrum of socio-cultural phenomena, literature being only one of them. This "multi-disciplinary approach to culture draw[s] not merely on the orthodox approaches derived from the social sciences, but also on more radical approaches suggested by, for example, feminism, Marxism and semiotics" (Edgar & Sedgwick 2007, p. 81). In the modern day, its methodological scope has been supplemented with, for instance, the elements of cyberculture, terrorism, visual studies, socio-biology or television (2007, p. 81).

Cultural criticism differs from all the other theoretical literary schools of the twentieth century in that it does not have a clear methodology and an explicit subject matter, but instead it encompasses a wide range of theories, methodological tools and cultural discourses. It draws on the assumptions from semiotics, feminism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis or gender studies. The theories focus on such phenomena as: popular literature, music, sport, advertising, pornography, even shopping.

The interdisciplinary field of cultural studies has drawn immensely upon gender and queer studies, which introduced new tools for the analysis and interpretation of cultural phenomena, including literature and even more specifically – characterisation. Although both theories are similar in that they activate new meanings and discourses focusing on sensitivity to 'otherness', they differ in their field of reference. In the case of gender studies,

this sensitivity refers to the question of gender and its function in society and culture in general. Queer studies, on the other hand, concentrate predominantly on issues of sexuality.

Both approaches are interdisciplinary and may be used not only in literary or cultural studies, but also in anthropology, sociology, philosophy, or film and theatre studies (in sections 4.3 and 4.4 of the current chapter I will refer to the examples of gender critique in modern drama and film). Literary theory adopted gender criticism in order to provide new interpretations of literary texts – including those of the literary canon – from the point of view of gender differences. The analytical questions may focus on how gender roles are imposed or suppressed by socio-cultural conventions; how gender is constructed via language; or what semantic discourses are created with reference to feminine and masculine gender roles (Burzyńska & Markowski 2007, p. 452). Since gender is an attribute each literary character is equipped with, gender criticism may constitute a useful tool for the analysis of characters in a socio-cultural context.

The above theories contribute to a new understanding of cultural texts and – amongst such postmodern theories as deconstruction, pragmatism or New Historicism – constitute important analytical tools for interpreting character roles and their significance in a socio-cultural context. The focus on gender and the importance of body adds another dimension to the discussion and allows for innovative interpretations of contemporary as well as canonical texts. For instance, Donna Haraway's notion of the cyborg may deliver useful tools for the analysis of digital characters in Hollywood productions (i.e., synthespians or digital stars) or - to an even greater extent – video game characters. I will further refer to Haraway's theory in relation to film studies discussed in section 4.4.

4.2.3 Woloch's Distributional Matrix

In *The One vs. The Many* (2008) Alex Woloch attempts to reconcile the two approaches (structural and cultural) discussed above by providing a new framework for interpreting characterisation and the design of a number of nineteenth-century novels. Woloch highlights how insignificant the study of characterisation has been in the history of literary theory so far, quoting multiple literary scholars in order to support his observation (2008, p. 14). Another problematic issue relates to the fact that characters used to be scrutinised either

from a structural or an entirely referential perspective. Combining the two approaches, according to Woloch, allows discovering the human aspect of a character and at the same time depicting its relation to a wider narrative structure. As he explicates:

> character-space draws on and redefines our understanding of both 'impression' and 'system', continually establishing a relationship between the referential elaboration of a character, as implied individual, and the emplacement of a character within a coordinated narrative structure. (2008, p. 15)

Constructing his argument on antonymic approaches, Woloch notices the irony in the relation between them: "the formalist and referential positions seem to rely on each other – both are generated only through the opposed position, which they configure into an extreme in order to reverse" (2008, p. 17). According to Woloch, those two contrary theoretical approaches to characterisation – reflecting a wider schism in the literary theories of the twentieth-century – stem from the fact that "the literary character is itself divided, always emerging at the juncture between structure and reference" (2008, p. 17).

In this theory, structure and reference do not have to constitute mutually exclusive entities placed on far ends of the continuum as Woloch's socio-formal theory links both approaches in terms of distribution:

> The opposition between the character as an individual and the character as part of a structure dissolves in this framework, as distribution relies on reference and takes place through structure. (p. 17)

> For the character-system offers not simply many *interacting* individuals but many *intersecting* character-spaces, each of which encompasses an *embedded* interaction between the discretely implied person and the dynamically elaborated narrative form. (pp. 17-18)

Woloch begins with a few questions he deems essential to any narrative, such as: the significance of marginal characters, the reason and means of a division between a couple of central characters in certain narratives, or – more importantly – the way in which many different characters are organised within a symbolic and structural system (Woloch 2008,

pp. 13-14). Woloch's aim is to redefine literary characterisation, taking into consideration the distribution of attention between the representation of an individual central character and minor characters, which exist in the same fictive space. To achieve this, Woloch combines two narratological categories, constructed especially for the purpose of his new method: the *character-space* and the *character-system.* The former denotes "that particular and charged encounter between an individual human personality and a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole" while the latter refers to "the arrangement of multiple and differentiated character-spaces – differentiated configurations and manipulations of the human figure – into a unified narrative structure" (2008, p. 14).

Woloch introduces his distribution theory with reference to realist novels, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Great Expectations* or *Le Père Goriot.* As the author explains:

> The inclusive aesthetics of the nineteenth-century realist tradition – with its dual impulses to bring in a multitude of characters and to bring out the interiority of a singular protagonist – illuminates particularly well the tension between the structural and referential axes of characterization. (p. 30)

However, such research may be relevant not only to a wide range of literary examples, but also to pictorial or cinematic art.

4.3 Drama

Similarly to fiction, characters in drama (i.e. dramatis personae) have been analysed and interpreted in relation to a number of literary theories placed on the structure-reference spectrum. For the purpose of this chapter, I have selected a few perspectives which illustrate the analytical tendencies in this particular genre.

4.3.1 Ubersfeld's Character Grid

One of the most comprehensive structural approaches in twentieth century theatre was developed by Anne Ubersfeld in *Reading Theatre*, where – amongst other issues – she redefines the character and discusses the methods of their analysis. In accordance with contemporary semiological thought, a character is no longer an exact reflection of a human being, but rather the *locus* of functions, a geometrical point of intersection of many

structures or the place where multiple meanings are produced (1999, pp. 72-78). Ubersfeld perceives a character predominantly as a construct, which undermines a traditional understanding of a dramatis persona as "a Kantian transcendental subject, universal character [or] eternal Man" with a predetermined existence (1999, p. 73). Such an approach assumes that meaning is present even before the dramatic discourse comes into play. If this was the case, as Ubersfeld notices,

> [t]he task for literary analysis would then be a discovery of meaning linked to the massive essence of the character, a hermeneutics of consciousness – rather than a construction of meaning. The work of semanticists today is directed against these amazingly tenacious concepts (1999, p. 73).

It should also be remembered that a character is not equivalent with a psychoanalytic discourse that may be constructed with reference to it (1999, p. 75). For Ubersfeld it is more important to depict the character's position and function within a dramatic system, rather than – following cultural studies – establish its significance in a wider socio-cultural context. In order to define and analyse a dramatic character, s/he has to be scrutinised from three different perspectives, including: character figures, character individualisation and character as the subject of a discourse. In order for the analysis to be coherent and successful, all the above aspects need to be taken into consideration. Ubersfeld maps them onto a diagram she refers to as the Character Grid (see fig. 6.1 in Chapter 6).

Introducing the first perspective (character figures), Ubersfeld emphasises the double life of the character, both in text and on stage. A network of textual signs turns into a concrete character. The dramatic character may be thus defined – almost in a mathematical sense – as a point at which two semiotic sets (text and stage) intersect (1999, p. 80). Such an approach produces further differentiation between an actantial and an actorial system. According to the first one, the character puts on a certain grammatical function and is considered to be a part of the syntax. Ubersfeld uses the example of Hamlet, who may be perceived as a subject in the action of avenging the father's death. Even more importantly, an actant may be associated with a function s/he performs in the text, while an actor with a concrete realisation of that function on stage (further examples related to this differentiation are provided in Chapter 5).

There are two kinds of semiotic character determinations, which bring the actantial textual character closer to its stage incarnation: distinctive features and individualising signs, which may include individual names or physical determinations. Those attributes contribute to making an individual out of a character, and turning them from an abstract actant into a concrete actor (1999, pp. 83-84). However, as Ubersfeld observes, in some forms of theatre a character may be reduced to an encoded role or abstract representation of socio-cultural norms (the superhero, the detective, the king) (Ubersfeld 1999, p. 84). Such an approach points towards the idea of social constructs and the death of the subject, and ultimately Elinor Fuchs' (1996) notion of the death of the character, which will be elaborated upon in the section 4.3.2 devoted to a postdramatic character.

The Character Grid and its multi-layered components – some of which have been briefly introduced above – contribute to various methods of character analysis in drama and theatre. According to Ubersfeld those procedures cannot be used in isolation and, more importantly, literary critics should remember that "each procedure presupposes analysis of the relation of the character under study with all other textual elements, particularly with the other characters" (1999, p. 88).

4.3.2 Postdramatic Character

Ubersfeld's methodology is applicable predominantly to the drama of a realist character. Therefore it becomes almost irrelevant with reference to postmodern or postdramatic theatre, in which characters are not constructed in relation to other characters and space, but rather deconstructed and based on the notion of a "continuously changing personae with no inherent self" (Fuchs 1996, p. 6). A dramatis persona, just like a postmodern human being, does not have a stable identity, but "disintegrates into autonomous elements", and as a result becomes an *(anti)character in progress* (Baluch et al. 2002, p. 275). It is devoid of psychological motivations as it is not dependant on the story or other cause and effect systems. Its function becomes attached to and is expressed through various discourses, which do not belong to the individual character, but are rather used, reused and abandoned. According to Beata Guczalska, discourse constitutes the most important common value, which is not assigned to any particular character. It is the tensions established at the intersection of various discourses that are important, not their source. Postdramatic texts

are devoid of individual utterances, which makes it impossible to construct an individual character (Guczalska 2005, p. 13). Oftentimes, the authors themselves (e.g. Elfride Jelinek, Heiner Müller, Sarah Kane) use 'ready-made' characters, created by literature and culture, reinterpreting them or questioning and deconstructing their socially accepted meanings (Wasilewska 2008, p. 42).

Elfriede Jelinek, an Austrian dramatist and one of the most prolific representatives of the postdramatic movement, emphasises the importance of individual discourse in the creation of her dramatis personae:

> My characters live only insofar as they speak. […] I have written plays in which the characters are constituted by their speech, and as long as they are speaking, they exist, but whenever they cease to speak, they also cease to exist. (Bethman 2000, pp. 65-66)

New forms of expression in drama and theatre (similarly to literature and other fields of study) require new methodological tools. In *Postdramatic Theatre* Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006) tries to find such a language and the new theatre aesthetics in terms of their aesthetics of space, time, and the body, as well as their use of text. For instance, he juxtaposes the dramatic and postdramatic notion of space, discussing its various forms. Lehman begins his reasoning by asserting that "in classical theatre, the distance covered on stage by an actor signifies as a metaphor or symbol a fictive distance" (Lehmann 2006, p. 151). On the other hand, in the metonymical space that very same distance refers to "the space of the theatre situation, thus referring as *pars pro toto* to the real space of the playing field (2006, p. 151). He also discusses the process of spatialising the physical actions by means of audio equipment, which allows the spectators not only to observe, but experience the time-space relationship as well. To support this assertion, Lehmann gives an example of the dancers' heartbeat distributed by means of a sound amplifier (2006, p. 152). Another postdramatic form of space has been moved to a natural setting, such as a factory floor or an electric power station, which acquire a 'new meaning' and a 'new aesthetic gaze' through a theatrical performance (2006, p. 152). This spatial procedure, according to Lehmann, allows the surroundings to gain an active role of a co-player (2006, p. 152).

Elinor Fuchs also begins her introduction to *The Death of the Character* by defining herself as "a theater critic in search of language in which to describe new forms" (1996, p. 1). As she notices, at the time when new dramatic forms appeared in American theatres, critics lacked the analytical tools that would help them to scrutinise and understand the new perspectives. Fuchs herself could not find an adequate vocabulary and grammar and it seemed to her that "[t]he older categories of fantastic, theatricalist, and the 'absurd' […] had little explanatory power" (1996, p.1).

In order to acquire necessary analytical tools, she turned to the following French critical, psychoanalytic, and feminist theories:

> Lacan's insight into the symbolic construction of subjectivity, Foucault's announcement of the 'end of man,' Derrida's attack on the 'metaphysics of Presence,' Roland Barthes's 'death of the Author,' Baudrillard's shattering 'precession of the simulacra,' Deleuze and Guatarri's 'schizoanalysis,' Lyotard's collapse of the 'grands recits' of modernism, and the exposures by Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva of masculinist philosophical and psychoanalytic constructions. (1996, p. 2)

The above discourses contributed to the construction of the analytical framework, according to which the new postmodern cultural phenomena could be interpreted. They also enabled Fuchs to deconstruct a dramatic character and elucidate the breakdown of dramatic conventions in contemporary American theatre. The notion of a postdramatic character was based on a dispersed idea of the self devoid of any anchorage it used to have. Not only is the self fragmented and lacking a stable identity, but also – if at all – constructed by socio-cultural myths. Elinore Jelinek believes the subject died with the nineteenth century, and currently it is created by such phenomena as advertising or television (Bethman 2000, p. 66). The progressive disintegration of the post-character – according to another theatre critic – is founded upon the automatisation of discourse and behaviour, corresponding with social clichés (Jasińska 2010). The flattening of the subject into a social construction or a language marker eventually led to what Fuchs refers to as the death of the character. In her critical method she combines the poststructuralist notion of removing the subject with the Buddhist idea of *anatta* ('not-self'). As Fuchs explicates:

> The ‘death of character’ idea started out as a spark of insight ignited in alternative theaters and fanned by the various poststructuralist ‘deaths’ announced in the late 1970s and 1980s (of Man, the Author, the Subject, the Work, the Book), but another important tributary came from my own readings in Buddhism. (1996, p. 9)

It should be emphasised here that the analysis and interpretation of a dramatic character may be carried out on two levels – a textual (with relation to the dramatic text) and a staged one. Such a binary division leads to the development of different methodologies used for the analysis of text-based dramatic characters and their on-stage counterparts. Fuchs refers to the latter category, analysing postdramatic theatrical performances rather than texts.

However, postmodern theories – especially gender studies and feminism – are also widely used in the interpretation of drama texts. Monika Wasilewska carries out analyses and interpretations of selected Polish dramas, applying feminist and gender theories as well as postmodern sociology, which focuses on the issues of e.g. fluid identity (2008). The above approaches formulate a theoretical-methodological perspective on reading dramas. The author discusses six different texts, classified into three groups. In the first two, femininity and masculinity are depicted in accordance with an extensively traditional paradigm. The middle pair consists of two thematically analogous dramas, which portray a woman and a man facing a radical change in life. The last two texts hold the promise to overcome the essentialist perspective in favour of a deeper understanding based on gender (2008, p. 4). As the author explains, sex and drama coexist in an inseparable relation. Classical drama can disregard the issues of age, race, nationality or other biological and cultural signifiers of the character, but it cannot depict a character without referring to its sex – the dramatic character will always be either a woman or a man. Even when it is not a direct focus, sex is always present in the text. Thus, it might be assumed – as Wasilewska notices – that a playwright subconsciously adopts an image of femininity and/or masculinity, prevalent in a given historical period, and presents it in accordance with current social expectations (2008, p. 3). Elinor Fuchs makes a similar albeit more general observation:

> each epoch of character representation – that is, each substantial change in the way character is represented on the stage and major shift in the relationship of

> character to other elements of dramatic construction or theatrical presentation – constitutes at the same time the manifestation of a change in the larger culture concerning the perception of self and the relations of self and world. 'Character' is a word that stands in for the entire human chain of representation and reception that theater links together. (1996, p. 8)

Therefore, gender as an interdisciplinary field investigating cultural aspects of human sexuality constitutes a functional academic perspective, which not only reveals the author's individual attitude towards sex and gender, but also a wider social perspective consolidated by a drama text (Wasilewska 2008, p. 3). Gender theory may serve as a tool for the deconstruction of seemingly impartial and objective historical, artistic, religious or socio-cultural messages, exposing their ideological backbone, which strengthens the status of one sex at the expense of discrimination and humiliation of the opposite one.

4.4 Film

In case of cinema (and video games alike), the analysis of characters does not take place on the level of the actual written document, which is the foundation of the visual production. Characters are viewed on screen and information about them is predominantly gathered via audio-visual input, based on dialogues held among other characters or internal monologues of the main character.[32] Although films involve scripts, their function is different to that of a written piece in drama or fiction. They are a part of the creative process, but do not constitute the artistic end products in themselves as it is in the latter case. In other words, film scripts are not meant to be available for the readers in the same way as dramatic texts are. A play may exist even when it is not staged. A motion picture, on the other hand, may not be called a film unless it is depicted on the screen and watched by the audience.

Before approaching a few selected methodologies of character research in film, I shall stress the fact that "there is no single monolithic 'film theory'", but rather a range of theoretical perspectives (Rushton & Bettinson 2010, p. 4). To a great extent those diverse approaches

[32] Interactive video clips and films are an exception to this rule. For instance, in *Smolik Attitute Webeo* by Dawid Marcinkowski, the viewer gathers the information about the protagonist Rosa von Braun by clicking on the links provided on the screen. In *Some Day on the Misty Island* – another clip by the same author – detailed descriptions of the characters involved are also included in the form of textual descriptions that may be accessed by the viewer/user. Marcinkowski's biggest project, an interactive web-based film *Sufferrosa,* includes extra textual information and a map, which further compliment the visual information about characters.

have been adopted from literary theory and, in some cases, tailored to the specificity of the audio-visual medium. Film studies was established as an academic discipline in the 1960s. It is not surprising that its initial methods of enquiry were founded upon theories dominant in the humanities at that time, such as psychoanalysis, structuralism and Russian Formalism, which tempted the theoreticians with a systematic 'poetics of cinema' (Rushton & Bettinson 2010, p. 5). Other theories that influenced film studies include: semiotics, apparatus theory,[33] feminism, postcolonialism, gender and queer studies, cognitivism or phenomenology. This heterogeneity of contemporary film theory, similarly to literary theory and approaches used in drama, may also be mapped onto the reference-structure continuum discussed in the previous sections. In the face of such a multitude of perspectives, I will confine myself to a few selected ones, which are particularly useful for character analysis.

4.4.1 Structural Analysis in Film

Since the assumptions of structuralism have been outlined in the previous sections, I will not reiterate them, and instead briefly introduce a particular example of the usage of this theory with relation to film. In *What is Film Theory?* Rushton & Bettinson refer to Raymond Bellour's close textual analysis of a scene from Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963), which "represents a methodical utilization of structuralist methodologies applied to a cinematic example" (2010, pp. 16-22). Bellour scrutinises every shot of a single scene in order to discover its deep structure (hidden from conscious view) and analyse the significance of the main character of that particular scene. A shot-by-shot analysis enables the researcher to assign meaning to each shot based on its difference from the other ones, which bears close affinity with structural theory (2010, p. 16). Such a highly detailed analysis of visual structures present in the scene supports Bellour's observation on the relationship between the protagonists (Melanie and Mitch), which is founded upon the Oedipus complex. As Rushton & Bettinson notice, the scene is crucial for both characters as it forms the beginning

[33] According to apparatus theory, cinema constitutes an ideological state apparatus. Objective reality is represented by means of the cinematographic apparatus, such as the camera, the projector and the screen. Once the reality is recorded, edited and projected, it becomes transformed and is no longer objective. According to Jean-Louis Baudry, " the cinematographic apparatus sets in place an imaginary relation to the real conditions of existence. On this count, the cinematographic apparatus is fundamentally ideological" (Rushton & Bettinson 2010, p. 36).

of their relationship that will last for the remainder of the film (2010, p. 16). In Bellour's research, thus, structural thought constitutes a general framework and a tool for further psychoanalytic interpretation of the characters' actions.

4.4.2 Cognitive Theory

The 1990s bore witness to film analyses based on perceptual and cognitive psychology. David Bordwell, Noel Carroll, and Edward Branigan – the originators of the cognitive approach to cinema – investigated the spectator's comprehension of cinematic text not only by means of methods derived from cognitive science, but also from cognitive philosophy and narratology (Rushton & Bettinson 2010, p. 156). Some theoretical issues covered by cognitivism in film include: the study of facial expressions of emotion, emotional responses to different media, and the role of reconstructive memory among others (2010, p. 156). It is important to stress that cognitivism is a set of different approaches rather than a unified theory of cinema. This heterogeneous perspective has been also used, for instance, to research fictional characters from the point of view of the process of identification experienced by the spectator (2010, p. 165). Some researchers (e.g., Gregory Currie and Torben Grodal) argued that spectators imagine the mental states of characters identifying with their point of view in a given situation (Rushton & Bettinson 2010, p. 156). Such a perception, according to Grodal, resembles a game-like activity and constitutes an entirely voluntary act "framed mentally as an imaginative activity 'from which we can bale out'" (Grodal 1997, p. 102).

Murray Smith, whose cognitive method has been discussed by Rushton & Bettinson, suggests that the term 'identification' be replaced with 'engagement', as the latter one enables a more accurate response to a range of different character types (2010, p. 166). Coming up with a cognitive model of character engagement, he analyses psychological and narratological processes influencing the spectator's attitude towards film characters. In his study Smith focuses on the protagonist from *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (2007), directed by Tim Burton. He believes that the viewers evaluate fictive agents based on the primacy effect, which refers to a set of first impressions related to the film character when they appear on screen for the first time. According to Smith, both the primacy effect and the character's judgment are shaped by the star system. "Many films

yoke the primacy effect to the specific attributes embodied by the star player" (Rushton & Bettinson 2010, p. 169). Helena Bonham Carter and Johnny Depp – the lead actors in *Sweeney Todd* – played sympathetic freaks in earlier films, which influences the way given characters are interpreted by the audience.

Cognitive approaches have been also used in a recent analysis of character psychology as the key aspect of characterisation in film. In his research Michael Z. Newman (2006) turns to social cognition in order to establish a method for the analysis of a psychological profile of characters. He applies the cognitive perspective to the protagonist in *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995) by Todd Solondz. Although the character's mental states and personality traits – the components of the psychological profile – may be constructed by means of dialogue or subjective narration, film is predominantly an audiovisual medium. Therefore, "a quick close-up of a face can be as expressive of a character's inner life as many more elaborate narrative techniques" (Newman 2006, p. 53). Since characters are products of social cognition, Newman proposes to perceive them as persons rather than structural signs or signifiers and signifieds. His approach stands in opposition to not only structuralist and formalist theories, but also to semiotics, evaluating characters as a collection of traits (p. 54). In his analysis of *Welcome to the Dollhouse,* Newman discusses three processes of social cognition crucial to audiovisual characterisation (2006, pp. 54-59):

a) Folk psychology – making sense of character's beliefs, desires;
b) Attribution – assuming character's personality traits;
c) Emotions expressions – understanding character's feelings based on their facial and vocal expressions.

Analysing the above components by means of social cognition theory, Newman demonstrates a possible methodology for the study of character's personality, and shows how the character's persona functions as a central element of storytelling (2006, p. 65).

4.4.3 Posthuman Characters

In *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies* Warren Buckland (2009) makes an interesting observation related to the most recent practice of digitising films. Defining this phenomenon as posthumanist cinema, he brings various digital levels into discussion.

According to one of them it may be either "a cinema that does not feature human characters (or in which humans are at the very least relegated to equal status alongside other life forms), or in which 'humans' have become capable of transcending the laws of physics" (Buckland 2009, p. 68). However, as the author notices, it is not only the content that may be defined as posthumanist, but also the process of production itself, especially on the level of form. It becomes more common for producers to make use of digital technology in order to create highly realistic special effects. Most importantly, however, those 'hi-tech' solutions contribute to the creation of digital morphs, that is "the characters that […] are a hybrid of 'real' flesh and blood actors and digital imagery", which may be perceived in terms of posthuman cyborgs (Buckland 2009, p. 69). Jonathan Burston goes even one step further. Reconsidering the position of the actor in media theory, not only does he mention the importance of human-software hybrids, but focuses on the actors entirely generated by computers (CG actors). He also introduces the term 'synthespian' to define digital characters who "possess varying degrees of functionality, autonomy, and human-machine hybridity" (Burston 2005, pp. 250-251). Gollum from Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Stuart Little or *Harry Potter's* Dobby constitute only a few examples of hybrids used in contemporary Hollywood movies. As Burston notices, although the viewer admires a fully digitised end product, such characters to a great extent rely upon talents of flesh and blood actors (2005, pp. 250-251). Their movements and facial expressions are registered by motion-capture technologies and transferred onto the digital character. Andy Serkis, who starred as Gollum in *LOTR* described the experience as "liberating because you can play any number of different characters that are not dependent on what your own physicality is. You can embody any character" (qtd. in Burston 2005, p. 255). In this sense, taking on a role of a human-software hybrid may be compared to the activity experienced by video gamers and virtual world residents, who act within the gameworld through their playable characters and/or avatars.

Although Burston himself neither proposes possible methodologies nor analyses or interprets concrete synthespians, he brings their existence into attention and emphasises their importance within film studies. He recognises the originality and the potential of those "new epistemologies of virtual entertainment [which] are blurring boundaries between subject and object, between human agent and machine agent" (2005, p. 259). However, as

he notices, theoretical and critical evaluations of the CG characters have not established their status in the new cinematic grammar yet (2005, p. 250).

Burston's assumption has been taken to another level by Barbara Flueckiger, who performs an analysis of the problems of computer charaters' design and reception (2011). In the two case studies focusing on James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) and David Fincher's *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008) she attempts to discover why it is so difficult to construct convincing digital characters (Flueckiger 2011). In order to answer the above question, she proposes two models of evaluation – the theory of the 'uncanny valley' and the model of distance (2011, pp. 5.6). The first assumption goes back to the 1970's, when it was first introduced by Masahiro Mori, who established the rules for the emotional evaluation of artificial characters – the more human-like the character seems, the more positive the emotions it evokes in the audience (Flueckiger 2011, p. 6). However, if the character becomes almost fully human, the effect of distancing (the 'uncanny valley') takes place. In order to overcome this effect, the character needs to be perceived as fully human. The second theory proposed by Flueckiger "takes as a point of departure the assumption that the aspects of appearance and behaviours should be at a similar distance from a photorealistic image defined as a standard" (2011, p. 6). Therefore, if the character's appearance is stylised, their movements should be animated correspondingly. In her extensive study Flueckiger scrutinises the character creation process in the two case studies (*Avatar* and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*) in accordance with the above evaluative models.

The significance of computer generated characters has been also examined by Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener (2009). The discussion on digital cinema commences with the shift of agency from the human to non-human (from the acting body to generated pixels) in the opening scene of *Toy Story* (Pixar 1996) – the first entirely digital film in the history of cinematography (Elsaesser & Hagener 2009, p. 170). As both researchers further notice, Pixar's animated films with the setting permeated with technology, depict predominantly objects "that more often behave like subjects that actively shape their environments" (2009, p. 181). In *Toy Story* the objects take on the subject's agency and are at the centre of attention, while the humans are depicted as objects. In *Wall-E* the prevalence of the digital objects is augmented to the point where humanoids become a rarity. The film's protagonists

are robots and “even language is reduced to its absolute minimum in this machine world” (2009, p. 181).

As I have demonstrated in this section, film studies have developed a great variety of methods and analytical approaches, many of which may be used in character analysis. Unlike in drama or literary fiction, no unified methodology may be found. Most of the perspectives focusing on analysing the significance of fictive agents in film have been adopted from literary and cultural theory. However, one of the most recent theoretical schools, dating back to the last decade of the twentieth century, turned to cognitive science as well. Numerous big contemporary Hollywood productions make use of complex digital technologies, and this process has been reflected in theoretical approaches, which start to acknowledge the existence of new forms, such as computer-generated characters and human-software hybrids.

4.5 Concluding Remarks

This chapter was an overview of selected theories used to analyse characters in fiction, drama, and film. The summarised methodologies were placed on a continuum between structuralism and cultural theory. Such a theoretical outline provides the necessary foundation for the research model of the video game character. Since the Player Character Grid, introduced in detail in Chapter 6, operates on both a structural and a referential level, studying this spectrum in other fields may yield fruitful results. Woloch’s combination of the structural and referential axes of characterisation provides a general underpinning of the model, which is also an attempt to connect both approaches. The structural dimension, which constitutes the foundation for the PC methodology, draws upon the notions of an archetypal hero (Campbell 1993), or, to use Greimas’ terminology, an actact (1966, 1983). More importantly, the model is based on ‘The Character Grid’, a structuralist character methodology developed by Anne Ubersfeld and applied in theatre studies. This basic layer of the player character methodology aims to scrutinise the PC in cRPGs as a construct, a geometrical point of intersection of numerous rules, interface solutions, and entities/props present within video game’s mechanics. In Campbellian terms, the structural part of the Player Character Grid (PPC model) tries to dissect common elements, forming the PC and its experience within the gameworld in a computer role-playing game genre, and to find the

common denominator, which would constitute a methodological basis for further investigations. The second layer of the Grid allows for a more game-specific analysis based on cultural criticism, comprising a wide range of theories. In an ideal scenario, player characters in cRPGs will exhibit similar basic building components (as actants and actors), and differ in their representational realisation as entities underpinned by socio-cultural conditionings.

As has been demonstrated in Chapter 3, video games have been scrutinised from numerous academic perspectives. Oftentimes, in order to come up with an autonomous and innovative methodology, one must seek inspiration in the previous studies and other disciplines. Chapter 4 may be therefore perceived as an attempt to both, systematise the character studies, and illustrate the theoretical roots of the methodology proposed in this thesis. The detailed overview of various research perspectives used in literature, film, and drama leads to Chapter 5, which depicts how characters have been analysed in video game studies so far.

Chapter 5

Studying Characters in Video Games

This chapter offers an overview of various approaches which have been used to examine video game characters. This diverse body of research accumulated over the past thirty years seems to go into several methodological directions, focusing on: characters as functions, characters as drivers of agency, representational gendered icons, and as players' re-embodied realisations. Since player characters combine virtual avatars with human agents, the role of the player in the construction of the PCs is key. Therefore, I devote section 5.2 to a discussion of research concerned with players. This typology of academic perspectives on video game characters will allow me to put all those divergent studies into a coherent overview, which eventually will contextualise my research and demonstrate how it diverges from or draws from previous studies. Although video game characters have been studied from many different perspectives, so far an attempt to develop a more comprehensive methodology has not been made. This study aims to fill that void by proposing a toolkit for player character research, the details of which will be presented in Chapter 6.

5.1 How to Study Video Game Characters?

Some researchers claim that games should be predominantly studied in relation to what makes them a game, that is: rules, game mechanics or "the events that constitute the gaming situation" (Eskelinen 2001). Translating this assumption into the study of video game characters, such a research perspective would "disregard representational traits in favour of the constitution of characters as sets of capabilities, potentials and techniques offered to the player" (Newman 2002). However, contemporary games – especially in the RPG, adventure and FPS genre – are so rich in representational elements that it would be a mistake to ignore their significance. A predominantly ludological analysis seems to be valid in the case of games, such as *Tetris*, *PacMan* or more recently *Angry Birds*, *Rugdoll* and *Shark Trilogy* among others (iPad). When more complex mainstream productions come into play (e.g., *Fallout 3*, *Assassin's Creed 2* or *Grand Theft Auto* series), one should not ignore their representational dimension. As Dovey & Kennedy observe, "contemporary console games and popular online games participate in what we might call an intermedial representational strategy", deriving their methods, subject matters and characters from cinema, television, literature or sport (Dovey & Kennedy 2006, p. 88). Since characters in video games operate in accordance with different principles than characters in film or literature, the specificity of the medium should not be disregarded. This, however, does not mean that games as such exist in a technological vacuum – "they have intertextual representational lives that affect the experience of the gameplay. These lives may be transmitted through the packaging of the game, cut scenes, [or] representational characteristics of the avatars" (Newman 2002). Games and their characters exhibit rich cross-cultural references as well and in essence are perceived and interpreted as cultural icons (Newman 2004, pp. 127-129). Lara Croft, for instance, participated in the Lucozade advertising campaign, which appeared in the UK in 2000 (Atkins 2003, p. 30).

> She was [also] the star in promotion-clips for cars such as the French Seat, was seen on huge posters promoting the German financial magazine *Die Welt,* made it on the cover of the British magazine *The Face,* acted in an animated commercial for the American sports company Nike, was the heroine in an ad

> campaign for the American cable-TV SciFi Channel, acted in a music video of the German pop band Die Ärzte. (Richard & Zaremba 2005, p. 283)

Other avatars are "based on characters that have a completely realized form outside the game world, such as sports players or popular culture icons such as James Bond, [Batman] or characters in *The Lord of the Rings*" (Newman 2002).

This diverse body of literature on video game characters seems to be unveiling an emerging pattern, according to which researchers focus on the following selected key aspects:

a) Characters as functions and capabilities – a mechanical approach according to which characters are analysed from the point of view of functions they perform within the gameworld,
b) Characters as drivers of agency – a method focusing on the player's actions, which have the power to alter the gameworld,
c) Characters controlled by the player and characters controlled by AI – a conceptual framework concentrating on characters which are not under direct player control,
d) Characters as representational gendered icons – an approach placing gender stereotypes at the heart of academic attention,
e) Characters as player's embodiment – an attitude emphasising the importance of the mind-body relationship in video games.

The next few sections will elaborate on the listed approaches to VG character study and provide an overview of applicable research.

5.1.1 Characters as Functions and Capabilities

A lot of research sprang from the assumption that video game player characters only gain their significance once embodied by players. Without them, PCs are perceived as mere vehicles (Carr 2002, p. 173; Newman 2002; Perlin 2004, p. 14), "semiotic vessel[s] intended to be worn glove-like by the players" (Rehak 2003, p. 173), "motivators of action" (Lankoski 2003, p. 1), "cursors for the player's actions" (Frasca 2001), "empty forms" (Pisarski & Sikora 2008, p. 192) or "empty shells" and "mask[s] the player[s] wear" (Adams & Rollings 2007, pp. 151, 152). All the above metaphors revolve around a strictly mechanical approach to

characters, analysed from the point of view of functions they perform within the gameworld. In other words, PCs become capabilities or capacities defined by their set of characteristics (Dovey & Kennedy 2006, p. 98; Newman 2002). Focusing on the playable experience of *Tomb Raider's* protagonist, both Newman and Aarseth come to the joint conclusion that Lara Croft's representational traits are insignificant and do not influence the gameplay as such. Newman remarks that "we don't have to think about Lara in playable game sequences in terms of representation […] we don't even have to think about 'her' at all" (Newman 2002). Coming to a similar ludological conclusion, Aarseth (2004, p. 48) explains:

> The dimensions of Lara Croft's body, already analyzed to death by film theorists, are irrelevant to me as a player, because a different-looking-body would not make me play differently […] When I play, I don't even see her body, but see through it and past it.

Such a perspective fully emancipates the players and offers a set of potentials and techniques in the form of graphical personas (avatars) that are embodied by them. Ken Perlin compares Lara Croft and other on-screen figures to game tokens and emphasises the active role of the gamers, noticing that "every choice she [Lara] makes whether to shoot, to leap, to run, to change weapons, is your choice" (Perlin 2004, p. 14). Lara Croft "will only move if, as and when the player compels her to" (Carr 2002, p. 173).

The player character's functionality is also directly connected with an array of assigned attributes, which are especially important in the cPRG genre. As Dovey & Kennedy state, both video game theorists and designers, turn to "narrative and character theories of Russian formalism based round the work of [Vladimir] Propp" (2006, p. 97). Since characters in games constitute algorithmically controlled sets of capabilities, the Proppian definition of characters in terms of the functions they perform, "fits remarkably well onto the scripting languages of game construction sets, in which NPCs [and PCs] are not 'characters' in the literary sense but rather objects that call functions" (Howard 2008, p. 68). Among the eight dramatis personae proposed by Propp, the 'dispatcher' seems to be the most essential one in role-playing and adventure games, in which a lot of NPCs operate as quest-givers (Howard 2008, pp. 68-69). Another idea that has been implanted in video games is the notion of narrative anthropologies by Joseph Campbell, whose ideas first entered the entertainment

world through Chrisopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey* (1992). Campbell's structure of the hero's journey ('monomyth') inspired Andrew Glassner's analysis of the characters in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (2004, pp.60-66). It is also referred to by Jeannie Novak, who differentiates between the following archetypal characters: hero, shadow, mentor, allies, guardian, trickster, herald and protagonist (Novak & Krawczyk 2005).

5.1.2 Characters as Drivers of Agency

The above perspective leads us to the issue of agency in video games, which in role-playing, first person shooters and adventure games and alike may be defined as a set of actions performed within the gameworld by means of a player character embodied by the player.[34] The player's actions modify the game space but more importantly "affect the nature of the character" (Lankoski 2003, p. 1). However, despite an illusion of control that games create, players' moves and decisions are not thoroughly autonomous. Their agency – and what follows, PCs' and NPCs' reactions – are restricted by designers and programmers. Focusing on interpretation and character design, Petri Lankoski (2003, p. 1) points out that:

> By setting goals, scripting pre-defined actions and choosing what kind of actions to implement, the game designer can restrict the player's freedom. This, together with the characterization of the character, will affect the interpretation of the character.

Since the decisions made at the level of design are responsible for the player's experience, their significance should not be overlooked. After all, the configurations of the player character's functions, attributes and traits are not entirely dependent on the player's actions. Modern cRPGs (*Neverwinter Nights*, *Dragon Age*, *Fallout 3* etc.) give gamers a great variety of characteristics to select from, but those choices are bound by the decisions made at an early stage of alpha and beta tests (Schmieder 2009, p. 9).[35]

[34] Clearly, more abstract games, such as *Tetris, Angry Birds* (iPAD) or *Rugdoll* (iPAD) do not require an avatar to translate player's agency onto a game space.
[35] I will expand on this point further when focusing on female and male avatars in video games.

5.1.3 Characters Controlled by AI

However, agency may not only be looked at from the point of view of playable characters. In his insightful study, Justin Parsler focuses on characters which are not under direct player control. As those non-player characters (NPCs) populate gameworlds and react to the players' actions, the latter attribute agency and intentionality to them (Parsler 2010, pp. 136-137). Because not all the NPCs are programmed to react to the player's input, Parsler introduces the term non-player agents (NPAs) for those who manifest a certain level of intentionality. He also elaborates on the issue of agency from the point of view of NPAs, and differentiates between 'perceived' or 'attributed' agency (2010, p. 137) and 'second-hand' agency (2010, p. 138). The first two result from the fact that players assign agency to NPAs on the basis of a meaningful in-game interactions with them. In the second case, video game characters' agency is seen as an attribute derived from the primary agent – the designer.

It should be noted here that character typologies vary. Prior to Parsler's differentiation into NPCs and NPAs (2010), Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca introduced a classification of characters related to the extent to which we can interact with them. They founded their taxonomy on four different character types: stage, functional, cast and player characters (2008, pp. 178-179). Stage characters, similarly to NPCs, constitute a part of the scenery and cannot be interacted with. Functional characters, on the other hand, operate like NPAs and, as their name suggests, perform general functions within the gameworld. These are the humanoids or other abstract beings we can talk to or hit and attack (e.g., in *GTA IV, Fallout 3*). Cast characters are assigned specific functions closely related to the story introduced in the game. They may be responsible, for instance only for trading with the PC, and as such do not manifest a more complex role from the point of view of the plot. However, the roles fulfilled by the functional and cast characters may intersect, therefore it may be difficult to categorise all the characters in accordance to this analytical pattern. The complexity of this task will become visible in the analytical chapters (7, 8, and 9). And finally, player characters are simply the characters whose actions are controlled by the player (2008, p. 179).

Another, older classification proposed by Mark J. P. Wolf categorises characters by the function they perform. The list starts off with player characters, which are "human players' surrogate characters in the game's diegetic world [and] are said to 'win', 'lose', or score

points" (2002, p. 98). Wolf also discusses computer-controlled PCs (present in some multiple-player games when the computer takes control over player-characters when human players are not interacting with the game) and computer-controlled incidental characters, which – similarly to functional characters – perform narrative functions and contribute to developing the storyline (2002, p. 98). The third category of players may also include neutral characters, which may be compared to stage characters introduced above, in that they constitute mere background ornaments and contribute to the overall atmosphere in the game (2002, p. 98).

Shifting the focus from player characters to the NPCs (or depending on the terminology used: NPAs, i.e. functional or computer controlled incidental characters) in video game character studies requires an equally important shift from a player-centric to a non player-centric point of view, which finds all the characters in the game equally important. In accordance with the above assumption, the "[p]layer character becomes an entity given the second-hand agency and controlled by the player, while non-player characters could be described as secondary agents 'played' by the designer" (2010, p. 141). The role of agency and player empowerment has been also raised by Lankoski, who discusses the correlation between the player's actions (as a PC) and the extent to which they are controlled by the game designer, who sets goals, scripts and implements pre-defined actions, and is responsible for a wide range of attributes to choose from (Lankoski 2003, p.1). It is of paramount importance to realise how underlying mechanisms, software and design shape the gameworld even before the user has the chance to interact with it, and how a range of experiences and possibilities has been set out in advance (Taylor 2003, p. 25).

For T. L .Taylor such design issues give rise predominantly to a discussion on online identity and the bodies of avatars in virtual worlds and massive multiplayer online games (MMOs). She asks the following question (2003, p. 26):

> How was it for example, that designers, who had ambitious, often utopic, visions of worlds full of diversity, found themselves producing a product that constrained embodiment in ways even they were not satisfied with?

Taylor explains such decisions by means of organisational and economic issues, as well as the force of technical momentum and economic consequences (2003, pp. 26-28). She also observes that "the role designers and programmers play in shaping those [virtual world] spaces is fundamental" (Taylor 2003, p. 25).

5.1.4 Characters as Representational Gendered Icons

The question of online identity is also scrutinised by Christian Schmieder, who examines the representation of gender identity in a massive multi-player online role-playing game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft* (2009). Drawing from Rubenstein (2007) he attributes the stereotyped visual bipolarity of game characters predominantly to the decisions made during the alpha tests. It turns out that the majority of *WoW* gamers found highly androgenic characters unappealing. As a result male characters have distinctive masculine features – they are strongly built and bigger than their female counterparts. Because the features are standardised, it is impossible to create feminine males and masculine female characters. As Schmieder concludes, "analysing visual representations of sex in *WoW* shows a strong dimorphism […] that is partly a product of communication between gamers and designers" (2009, p. 8). Other publications focusing on hyper-sexualised appearance of game characters include: Rubenstein (2007), Sheri Graner Ray (2004) or Sherry Turkle (1984, 1995).

Gender stereotypes and the role of female characters in video games have been also widely discussed in an early publication by Cassell & Jenkins (1999). As they point out,

> characters continue to be constructed according to a fairly traditional set of gender stereotypes, including the portrayal of good but passive princesses as objects, which motivate the action, and bad, eroticized women as competitors who must be beaten back by the protagonist. (1999, p. 8)

The situation changed slightly when the co-founder of Sierra On-Line, Roberta Williams, started incorporating female protagonists into the gameworld of the *King's Quest* series in 1989. However, as Cassell & Jenkins admit, violent games without positive and strong representations of women predominate in the industry (1999, p. 10). Although ten years have passed since the publication of *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat,* not much seems to

have changed.[36] The discussion yet again focuses on allegedly the most quoted VG heroine of all times – Lara Croft. Cal Jones, reviews editor for PC Gaming World, when asked about the significance of Lara Croft as a female character, remarks: "Lara is not the great feminist icon Eidos would have you believe. She's just a fantasy, and one that is pretty damn impossible for us women to live up to" (1999, p. 339). Michelle Goulet from Game Girlz adds that "[r]especting the female characters is hard when they look like strippers with guns and seem to be nothing more than an erection waiting to happen" (1999, p. 341).

Anne Schleiner perceives Lara in slightly more positive terms, referring to her as the first female heroine in the FPS/adventure genre. She observes that, until the moment Lara was created, "the avatars in these games were almost exclusively male, with the exception of the princess offered as game prize in *Prince of Persia*, *Double Dragon* and other games with women as battle trophies" (2000). However, as Schleiner later observes, Lara Croft constitutes "an idealized eternally young female automaton, a malleable, well-trained techno-puppet created by and for the male gaze" (2000). To support her point, she gives an example of the "*Tomb Raider* Anniversary Nude Patch", striping Lara's clothing, which, according to Schleiner, is evidence of the gender-subject relationship. In this case, unlike Aarseth's observations, the dimensions of Lara Croft's body seem to be crucial, and players indeed do not see through and past Lara's body. Her figure is brought to the forefront of gameplay.

The problem of over-inflated and passive VG heroines is also discussed by Jo Bryce & Jason Rutter, whose research demonstrated that female VG characters are repeatedly depicted in a stereotypical manner as princesses in fantasy games, waiting to be rescued by males, or as subjects of the male gaze (2005, p. 303). Other researchers also point to the fact that Lara's strength and power are undermined by "the over-fulfilment of female proportions that are designed for the male gaze" (Richard & Zaremba 2005, p. 285). The example of a "nude patch" described in the previous paragraph seems to confirm the legitimacy of this claim.

Helen W. Kennedy proposes a wider range of potential readings of Lara's representational traits and their significance. Contrary to Bryce & Jason (2005), she begins by emphasising the

[36] The following games, among many others, picture the female characters in a stereotypical way: *Grand Theft Auto* series, *L.A. Noire*, *The Witcher*, *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings*. *Call of Duty* games don't include any major female playable characters at all.

fact that "*Tomb Raider* marked a significant departure from the typical role of women within popular computer games" (Kennedy 2002). As she observes, no previous fighting games featured strong and independent female main characters. Traditionally, the hero has always been a male figure, and females have been only there to play supporting roles. "In this respect alone Lara was a welcome novelty for experienced female game players" (Kennedy 2002). In her analysis, Kennedy portrays Lara Croft as an action heroine, who makes her presence within masculine game genres. After all, she is not a typical damsel in distress but a strong Indiana Jones-like protagonist, who "totes a gun as she navigates a hostile landscape fraught with danger" (2002). Lara is also looked at as a *femme fatale* – an active yet highly eroticised object of the male gaze – and an object of queer theory, which sees a male player as being transgendered through the act of embodying a female character. Although Kennedy interprets *Tomb Raider's* heroine on many different levels, she comes to conclusions present in the studies discussed above (Bryce & Rutter 2005; Cassell & Jenkins 1999; Richard & Zaremba 2005; Schleiner 2000):

> [w]e need to encourage the production of a broader range of representations of femininity than those currently being offered [and] stimulate innovative and alternative images of men and women that do not simply reinstate doggedly rigid gender stereotypes. (Kennedy 2002)

Perhaps in order to achieve this, the mainstream gaming industry should aim at educating its consumers rather that reiterating the stereotypical preferences and views held by the majority of players, who tend to buy the products that strengthen their comfort zone.

5.1.5 Characters as Player Embodiment

Another strand in video game character studies – closely related to agency and representational features discussed earlier in this section – refers to the issue of embodiment and the understanding of the mind-body relationship in video games and virtual worlds. After all, avatars – which may be perceived as vehicles for the characters – operate as our "represented 'presence' in virtual space" (Doyle 2009, p. 131). "[They] develop over time (through access to new levels, power ups, new objects) in such

a way as to become the in-game embodiment of our gameplay experience" (Dovey & Kennedy 2006, p. 108). Research perspectives revolving around the player-avatar alliance are numerous. Denise Doyle, for instance, tries to answer the question of the role of imagination in accepting the users' presence in the virtual through the avatar's body (2009, p. 134). She comes to the following conclusion:

> If these new immaterial bodies can be experienced through new technologies, we can also experience ourselves in avatar-based virtual worlds, such as *SL* [*Second Life*], through embodied presence. (2009, p. 139)

What Doyle refers to as embodied presence, other researchers are more likely to call re-embodiment. After all, the body made of flesh and bones sits in front of the screen and interacts physically with the computer in order to launch the mind into the virtual and re-embody itself. This phenomenon may be referred to as the double-situatedness of the body – "a shift to a dualistic existence in two simultaneous bodies" (Morie 2007, p. 124). Such an assumption "implies, on the one hand, that user-readers are 'embodied' as direct receivers, whose bodies interact with the hardware and software of a computer. On the other, user-readers are considered to be 're-embodied' through feedback that they experience in represented form, e.g., through visible or invisible avatars" (Ensslin 2009, p. 158). The physical engagement with the game's software by means of game controllers results in the creation of a cybernetic feedback loop, which would not be possible without the involvement of real bodies. The players become fused with the interface and the gameworld, and this cybernetic combination gives rise to "fabricated hybrids of machine and organism" (Haraway 1991, p. 292). Such cyborgs constitute what Lister et al. (2003) refer to as the "new physiological entity […] constructed from this network of organic and technological parts" (Lister et al. 2003, p. 374). The significance of the re-embodied virtual experience has been also discussed by Tom Boellstorff in *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008), where he refers to avatars as "the modality through which residents experience virtual selfhood" (2008, p. 129). He also emphasises the fragility of the distinction between what is real and what is virtual. The reality of virtual embodiment for Boellstorff lies predominantly in the responsiveness of the actual-world body sitting in front of the screen – "one saw or heard with actual eyes and ears, typed on a keyboard and moved with actual

fingers" (2008, p. 135). A similar view is shared by T. L. Taylor, who defines avatars as "one of the central points at which users intersect with a technological object and embody themselves, making the virtual environment and the variety of phenomena it fosters real" (2002, p. 41).

Clearly, although a lot of research on the bodily experience focuses primarily on virtual environments, such as *Second Life* (Boellstorff 2008; Doyle 2009; Taylor 2002, 2004) or role-playing virtual communities i.e. Multi-User Domains (Turkle 1999), its assumptions are highly applicable to video games, especially those in which players embody avatars. Those virtual representations "haunt media and cyperspace in multiple guises, nested in online chat rooms and seminars, internet commodity arcades, art installations, gameworlds, architectural models, data-shadows, and program algorithms" (Apter 2008).

As the above examples illustrate, research on embodiment cannot be easily classified as either structural or cultural. The variety of research perspectives allows for the implementation of both analytical strands. Structural studies may take into account the dualistic existence of two simultaneous bodies (the player's body and their graphical representation on screen) and try to differentiate between different mechanisms that come into place. Of particular interest might be the process of embodying an on-screen character via hand-held controllers and controller-free technologies such as Microsoft's Kinect sensor. The physical engagement with the game's software by means of our own bodies may contribute to an increased level of immersion and identification with the virtual persona.

On the other hand, as Boellstorff demonstrates, research focusing on embodiment may be underpinned by more philosophical and cultural perspectives rather than the mechanical characteristics of the player-avatar relationship. The player's representation (avatar) may exert a great influence upon their virtual selfhood, and what follows, the gameplay itself. Doyle's analysis of the role of player's imagination in embodying the avatar is yet another example of research, which may be placed on the cultural spectrum.

5.2 The Importance of the Player's Persona

The research on embodiment presented above flags the importance of the player as an essential part of the video game character, which cannot be realised without the presence of the human agent. Such an assumption is a valid starting point in the discussion of the PC in computer Role-Playing Games. Mariusz Pisarski & Dorota Sikora notice that it constitutes a dynamic semantic construct, which consists of two layers: the external one, visible on the screen and denoting an avatar; and the internal one, describing a player, who controls the avatar's behaviour within the gameworld (Pisarski & Sikora 2008, p. 191).[37] The two layers are separated by the game's interface as presented in figure 5.1.

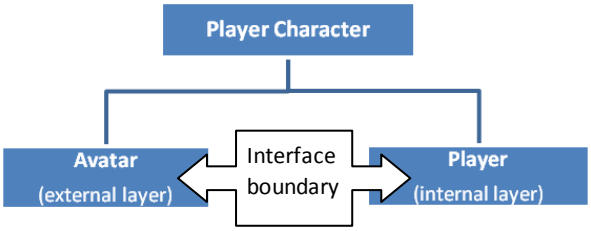

Figure 5.1 Two components of the player character (PC)

Pisarski & Sikora further notice that player characters (PCs), similarly to non-playable characters (NPCs), are significant anthropomorphic constructs, which the player fills in on the semantic level during the gameplay (2008, p. 191). In the present study much attention will be devoted to customisation tools enabling intricate characterology. However, to give a full account of the player character's complexity, I will outline the most representative and significant analyses preoccupied with the the player's persona. In the end, an empty construct (avatar) is always combined with and controlled by an authentic person. Irrespective of the pre-designed attributes, the final character's shape to a great extent depends on the choices made by the individual player. Games as such would not make sense if it weren't for the interaction with players and the importance of this should not be downplayed. The following section thus constitutes a sketch of various theoretical approaches concerned with the player's persona, responsible for pulling the strings and co-creating an on-screen character.

[37] The definition introduced here applies to many more video game genres as well as to virtual worlds (e.g. *Second Life*, *Project Entropia*).

Due to the sheer number and complexity of existing approaches to the player's persona, I will restrict myself to a cross-section of salient and relevant studies in this area. It should be emphasised that in the ensuing overview I shall not focus on the potential player, but on the actual player (a non-objectified individual) inside the game, who is

> created by these instructions [from the game itself or from a guide], and by his or her initial learning experience. In many cases, this experience is social, and the player learns from other, more experienced players. But this is far from always the case, especially with single player games. (Aarseth 2006, p. 1)

The academic research related to actual players is usually done either from an empirical, ethnographic or an aesthetic or textual perspective. The former entails the ethnographic player-observer examining players as actual historical figures, while the latter involves the critical player-theorist, who scrutinises players as functions (Aarseth 2006, p. 2). Aarseth argues that "[s]ince games are both aesthetic and social phenomena, a theory of the player must combine both social and aesthetic perspectives to be successful" (2006, p. 1). The diagram in figure 5.2 also presents the methodological divide behind the two approaches.

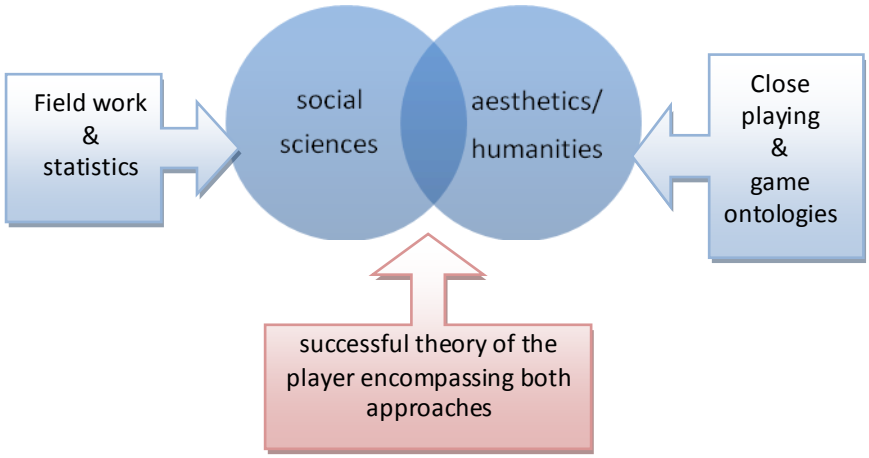

Figure 5.2 A Venn diagram presenting successful theory of the player according to Aarseth (2006)

In his most recent book, *A Casual Revolution* (2009), Jesper Juul combines the two aforementioned approaches outlined by Aarseth, adding another dimension to the discussion, that of the developer's perspective. Juul's discussion of casual games and casual players involves the examination of the design of casual games, and the exploration of reasons and means of play. As he puts it:

> It is of paramount importance that we can acknowledge player culture without treating games as black boxes, and we must be able to discuss game design without ignoring the players. (2009, p. 21)

To be able to give a full account of the researched issues, not only does Juul concentrate on the mechanics of given games, but also draws from social sciences to be able to conduct statistical research on players. He challenges the stereotype of the casual player by analysing player stories and an extensive player survey completed by 182 participants. In his detailed study, Juul also includes interviews with various developers. By implementing those three different perspectives, he creates a comprehensive picture of a casual player and casual downloadable and mimetic games. Unlike most sociological studies on games, *A Casual Revolution* does not take "gender or age as a starting point for discussing players" (2009, p. 10).

Prevalent sociological or anthropological studies (Turkle 1995; Bartle 1996; Yee 2005, 2009; Taylor 2006; Boellstorff 2009) tend to focus on identity, player taxonomy, demographics in Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) or Virtual Worlds (VWs). For instance, in *Play Between Worlds* T. L. Taylor examines various aspects of gaming in *Everquest* (Sony Online Entertainment 1999), a massively multiplayer online game (MMOG). Having spent four years as an active member of both, online and offline gamers' community, she makes use of her vast experience to discuss, among others, the social aspect of gaming, the phenomena (gaming styles) of power gaming and professional gaming or the stereotypical picture of female players in *Everquest*. She also tackles the question of intellectual property rights and examines the relations between gamers and game developers.

Tom Boellstorff, on the other hand, in his anthropological study *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008), applies the theories used in anthropology to a virtual world. In order to observe the native virtual life of SL residents, the researcher conducted his fieldwork by means of an avatar, created specifically for the purpose of his study. Boellstorff engaged in methods, which involved participant observation and conducting interviews (Boellstorff 2009, p. 4). Boellstorff provides an ethnographic portrait of Second Life and explores its place and time, gender, race and embodiment of its residents as well as the notion of community. He also discusses the issues of economics, politics and inequality among others (2009, p. 31).

One of the first and most quoted studies focusing on the player's persona is Richard Bartle's player taxonomy (1996). Although Bartle's research refers to online MUDs (Multi User Dungeons) or MMOs (Massively Multiplayer Online games), it has been serving as a springboard for more complex examinations of players (Yee 2004), for instance in modern MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games), such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2005). Bartle's taxonomy relates to player actions in MUDs and is based on four main styles of play: achievement, exploration, socialising, and imposition oriented style. As a result, "labelling the four player types abstracted, we get: achievers, explorers, socialisers and killers" (Bartle 1996). It should be noted here that Bartle's model generating four player types does not reflect the complexity of personality traits and gameplay behaviours of players. In one of his studies belonging to The Daedalus Project, Nick Yee investigates various aspects of players' "identity projection through the use of avatars" (Yee 2004). He juxtaposes real life personality of the players with those imagined and constructed in the game. Furthermore, Yee takes into consideration motivation and several personality traits, which might influence the way identity is constructed in the gameworld by means of embodied avatars.

As fruitful and encouraging as both studies seem to be, their basic assumptions require further refinement. Defining a human being by means of a limited number of static personality traits is considered problematic by the sociologists of culture, such as Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman 2000; 2001; 2007) or Anthony Giddens (Giddens 1991). As I will present in the subsequent paragraphs, the above researchers define identity in terms of its fluidity and changeability. For Giddens, identity "is not something that is just given, as a result of the continuities of the individual's action-system, but something that has to be routinely

created" (Giddens 1991, p.52). In light of such research, Bartle's player taxonomy and Yee's project seem to be somewhat dated in their understanding of the notion of human identity.

It should also be emphasised that while Yee's research is based on statistical data obtained from 2,916 completed surveys (sample size: 2495 males and 420 females), Bartle's study lacks methodological clarity. He bases his assumptions on "a long, heated discussion which ran from November 1989 to May 1990 between the wizzes (ie. highly experienced players, of rank wizard or witch) on one particular commercial MUD in the UK" (Bartle 1985, qtd. in Bartle 1996). As Bartle emphasises, the starting point for the online discussion and his research was the question "What do people want out of a MUD?" The sample consisted in "some 15 individuals [who] took a major part, with perhaps another 15 adding their comments from time to time; this comprised almost the entire set of active wizzes during that period" (Bartle 1996). Thus, putting aside the philosophical and sociological questions on the nature of human identity, the very method used by Bartle seems disputable from a methodological point of view.

In the most recent cRPGs, players are usually faced with an overwhelming array of character attributes to choose from when customising their avatars. Those various options at gamers' disposal are pre-programmed by game designers. However, the exact configuration depends entirely on the individual player and their preferred style of play. The relation between player type and attribute choice in the light of such diversification might yield some fruitful conclusions, in terms of empirical and textual approaches. However, as has been presented in the above paragraph, one needs to be careful not to oversimplify research assumptions and not to reduce a rich players' experience to a list of four behavioural patterns.

The relation between players' personality traits and the behaviour of their in-game character is much more complex than the scenario proposed by Richard Bartle. So far, such correlations have not been studied extensively. Some promising preliminary research – although not devoid of the same existential flaws as Bartle's or Yee's studies - was also carried out by Thaddeus Griebel, who explored "the extent to which people project aspects of themselves into the game, running statistical analyses to find patterns between game play behaviours and personality and values" (Griebel 2006). To prove his point Griebel analysed personality characteristics of a sample of 30 players and compared the results with their

game play choices in *The Sims 2*. He measured values corresponding to various dimensions of personality (e.g. neuroticism, extraversion, conscientiousness or creativity), and asked the participants to complete questionnaires related to their in-game behaviours.

> From the results given above, it can be seen that participants did indeed project certain aspects of their personalities, values and characteristics into their Sims. The data suggest that personality traits such as neuroticism, openness and conscientiousness, values such as wealth, creativity, flirting and fidelity, and personal characteristics such as race, gender, age, need for cognition [sic], perceived number of enemies and parental marital status all relate to different ways in which people play The Sims 2. (Griebel 2006)

However innovative and inspiring the study may seem, it is not devoid of shortcomings, one of them being a limited sample size unrepresentative of the wider population.[38] Despite its inadequacies, Griebel's statistical analysis lays a solid foundation for future research. Although the aim of the present study is not to explore the above correlation, it may nonetheless be worth remembering when looking at character customisation. After all, every attribute configuration of the PC seems to run parallel with the characteristics exhibited by the player's persona standing behind a given character within the game. A positive correlation between the player's character features and the behaviour exhibited by their PC in the game has not been definitively confirmed by any academic research. There is, however, some anecdotal evidence to support this observation. When asked whether they played in accordance with their personality traits, many of my students (eight out of ten) admitted in a small-scale study that they transferred their behavioural patterns to the video game context. Having completed the game the way they felt was closest to their 'real' selves, the students kept experimenting with various other PC's attribute combinations. Usually, when a moral choice was required, they played as a good character in the first instance, and only then did they repeat a given quest as a bad character.

[38] The sample consisted of 30 undergraduate students from Dominican University (River Forest, Illinois, USA), of whom 9 were males and 21 were females. The age of the participants ranged between 18 and 24 (Griebel 2006).

On the other hand – as I have mentioned in previous paragraphs - in the light of postmodern and post-postmodern concepts on fluid identity, the notion of the 'real' self is highly disputable. Therefore, it becomes nearly impossible to pin down one's 'true' identity based on a stable set of personality attributes. This fluid identity may be also referred to as 'hybrid' identity (Mamzer 2007, p.8), which consists in various elements, no longer inherited but constructed in accordance with individually chosen criteria (Mamzer 2007, p.8). Of great importance in the process of construction of this changeable identity is the role of digital media and video games respectively. Mirosław Filiciak, a media studies scholar, describes identity created by the users of electronic media with the following words:

> we cannot talk anymore about a single identity that produces temporary identities subordinate to itself. This, in the era of electronic media we should rather talk about hyperidentity, which is related to as a hypertext to a text. (2003, p. 97)

In Filiciak's understanding, hyperidentity is characterised by its complex structure, which is constantly being updated. Creating one's identity, thus, is not a linear process leading to an ultimate ending (2003, p. 97). What is more, "self is only a temporary construction" and this notion becomes even more tangible in cRPGs and MMORPGs, where players are equipped with tools to create their own avatars, representing one of the instances of their identity (2003, p. 97).

5.3 Concluding Remarks

Introducing their own typology of characters and the ways in which they may be constructed in video games, Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca claim that "[n]ot many researchers have dealt with video game characters, even though there is a rich tradition of character studies in literary criticism" (2008, p. 179). As it has been demonstrated in the current chapter, this is not necessarily the case. Video game characters have been studied from many different angles. None of the reviewed perspectives, however, encompasses a wide range of experiences, both on a representational and mechanical level. What video game studies lack in this respect is a broader treatment of the subject, a possible methodology for the study of characters. This thesis aims to fill that void by providing a comprehensive method for the

analysis of the VG character. It should be emphasised that critical tools may not only help to exert pressure on game developers to produce more diverse games for a demanding audience, but at the same time they have the power to turn gamers into more culturally self-aware consumers. With the passage of time, constructing characters in cRPG games may become a less stereotypical and more creative process. However, in order for video games to evolve into more elaborate cultural forms, their designers, writers and recipients should at some point detach themselves from the common and repetitive scheme prevailing in a given video game genre. In Chapter 6, a prospective method for player character analysis will be introduced and further applied to concrete games in Chapters 7, 8, and 9.

Chapter 6

The Player Character Grid and the Pivot Player Character Model

In the previous chapters I have outlined structural and cultural trajectories in video games studies (Chapter 3), discussed character studies in literary fiction, drama, and film (Chapter 4), and presented how characters have been scrutinised in video game studies so far (Chapter 5). The above examinations demonstrate a general divide in the humanities into the analyses conducted from a structural perspective, and those referring to a wider socio-cultural background. The Player Character Grid introduced in this chapter aims at reconciling both strands (much like Alex Woloch's distributional matrix described in Chapter 4) and combining them in a single methodology for the player character in offline computer role-playing games. The Grid consists of two planes, the structural and the referential one. The former focuses on the player character as a functional element within the game system, and is derived from Anne Ubersfeld's (1999) semiological methodology for theatrical character study. It further entails the Pivot Player Character Model – a player-centric tool comprising five fundamental elements: the player character (PC), non-player characters (NPCs), objects/props, interface and agency, which contextualise the PC in relation to a concrete game space. The referential plane, on the other hand, depicts the PC as a concrete realisation of the structural element, placed in a wider socio-cultural context. Such an understanding of the player character enables a rich analysis of selected aspects in accordance with Cultural Criticism discussed in Chapter 4. Although the referential plane forms part of the model, due to the spatial constraints of this thesis, it will not be discussed in detail. Instead, the components constituting the structural plane of the Player Character Grid will enable me to perform coherent and replicable close analyses of the cRPG games introduced in Chapters 7, 8, and 9.

6.1 The Theatrical Character Grid

Before discussing the details of the Player Character Grid, I will introduce Anne Ubersfeld's semiological character research conducted in the field of theatre theory. Her understanding of the character as a semantic construct and the methodology behind it constitute the main principle for the structural model of the PC in cRPGs. Although Ubersfeld's theory concentrates on the interpretation of dramatic texts, its main assumptions regarding character may be transferred to the field of video game studies. As I will present in the following paragraphs, Ubersfeld's criticism of the concept of the dramatic character, introduced in *Reading Theatre I* (1999), is comparable to the VG player character's experience on many levels, and may be used to support the structural part of the methodology for the PC analysis in video games. I shall further discuss the divergences between the two areas to establish which elements of Ubersfeld's theory need complementing when applied to cRPGs.

It should also be mentioned that Ubersfeld's original research conducted in French in late 1970's, and translated into English in 1999, is not necessarily the most recent and certainly not the only theatrical study of structural nature. However, its core assumptions illustrated by means of the Character Grid make it highly relevant and applicable to video games. That is not to say that a different methodology might not be adapted to games, but since the selected model depicts so many parallel phenomena referring to both, theatre and VG characters, it becomes a rich source of methodological inspiration. Also, Ubersfeld's study might be treated as an accurate synthesis or a cross-section of the theatre character and its relation to the surrounding space. In this respect, it becomes a significant foundation to establish a comprehensive methodology for the research of a video game player character.

As Ubersfeld observes, in her introduction to the concept of the theatrical character, "contemporary semiology sees character as the locus of *functions,* and no longer as a substance-copy of a human being" (1999, p. 72). In other words, character analysis is not a discovery of pre-determined meaning, but rather a continuous construction of how character functions in individual scenarios and situations. This distinction seems to be accurate with reference to video games, where the actual character becomes three-dimensional only once it has been enacted by the player. Applying Propp's theory of

character types, we may say that action is emphasised over an individual agent. It is not as important to interpret the way an act is performed by a concrete character in a literary work, but to analyse the very action and – depending on its nature – to classify the character's function in the fictional setting (Propp 1968, p. 20). As I mentioned in Chapter 5, the actantial or the Propprian character model is very often used as a point of reference not only by theorists (Ensslin 2011) but also by game designers and developers (Howard 2008; Novak 2005). When perceived from such an angle, a character becomes an abstract locus, "a crossroads at which sets or series of independent functions meet" (Ubersfeld 1999, p. 77). In order to explicate and establish the legitimacy of the terminology used in her detailed semiological methodology of the character, Ubersfeld drafted it visually on the Character Grid (Ubersfeld 1999, p. 79). To make the grid more comprehensible, the elements in figure 6.1 to be examined with reference to games have been highlighted in yellow.

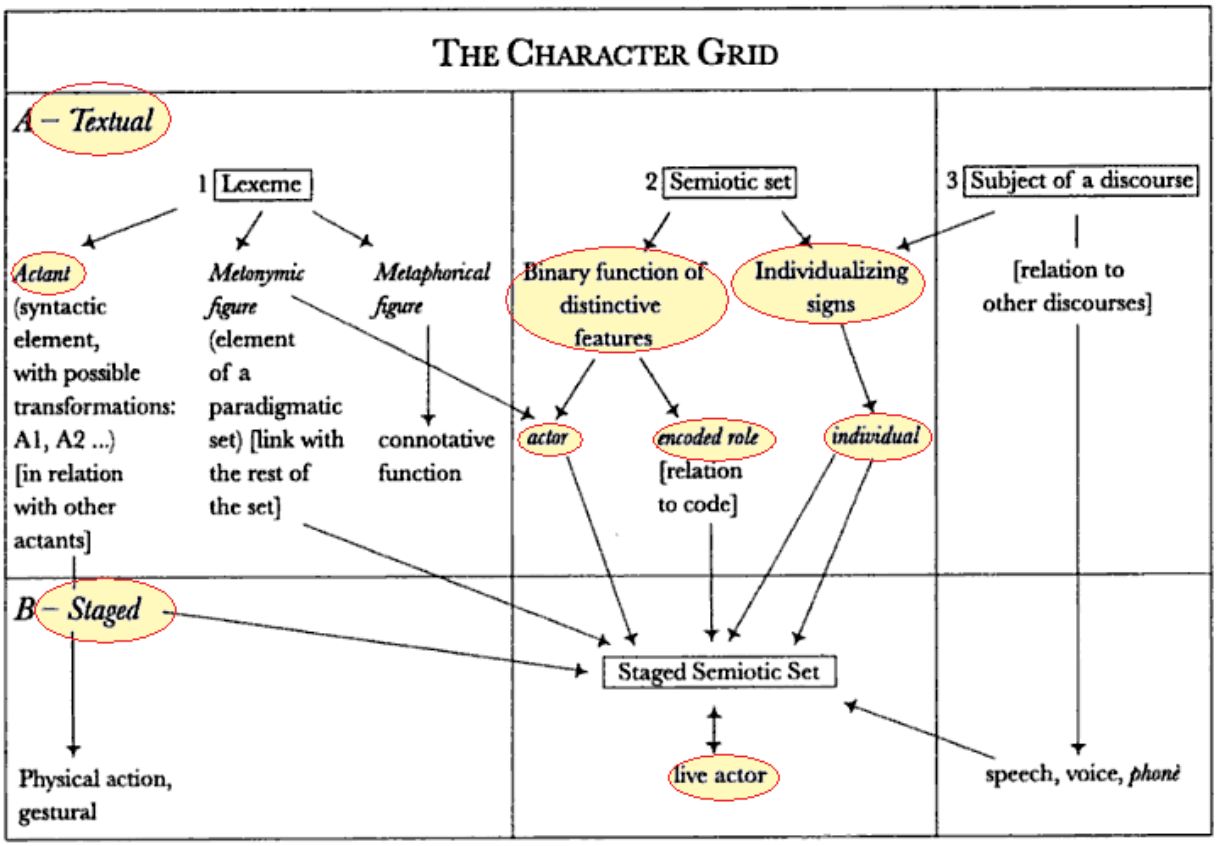

Figure 6.1 Anne Ubersfeld's Character Grid. A reprint from *Reading Theatre I* (1999, p. 79)

Ubersfeld's model introduces two different analytical orders to the methodology of the theatrical character – 'textual' and 'staged'. The former scrutinises the character as an

element within a literary text, while the latter focuses on the analysis of the persona exposed to the public gaze on stage. Although the table is divided into several layers and subsets, the live actor seems to be placed in the centre of a network (Staged Semiotic Set) including all the listed aspects belonging to the two main dimensions. As Ubersfeld notices, "[t]he character can thus be seen as the intersection (in the mathematical sense) of two semiotic sets (text and stage)" (1999, p. 80). To understand the significance of those two sets (the textual and the staged one), it should also be emphasised that in the case of the former, the character operates in the actantial system (deep structure), while the latter implies the presence of the actorial system (surface structure) (1999, p. 77). The character's concrete existence is only possible in the stage set, and that is achieved by a concrete performance of an actor. The textual character constitutes merely a virtual entity (1999, p. 92).

This duality of the theatrical character's existence is mapped onto three analytical axes, according to which the character may be viewed as:

a) Lexeme (part of many syntactic structures)
b) Semiotic set
c) Subject of a discourse.

In what follows, I shall discuss each of these elements in turn.

6.1.1 Lexeme

From a syntactical point of view the character may be identified as a lexeme, which results in the character acquiring a certain grammatical function within a given syntactical structure (1999, p. 80). For instance, with reference to video games, Mario Bros may be characterised as subject of an action denoting a quest for the beloved Princess Peach Toadstool. The princess, on the other hand, is the object of Mario's love. The actantial system may also go beyond the limits of a single word or sentence. In accordance with the terminology introduced by Algidras J. Greimas, an actant denotes the character's role associated with a certain function performed within the text. An actant should be differentiated from an actor, who is a concrete character placed in a concrete story. To illustrate the point, Burzyńska & Markowski refer to Ian Fleming's stories, in which the actant equates to the agent depicted in the text, and the actor is denoted by James Bond (Burzyńska & Markowski

2007, p. 293). It should be noticed here that an actor in the above understanding should not be confused with a concrete performer (e.g., Roger Moore, Timothy Dalton, or Sean Connery). Transferring this juxtaposition to the video games realm, we may define an actantial figure in *Grand Theft Auto IV* as a law breaker and a war veteran, whereas his actorial realisation would equate to Niko Bellic impersonated by the player, who shapes the player character through the choices made. In this sense the actantial model becomes almost concomitant with the Propprian definition of a function, which denotes an element of the folk tale pointing to the actions undertaken by the acting character from the point of view of their significance for the story (Burzyńska & Markowski 2007, p. 287). The actantial system thus denotes an abstract construct while its actorial counterpart depicts a concrete character realised on stage or – in the case of the video games I will discuss in section 6.2 – within a given gameworld.

Forming a part of the syntactic structure, the character may be further scrutinised as one of the following rhetorical elements (Ubersfeld 1999, pp. 81-82):

a) metonymy and synecdoche (a part for the whole);
b) metaphor and/or oxymoron (two opposing orders of reality).

In the first case Ubersfeld provides examples of characters, who are the metonymy of either an entire paradigmatic set (e.g. counsellor as the metonymy of authority) or other characters (e.g. the Fool in *King Lear* as the metonymy of Lear in his madness). The theatrical character may also be a living oxymoron, bringing together two opposing orders of reality. Using another example from *King Lear,* Ubersfeld depicts Cordelia as a life/death oxymoron – an intersection point of two metaphors, according to which she either epitomises life and future (as the king's daughter) or is associated with death (being incapable of speech).

Likewise, video game characters may exhibit the above rhetorical characteristics. For instance, Geralt of Rivia in *The Witcher* (2008) may function as a metonymic element for the whole suppressed race of the witchers. Geralt also embodies two mutually exclusive orders – on the one hand he seems to be a noble warrior standing up against Salamandra bandits, on the other, he is capable of betraying other non-human races (the Squirrels) for his personal gain. Furthermore, although he is alive, fighting for a good cause (its nature

depends on the player's choices), he rose from dead thanks to black magic. The character thus may be perceived as a life/death and good/bad oxymoron.

Ubersfeld also notices that a theatrical character may connote a series of related meanings that are not present in the actual text or play. This plastic system of connotations may be triggered in the reader's or spectator's mind by various extra-textual, historical, legendary or cultural elements. The connotative network may entwine the character depending on the richness of the semantic fields associated with him/her. Using the same video game example, we may observe a rich connotative process deriving from Geralt of Rivia. Since the character and gameworld in *The Witcher* are based on the fantasy book series by Andrzej Sapkowski, they activate various connotations related to their literary referent and Slavic mythology depicted in Sapkowki's works.

6.1.2 Semiotic Set

The Semiotic Set constitutes the second axis in the character grid. Although the actantial system is associated predominantly with textual (rather than staged) character representation, its prevalence might be diminished by the following two kinds of semiotic character determinations: distinctive features and individualising signs. As Ubersfeld observes (1999, pp. 83-84):

a) First there are determinations that make a character not an *actant* but an *actor*, with a certain number of characteristics that he or she shares partially or totally with other characters of the same text or other texts.

b) Another set of determinations makes an individual out of the character.

In the first case Ubersfeld gives an example of the English soldiers in Brecht's *A Man's a Man*. They seem to epitomise a collective actor, yet one of them (Fairchild) has further determinations that differentiate him from the rest and turn him into a privileged actor. The second type of semiotic determinations, which lead to the full individualisation of the character, may be achieved by means of such elements as individual names or physical attributes. However, not all forms of theatre depict individual features of characters. In some cases a character may embody an encoded role or may be reduced to an abstract figure underpinned by socio-cultural determinations (the superhero, the detective, the king,

the soldier) (Ubersfeld 1999, p. 84). Such archetypal roles were especially common in commedia dell'arte (e.g. stock characters of Pierrot and Harlequin). In this respect theatre is no different from other media, such as games, for the purpose of which the characters epitomise those culturally established roles or functions. This is especially common in the First Person Shooter (e.g., *Wolfenstein 3D*, *Return to Castle Wolfenstein,* the *Doom* or *Quake* series) or action-adventure game genres (e.g., *Tomb Raider*, *Risen, Prince of Persia, Grand Theft Auto IV*) where the player is given a formed character who does not need to go through an extensive customisation or development process. It is the players who develop their dexterity skills throughout the game; the player character as such stays unchanged. In an adventure game "tasks are always and forever solved by entering the correct commands (or performing the right sequence of tasks)" (Barton 2008, p. 5). The situation is reverse in cRPGs, which rely heavily on character development and attribute allocation (see Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of those aspects). In cRPGs almost all in-game objects and gained attributes or perks have their own numerical value, which contributes to the development of the player character throughout the course of the game. As Matt Barton explains, a numerical levelling system based on experience point allocation is a crucial element of a cRPG – the more orcs the player kills, the more experience points they gain, which promote them to the next level in the game (Barton 2008, p. 6). Those underpinning mechanisms allow for more intricate characterology in video games. They will be further elaborated on, and applied to concrete game scenarios in Chapters 7, 8, and 9.

In the process of allocating semiotic determinations, an actantial figure is thus turned into an actor with shared characteristics, a culturally encoded role, or an individualised actor. As I will demonstrate in the subsequent sections, a game character may be also contained within the semiotic set Ubersfeld created to portray a theatrical character. In drama, all individual variables from both sets (the textual and the staged one) contained in the character grid are mapped onto a live actor, who functions within the staged semiotic set. It is only on stage that a concrete character is realised through the process of theatricalisation. As Ubersfeld concludes, "[w]e must return to the obvious fact that the character has a concrete existence through concrete performance alone; the textual character is only *virtual*" (1999, p. 92). This observation will take us to the world of cRPG games, in which the

duality of the player character's persona – as it is in the case of a theatrical character – is a predominant feature.

6.1.3 The Subject of a Discourse

Finally, in accordance with the third axis, the character's profile may be created on the basis of what they say about themselves, and how other characters perceive them. However, in order to fully understand the relationship between the character and his or her discourse, we have to contradict the classical model – "we no longer view a character's discourse as a stock of information that will allow us to decode psychological character or psyche of that character; instead we examine the entire set of that character's distinctive features and his or her relations with other characters (his or her speech situation)" (1999, p. 86). It should be emphasised that the meaning of the character's discourse can be clarified only by the speech situation, which takes into account the conditions under which the message is sent and the receiver's knowledge of the sender. A purely linguistic perspective deprived of context might not reveal the meaning behind the words uttered by the character. To support her statement, Ubersfeld provides the following example: "I haven't loved you, cruel? What then have I done? (Andromaque, act 4, scene 5); these completely ambiguous words (*love, cruel, done*) are not made any clearer by the verb tense. The dictionary is no great help [either]" (1999, p. 86).

Ubersfeld proposes to analyse the character's discourse (not speech, for the theatrical character does not use the language in a real communication process) as a string of words, and as message. In the first case, we may count the number of lines and speeches of each character, and examine the relationship between the two. Various types of character discourse may be also taken into consideration: monologues, dialogues, multiple scenes, and length of speeches (1999, p. 91). In the analysis of discourse as message, Ubersfeld proposes to look at (1999, p. 92):

a) Jakobson's six functions of communication (referential, aesthetic, emotive, conative, phatic, and metalingual);[39]

[39] Roman Jacobson, a representative of the Prague school of linguistics, differentiated between six functions of language, which characterise every act of effective verbal communication. He extended the act of communication between the sender and the receiver by additional categories, referring to the context

b) a character's idiolect (e.g., language related to a social class);

c) a character's individual style.

Performing a concrete discourse analysis, one has to take into account the law of twofold enunciation operating in theatre. According to Ubersfeld, there are two subjects of discourse enunciation in theatre – the character and the author; there are also two receivers, other characters and the audience (1999, p. 90). It is the author that creates the words and puts them into the character's mouth. Therefore, we should not speak of the character's speech but of the discourse as a constructed process.

In video games, the situation becomes even more complex with the addition of agency and interactivity. While it is true that the player character and their discourse are created at the design stage, the players fulfil a role far more complex than the traditional theatrical audience does. Not only do they observe the PC on the screen, but they actively take part in the decision making process throughout the game. The law of twofold enunciation, so important in theatre, reaches yet another dimension when applied to video games, especially computer RPGs, which allow the player to customise their PCs and make crucial choices during gameplay. As a result, part of the agency is shared between the designers (authors), the PC (actor), and the players (audience). This issue will be discussed in more detail in section 6.2.

6.2 Introducing the Concept of Space in Video Games

The structural model for the player character analysis, which I will present in section 6.3, is based upon the spatial relations between the PC and other elements within the gameworld. Therefore, before discussing the core of my methodology, I will introduce the concept of space in video games, so important for the understanding of the way a PC functions in the game.

Video game characters impersonated by players do not exist in a void, but in a game space, which denotes their position within a wider geometrical context and the story itself. Gamers also occupy a certain space and, in doing so, approach this ludic phenomenon from two

(referential function), message produced for its own sake (aesthetic function), emotional state (emotive function), direct expressions by means of imperatives (conative function), communication for the sake of pure interaction (phatic function), and the self-referential use of language to describe itself (metalingual function).

different angles – the first one denoting the in-game world experienced through the avatar, and the second one referring to the interaction with the game's hardware. Introducing the concept of space in VGs, I will take into consideration both the players and the virtual personae they enact. It should be noted, however, that the latter category will be of main interest to this study. In order to understand the complexity of the relation between game space and the player character, I shall place this distinction in a wider spatial context. To do so, I will relate to various approaches drawing from the spatial experience not only in games, but also in theatre and literary fiction.

The phenomenon of space in games goes beyond the purely representative plane of the screen and the fictional in-game world it mirrors. Space may be defined and analysed on many levels. Thus, to be able to delineate the position of the PC in relation to the game space, different understandings of space should be supplied. A good starting point for the discussion has been provided by Michael Nitsche in *Video Game Spaces* where he systematises the experience of space in VG by means of five conceptual planes (see fig. 6.2 below): *rule-based*, *mediated*, *fictional*, *play* and *social* (2008, pp. 15-16). The *rule-based space* is defined by rules responsible for e.g. game physics, AI, user interaction or level design. The *mediated* plane is related with the images projected onto the screen and in this respect, according to Nitsche, resembles a cinematic form of presentation. The *fictional space* describes the internal representation of the in-game images in the player's imagination. In this sense it may be compared to Gerald Genette's concept of "passive literary spatiality" (qtd. in Ubersfeld 1999, p. 99) achieved by means of textual descriptions of space, which are then internalised and reconstructed as images by the reader. Drawing from psychology we may also understand the *fictional spaces* as cognitive maps, which "are complex mental interpretations of a real or fictional environment, and its components that live in the fictional plane" (Nitsche 2008, p. 161).

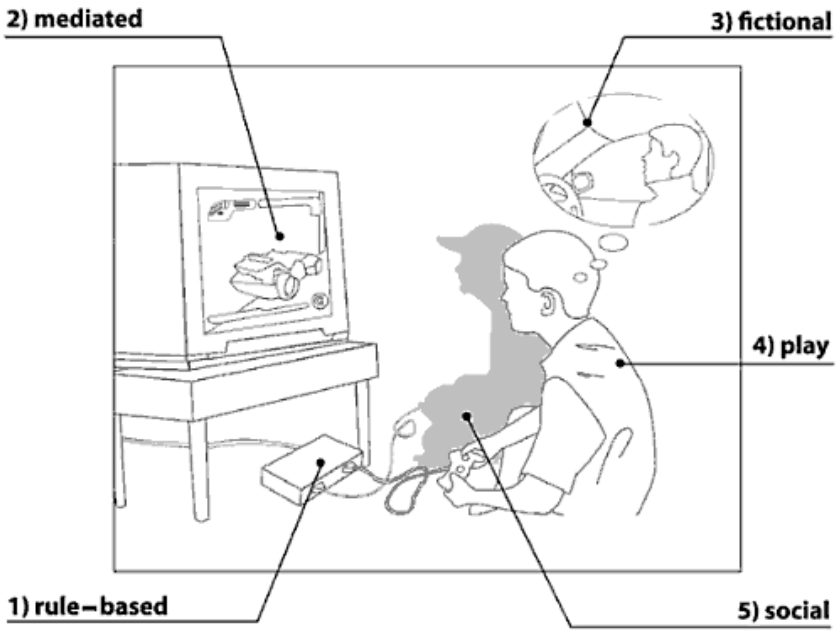

Figure 6.2 Five analytical planes. A reprint from Michael Nitsche's *Video Game Spaces* (2008, p. 15).

The last two spaces focus on the player persona and include their interaction with the game's hardware (*play space*) and with other players (*social space*) in case of games featuring a multiplayer mode. Since this study is concerned mainly with the player character's perception of and interaction with the in-game space, the *mediated* plane – or what I refer to as game space – is of primary importance to it.

Although Nitsche's categorisation of space has been created specifically with video games in mind, similar points of reference may be observed in the evaluation of the theatrical space. According to Ubersfeld, theatrical space may be approached from three different points of departure: the text, the stage and the audience (1999, p. 103). When translated to video games, the first two dimensions – the text and the stage - could be related to the development of game concept and game story (included in the Game Design Document, GDD), and to the actual design process, which involves level design, user interaction design, modelling and animation, AI programming or sound effect design. These are the layers underpinning the actual in-game space, explored and interacted with by the players. The third point of reference for the study of theatrical space, mentioned by Ubersfeld, points towards the audience and denotes "the spectator's perception of stage space" (1999, p.

103). This approach, although not without certain modifications, may be translated to Nitsche's concept of the *mediated space*. It should be emphasised, however, that in case of theatre the space on stage is constructed by the actors through their physical movements (Ubersfeld 1999, p. 112), and the spectators are not typically meant to participate in this process.[40] In cRPG games, on the other hand, the player has the possibility both to watch the actions taking place on virtual stage, and to become an actor who actively participates in and shapes the gaming experience. Clearly, the latter activity is essential for a video game to take place. It is the case of forced participation, and as Jill Walker notices with regards to electronic text (2003, p. 96), the medium (whether it is a text or a video game mechanism) imposes a role onto its user, who has to accept it, if they want to participate in the gameplay experience. Observation is not a necessary condition for the video game to happen; participation is. When you read a narrative or watch a theatrical performance, you are a voyeur. On the other hand, "when you play a game, or enact the involuntary performatives of responding to a link in a hypertext, you are more than a voyeur. You enjoy that feeling of being part of the text, part of the machine" (Walker 2003, p. 97). You accept the fact that you are being forced into participation.

This twofold stage-hall dichotomy, which "confronts actors and spectators" (Ubersfeld 1999, p. 96) in theatre may be observed in the distinction between game space and play space. The former denotes the mediated plane of the virtual stage, while the latter positions the player in the audience and as a result makes them watch the in-game spectacle. The only dimension which blurs this clear-cut transposition from theatre to video games is the fact that by diving into the gameworld the player interacts with its space and, in doing so, alters it and leaves traces of their presence within it (Nitsche 2008, p. 205). This "functionality of

[40] Although the participation of audience is not a prerequisite for the theatrical performance to be realised on stage, it is being incorporated in several theatrical forms, which break the "fourth wall", separating the actor from the audience. The interplay between audience members and performers occurs, for instance in interactive theatre. An accurate example includes *Shear Madness*, a murder mystery play (originally written by a German playwright Paul Pörtner) staged for the first time in 1980 in Boston. The format of the play involves the audience in the process of questioning the actors in order to solve the crime committed on a landlady, who lives above the hair salon depicted on stage. Parts of the dialogue are improvised by the actors and refer to the local events, depending on where and when the play is staged. The ending of the play is somewhat unpredictable and also differs from performance to performance. Apart from the United States, the adaptation of *Shear Madness* was staged in Greece, Korea or Poland (Teatr Powszechny in Łódź and Teatr Kwadrat in Warsaw). The active participation of the audience has been also used in improvisational theatre and in forum theatre, introduced by Augusto Boal, for whom the fundamental element was the interaction between actors and spectators ("spect-actors") on stage. Various other forms of actor-audience interaction may be observed in street theatre or in children's theatre.

interactive digital media positions the player as a creative performing element inside the spatially located discourse" (2008, p. 212).

The question of functionality points towards a more tangible interaction between the player and the elements set in the gameworld. In computer role-playing games those elements entail inanimate objects or props (e.g. chests, rooms, doors, weapons) as well as AI agents or the so called non-player characters (NPCs). Interacting with the above elements of the game space creates the feeling of what Carrie Heeter calls *social* and *environmental presence*. The former denotes "the extent to which other beings (living or synthetic) also exist in the world and appear to react to you", while the latter defines "the extent to which the environment itself appears to know that you are there and to react to [your actions]" (Heeter 1992, qtd. in Nitsche 2008, p. 205).

6.3 The Player Character Grid in Video Games

As I have demonstrated in section 6.1, the phenomena Ubersfeld discusses in relation to the theatrical character grid can also be applied to the analysis of a video game character. However, since her model focuses on traditional drama and theatre, it does not take into account the interactive role of the audience. In video games the characters are not only pre-designed and presented on the screen, but more importantly embodied, steered and customised (in case of cRPGs) by the players. This distinctive element, allowing players to influence their VG characters and become part of their identity (Player-Character) is the focal point of the methodology presented in this section. Therefore, I will only employ those aspects of Ubersfeld's grid that contribute to the interactive model of the PC in computer role-playing games. The notions of actant, live actor and individualising signs will be considered important for the structural plane of the Player Character Grid.

Although discourse analysis as proposed by Ubersfeld will not be applied in my methodology, the significance of dialogue trees in games will be brought up in my close analyses. From the point of view of player character customisation, the choices and effects triggered by dialogue options are more important than their linguistic properties. The PC is shaped by the dialogue choices and these allow the player to change the course of the story in the game. As far as speech, voice, and tone are concerned, the player does not exert any

impact on them; the lines are pre-recorded in the studio. In some games (e.g. *Fallout* series) the PC is mute, so the players can imagine their PC's voice or articulate the dialogue lines themselves. Those aspects will be further discussed with reference to concrete examples in Chapters 7, 8, and 9.

The twofold existence of the theatrical character on the textual and staged level is reflected in their role as "mediator between text and performance, between writer and spectator and between pre-existing meaning and final meaning" (Ubersfeld 1999, p. 93).[41] The same may be said about the video game player character, who combines a pre-designed form with an on-screen construct shaped by the players themselves in accordance with their preferences. In this respect, the character acts as a platform joining the designers or interface with the gamers. Most importantly, however, the initial meaning assigned to the player character is shaped and constructed through the player's actions taken within the gameworld. As I will demonstrate, on a certain level the cRPG character has a lot in common with the theatrical character analysed by Ubersfeld, and thus her methodology may be adapted to the structural plane of the Player Character Grid demonstrated in this study.

The process of theatricalisation applied to the cRPG character refers us back to the basic principle of Ubersfeld's grid – the division into a textual and a staged set. Its dual nature resonates especially well with a video game character. In theatre the first set designates the written text as opposed to its concrete realisation on stage. In cRPG games, where character development throughout the game is crucial, a textual dimension would refer to a pre-designed conceptual and visual set of attributes belonging to the PC. The actual adjustment of the available features happens on the virtual stage as soon as the player enters the game. The player character customisation process used in *Neverwinter Nights* (Bioware 2002) is a representative example. The game offers seven races, eleven basic classes, nine

[41] It should be emphasised, however, that the notion of final meaning became problematic in the light of such literary theories as deconstruction, reader-response theory or New Criticism. The certainty of any text's referentiality was undermined by Jacques Derrida, for whom various meanings in a given text lead to its undecidability (Burzyńska & Markowski 2007, p. 374). Similarly, in reader-response theory the ultimate meaning of the text cannot be pinned down, as every reader is perceived as an active agent, taking part in the process of interpretation. As a result, the text may have an infinite number of unique meanings, depending on the reader's perception of it. Also New Critics questioned final meaning and emphasised the notion of ambiguity of the text, which according to them includes many simultaneous meanings. The author's role in the creation of intended meaning is challenged as well under the name of "intentional fallacy."

personality attributes and six further attributes to which various skills have been assigned. As a result, players have 8,316 combinations at their disposal (Pisarski & Sikora, p. 190). It should be noted that those numbers are approximate and take into consideration only the initial stage of the game, before the player character is sent on their first quest. This means they will have further development possibilities during the gameplay, making choices and interacting with non-player characters.

Our pre-designed player character (actant) is brought to life on the virtual stage by the player and as a result becomes an animated PC – a term I will use to refer to a video game equivalent of Ubersfeld's *live actor*. The process of PC animation or its in-game theatricalisation (bringing it to the virtual stage) is accompanied by the allocation of individual signs. Those visual and conceptual signifiers – related to the PC's appearance customisation and attribute modelling – change the in-game character from a pre-designed vessel; and a myriad of options to an actualised individual entity, controlled by a concrete player. With reference to theatrical characters Ubersfeld discusses the importance of names and physical determinations, which are responsible for constructing an actor out of a character. Although name and appearance customisations are also crucial individuality indicators in many video games (*Mass Effect, Neverwinter Nights, Fallout 3*), the cRPG genre relies predominantly on extensive attribute allocation, and this feature makes cRPG characters so distinct, not only from their theatrical counterparts, but also from characters present in other video game genres, which do not require such a complex customisation (e.g. action-adventure games, such as *Prince of Percia*, *GTA,* or *Mirror's Edge*).

The first dimension of the player character analysis, related to Ubersfeld's semiological model, is demonstrated in the first part (PC – Structural Plane) of the Player Character Grid in figure 6.3. The methodological model consists of two planes, a structural and a referential one. In accordance with the first level of the Grid, the player character is depicted as an integral element within the game as a system. Building upon Ubersfeld's theatrical character's methodology, the PC is analysed as an abstract actantial figure, and an actor/animated PC – its counterpart impersonated by a concrete player. Once the potential player character (actant) is embodied by the player, its structural analysis is conducted from a player-centric perspective.

Such a point of view requires the integration of other important in-game elements, which influence and co-create the player character's persona within the gameworld. Section 6.3.1 will introduce the Pivot Player Character Model, which embraces the complexity of the PC's experience from a structural point of view. The middle column refers to the methodology needed to analyse the elements to the left and right.

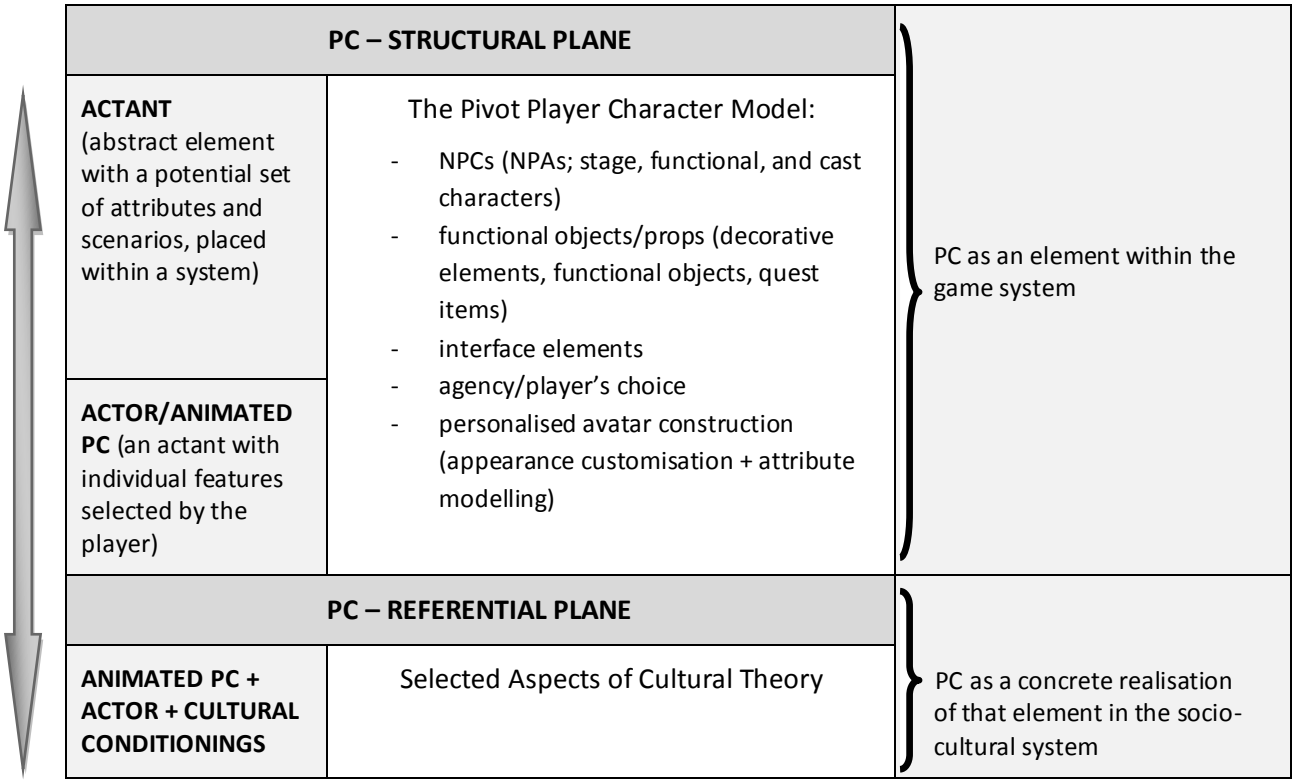

Figure 6.3 The Player Character Grid in Video Games

The Referential Plane of the Player Character Grid portrays the PC, not as a mechanical element within the system, but as a concrete realisation of that element in the socio-cultural context. As I have emphasised in Chapter 5, video games do not exist in a technological vacuum, and are in fact the products of culture, which influences the way characters are represented and interpreted (Newman 2004, pp. 127-129). The Referential Plane thus may incorporate a wide spectrum of aspects of Cultural Theory (see Chapter 4) into the analysis of the player character in a given video game.[42] Although it constitutes an important part of the player character study, due to space constraints, in this thesis I will not conduct an

[42] This multidisciplinary approach to culture may draw on: semiotics, feminism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis or gender studies among others.

analysis based on the referential plane. Instead, I will eliminate the psychologising or psychoanalysing discourse constructed around the character (Ubersfeld 1999, p. 75) in order to demonstrate how the player character functions in the gameworld and what in-game components influence that functioning.

It is also worth noticing how the PC's development progresses in accordance with the presented continuum between an actant and an actor/animated PC (structural plane), and an animated PC perceived through the cultural prism (referential plane). Those three different perspectives depict the player character first as a structural element with a predefined set of capabilities, then as a realised set of capabilities selected by a concrete player (the choices are narrowed down and an actant PC becomes an animated PC), and finally the PC reaches yet another level of individualisation, by which a layer of culturally significant conditionings is added to the animated PC. Using the example of *Fallout 3*, we may identify a PC as an empty nameless vessel with a set of available attributes, perks and decisions, which later in the game will form it into a concrete character. Once the player impersonates the vessel, it becomes a Jenny (a possible name for our female avatar) with neutral Karma, a certain number of points allocated to: strength, perception, endurance, charisma, intelligence, agility, and luck (S.P.E.C.I.A.L), and a few items in the Pip-Boy's 3000 inventory. Once Jenny proceeds through the game, develops her skills, levels of morality (between -1.000 and + 1.000) and makes choices that influence her relation to other in-game elements (NPCs), she and her decisions, as well as the reactions of NPCs, may be then interpreted according to a certain cultural scenario.

Such a scale contained in both planes of the Player Character Grid reflects a variety of PC research presented in Chapter 5 – the analysis conducted in accordance with this methodology may reflect upon characters as: functions and capabilities, drivers of agency leading to individualised constructs, as representational gendered icons, player's embodiment, or entities controlled by the player and juxtaposed against the game's AI.

6.3.1 The Pivot Player Character Model

Since the *modus operandi* of the Pivot Player Character Model, as mentioned in the previous chapters, is based on the structuralist mode of thinking, it will endeavour to find regularities

and repetitive patterns in the player character's experience within the discussed cRPG gameworlds. Furthermore, its pragmatic application to the three case studies introduced in Chapters 7, 8, and 9 assumes the researcher's involvement and this necessitates a systematised player-centric perspective. The Pivot Model will thus focus on the game-as-a-system, whereas its empirical application will concentrate on the game-as-played.

Although analysing the player persona in cRPGs in accordance with a prescribed model proposed in this study might seem a phenomenological act, it diverges from this absolutist path by implying that the framework in question is only one of the possible ways of analysing the PC. The way the gameplay is experienced by each player will differ, despite the presence of a general leading structure for video game analysis. A similar perspective is shared by Consalvo and Dutton who summarise their method with the following words: "This template is meant to serve as one way (likely among others) for game analysts to approach games in a way that is systematic but not rigidly so" (2006, p. 3).

The Pivot Player Character Model (the main methodological tool in the structural plane of the Player Character Grid) encompasses five major building blocks: the player character itself, non-playable characters, props and inventory, interface, and agency. As stated above, the PC is an entry point around which all the other units oscillate. The diagram in figure 6.4 illustrates the correlations between the individual elements of the model, which are explicated in the following paragraph.

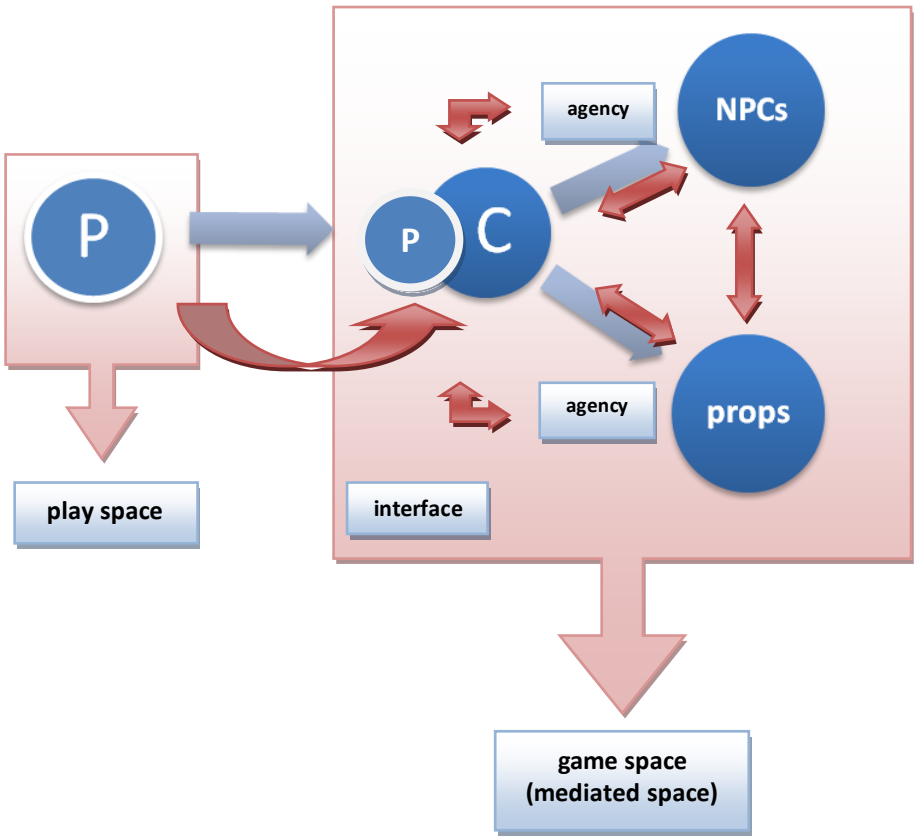

Figure 6.4 The Pivot Player Character Model

The player character (PC) constitutes the main element of the entire methodology and a central point of the Pivot Player Character Model. The other components, such as non-playable characters (NPCs) and objects or props revolve around it, and are analysed from the PC's perspective.[43] The PC consists of two layers: a player (P) and a character, or avatar (C). Following Nitsche's representation of space in video games (2008, p. 17), P belongs to the play space, which is external to the game space and "includes the player and the video game hardware" (2008, p. 18). It should be noticed here that when Michael Nitsche came up with his definition of game space, video game hardware was still its primary distinguishing mark. With the introduction of Microsoft's Kinect for Xbox 360 in 2010 (also known by its original code name Project Natal), a controller-free era in gaming started. Kinect enables its users to play a range of games on the Xbox 360 console without the need to operate any physical controllers. Kinect's natural user interface is based on gesture, facial and voice recognition. Such a controller-free solution in video gaming has various implications for the embodied

[43] An object or a prop in may also be referred to as an "entity". Such terminology is used by Bogost and Mateas, who define it as an element involved in the dynamics of the system, and producing meaning (2011, p. 3).

experience of the players. The process of creating one's virtual body has considerably changed with the shift from text based games and virtual worlds (Multi User Dungeons) to the fully graphical video games and VWs such as *Second Life* (Fizek & Wasilewska 2011). Controller-free software adds yet another dimension to this shift. The players not only identify themselves with their cyber representations on the basis of graphical features, but also take into account the movement of their actual bodies mapped onto the screen. With the advent of Microsoft's Kinect technology, the human-machine cybernetic feedback loop seems to be tightening even more vehemently than ever before.

C occupies the game space, or to be more precise the mediated space – "the space of the image plane, […] which consists of all the output the system can provide in order to present the rule-based game universe to the player" (2008, p. 18). Once the player adopts the identity of the character within a game, they (players) become its integral part and see the gameworld through the avatar's eyes. It should be emphasised here that the level of identification with the game's character on the player's part to a great extent depends on the point of view (POV) applied in the game. Thus, when analysing PCs and, what follows, the relations between the impersonated character and the player in individual games, we must take into consideration various types of POVs (first-person, third-person/top-down and over-the-shoulder).

Another dividing layer (or a joining one, depending on the theoretical perspective)[44] between the player and the character persona relates to the interface, which enables the PC to experience the game space. The player exerts their control over the game's elements by means of agency, which is conveyed via the interface. Furthermore, in many games there is a constant interplay between NPCs (Artificial Intelligence) and props. NPCs have the ability to pick up certain objects and make use of them just in the same way a PC does. Manipulating

[44] Interface may be perceived as a dividing layer, which separates players and their actual bodies from the video game characters impersonated on the screen. The players cannot merge with the PCs and literally see the virtual world through their eyes. The interface is there to break the suspension of disbelief and to remind the players of their dual nature with relation to the game. The introduction of controller-free hardware (Microsoft's Kinect) seems to be blurring this boundary by limiting the on-screen interface and removing the hardware, such as game pads, keyboard, mouse, joystick etc. The players use their own body to control their avatars and in doing so, decrease the distance between themselves and the virtual personas they embody. On the other hand, the interface (especially the natural user interface used in Kinect) may be perceived as means – far from being perfect – to join the player with the embodied avatar. The Gibsonian dream of obtaining a pure connection with the technological medium is being partially realised by granting more control to the player over their virtual bodies displayed on the screen.

the NPCs and props makes them responsive to the PC's actions, which is indicated by the red double pointed arrows in the diagram (PC ↔ NPCs ↔ props ↔ PC). The interplay between the above elements (PC, NPCs, props) may be referred to as "*entity manipulation* [, which] encompasses the alteration of the game made either by the player or by in-game entities" (Zagal et al. 2005, p. 5). *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Softworks 2008) is a good example of the above interplay. Here NPCs make use of the same guns as a PC and having dropped a certain object in a fight, they can pick it up again and interact with it.

6.3.1.1 Player Character Customisation

The initial process of player character customisation in cRPGs is based on the allocation of attributes, which in Proppian terms may be characterised as "the totality of all the external qualities of the characters: their age, sex, status, external appearance, peculiarities of this appearance, and so forth" (Propp 1970, p. 87). Although four decades have passed, the archetypal models introduced by Propp are still in many cases applicable to the modern cRPG design. As Jeff Howard notices, "[i]n terms of theoretical background, the critic of quest narratives most useful in constructing these characters [NPCs] is Vladimir Propp" (2008, p. 67). Although Howard refers to the design of non-playable characters, the main principle remains similar for PCs as well. The names and particular attributes of the characters are subject to change, but their actions and functions stay the same (1968, p. 20). In other words, different cRPG games picture distinct protagonists, but their mechanics and action patterns repeatedly overlap, even if the interface solutions vary, as will be demonstrated in Chapter 7, 8, and 9. It should also be emphasised that this research focuses on the creation of player characters from the player's perspective, which does not entail computer design per se, but is a direct consequence of it. Constructing their virtual personae in video games, players make use of a pool of pre-designed attributes and functions accessible via the interface or acquired throughout the game play as a result of an increase of experience points.

The array of choices enabling the players to customise not only their avatars, but also in-game surroundings, has become even more varied with the advent of gaming 3.0. Its distinctive features include user generated content and online collaboration players. Will Wright's *Spore* (Electronic Arts 2008) and Mark Healey's *Little Big Planet,* and *Little Big*

Planet 2 (Sony Computer Entertainment Europe 2008; 2011) are representative examples of this new phenomenon. Both games allow its players to add user-generated environments and create new levels, which may be later on downloaded by other gamers. Games 3.0, in comparison to its predecessors – games 1.0 and 2.0 – feature a fully dynamic content. The author of an article published in the Bloomberg Businessweek summarises this innovation as follows:[45]

> Game 1.0 was represented by the disconnected console and static game discs; Game 2.0 was brought to us by connected consoles (or PCs) that offered static content; but Game 3.0 takes connected consoles to a new level by leveraging online collaboration and user-generated content. (Radd 2007, n.p.)

As I have observed in Chapter 5, creating an on-screen character in cRPGs may be compared to filling in "a semiotic vessel intended to be worn glove-like by the players" (Dovey & Kennedy 2006, p. 91). A parallel metaphor has been also used by Petri Lankoski et al., who claim that a protagonist within a video game "act[s] merely as a vessel of functions" (Lankoski et al. 2003, p. 2). Gonzalo Frasca, on the other hand, draws from Fullop's (1993) ideas and compares the character to "a 'cursor' for the player's actions" (Frasca 2001, p. 2). Frasca comes to the conclusion that, depending on the particular game or a game genre, the functions and roles of the characters will differ, which in turn impacts the pool of actions a player may undertake. In other words, the player's agency is restricted by the designers' decisions concerning the characteristics of the player character and game mechanics. Let us translate this correlation into a specific example taken from *The Witcher* (2007). If we wanted to go against our protagonist's destiny and become an exceptionally negative character slaying its allies and fellow witchers, to our disappointment, we would not be able to pursue such a sombre path. The game mechanics would prevent us from killing random NPCs.

Restrictions of a similar nature await us in every single cRPG. Some sandbox-type games, such as *Fallout 3*, may offer its players a more flexible and open gameworld, but the number of possible actions is limited. Thus, a playable video game character may be compared to a vessel of functions, but their pool has been already specified by the game's designers.

[45] Player-generated content and Game 3.0 have been also widely discussed by Alan Meades (2010).

What the player is left with is the sequence of their selection, which oftentimes generates numerous combinations of attributes and outcomes. Relating this principle to Ubersfeld's character study introduced in section 6.2.1, we can see the relation between the semiotic vessel and the actantial figure, and between the player's actions and the actorial role discussed in the previous paragraphs. Clearly, an actor, not constrained by the digital code, is granted more freedom in their performance than a player is. An extreme example involves improvisational theatre, in which actors carry out spontaneous activities. A predetermined structure, which is the core of the performance, acts as a springboard for, to a great extent, unpredictable actions. In video games, on the other hand, if players want to go beyond a pre-programmed role of their character, they have to resort to modding or cheating. These non-standard methods of modifying the designed gameplay allow the players to alter the content of the game, either partially or entirely, depending on the type of modifications or cheat codes used.

A personalised avatar construction is a complex process, which develops over time. It involves the following individuality indicators: the first one typically entails name and sex choice as well as appearance customisation, while the second one is more central to the game play's mechanics and focuses on attribute modelling. The division is represented in the diagram in figure 6.5.

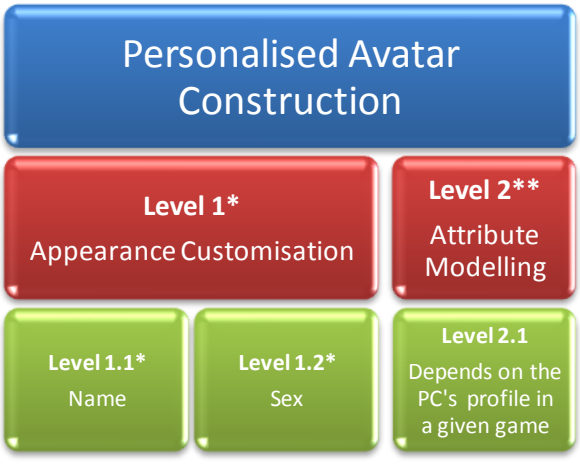

Figure 6.5 Individuality Indicators in the Personalised Avatar Construction

* Levels 1, 1.1 and 1.2 are not always present in cRPGs, although they are common (see: *Neverwinter Nights*, *Fallout 3*, *Mass Effect*)

** Level 2 and its sublevel 2.1 may include, e.g. character traits, physical statistics, magical powers etc. In *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Softworks 2008) a player character is defined by a list of S.P.E.C.I.A.L attributes, such as: strength, perception, endurance, charisma, intelligence, agility, luck. Additionally, the PC's effectiveness is determined by derived statistics (e.g., action points, fire resistance or health), skills (combat, active and passive skills) and perks gained after the completion of every level (e.g. Thief, Scrounger, or Contract Killer). A full list of player character's attributes in *Fallout 3* may be accessed at Fallout Wikia or in the official *Fallout 3* strategy guide (Howard 2008).

6.3.1.2 Appearance Customisation

In some cRPG games the first level is non-existent and "characters are fixed givens rather than compositional palettes offered to the player" (Burn 2006, p. 77). Such is the case in *The Witcher* (CD Projekt 2008), in which the player impersonates Geralt of Rivia, one of the witchers who are known for their mystic powers enhanced by various elixirs. The mechanics of the game does not allow for the change of the PC's appearance or name, unlike highly customisable games, such as *Fallout 3, Fallout: New Vegas* (Bethesda Softworks 2008; 2010) or *Mass Effect* (Bioware 2008), where the player may alter their protagonist's name and sex[46] at the beginning of the game. In *Fallout 3* the PC's sex may be also adjusted directly before leaving the Vault (Escape quest). In most cases, the PC's appearance in cRPGs seems to be an abundant addition, which does not necessarily affect the nature of gameplay, at least on the mechanical level. Especially, when the first-person point of view (POV) is applied. As far as representational game analysis goes, Aarseth's opinion related to the ludic significance of the avatar's appearance is that it is irrelevant to players – a different-looking Lara Croft will not alter the gameplay; as the game is played from a first person POV, Lara's body becomes transparent (Aarseth 2004, p. 48).

[46] Appearance modifications have been always prevalent phenomena in text-based MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons), where the players/users were able to provide limitless textual descriptions regarding their characters and were given the possibility to choose from up to ten different gendered and agendered identities (Turkle 1995; Rosenberg 1992; Boellstorff 2008). Although gender changes are much restricted in the recent graphical virtual worlds (e.g. *Second Life*, *Project Entropia*), appearance modifications seem to thrive. Fully customisable character profiles are also common in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) genre, where a personalised and unique avatar is a distinguishing mark among thousands of different players. In offline cRPGs this is not always the case. The possibility to fully adjust one's avatar may give the players a greater sense of control over their character's life, but it does not directly affect the course of the game. In cRPGs, unlike in VWs or MMORPGs, the appearance itself does not constitute a meaningful part of the gameplay as far as mechanics is concerned.

As much as Dovey & Kennedy agree with Aarseth that "a different-looking body would not affect the underlying game mechanic", they emphasise its importance in transforming the experience of gameplay (2006, p. 92). Clearly, there are certain games in which the change of sex is followed by a series of minor adjustments in the game's mechanics. In *Mass Effect* (Bioware 2008), for instance, the gameplay changes depending on whether we're playing a female or a male avatar. Various avatars react differently to our PC, depending on their sex. For instance, if we choose to play a female avatar, Commander Shepard is very likely to get involved in a lesbian love affair with Dr. Liara T'Soni, an alien scientist. Although a male PC can also have an affair with Liara T'Soni, he will not be able to encounter any homosexual relationships with other characters.[47] By the same token, in *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Softworks 2008) slightly different traits are assigned to female and male PCs, which in effect influences the character's development. Having specified basic attributes in *Fallout 3*, the so called S.P.E.C.I.A.L.[48] statistics, after reaching each of the levels players have the possibility to assign various perks to their character. "Perks are benefits that are more specific to your character development, and allow much more focused specialization in a chosen field" (Hodgson 2008, p. 14). And so, one of the first level 2 perks available is Black Widow for a female character and Lady Killer for its male counterpart. In both cases, player characters are equipped with an extra 10% damage to all characters, either female (for male PCs) or male (for female PCs), and some additional dialog options with female or male NPCs respectively.

However, as far as perks are concerned, a great majority of them are not associated with the player character's sex. Aarseth's remark, however, referred primarily to the avatar's bodily features. In other words, PC's skin colour or shoulder width does not in any way alter the game play. Irrespective of the appearance, the player character will explore the same space, interact with the same props or challenge identical NPCs. At least, this seems to be the case in a great majority of games. *Spore* (Maxis 2008), a multi-genre metaverse god game, goes against that line and makes the characters' corporeal representations significant elements of gameplay. The avatar's bodily features determine the way the character interacts with the

[47] "At some point in the game's development, it was also possible for a female Shepard to romance Ashley Williams or a male Shepard to romance Kaidan Alenko." This option was later removed (Mass Effect Wikia).
[48] "S.P.E.C.I.A.L. is an acronym that stands for your seven Primary Statistics in *Fallout 3*: Strength, Perception, Endurance, Charisma, Intelligence, Agility, and Luck" (Hodgson 2008, p. 4).

NPCs and other game elements. In *Spore* our success within the gameworld depends on the efficiency of the creature's body design. Since the player has to lead their designed creature through six different evolutionary phases, they have to make sure their character has bodily features, which enable it to survive, starting from the microscopic level and ending at the space stage.

Dovey's & Kennedy's observation concerning the influence of the avatar's body on the experience of gameplay is not far from being accurate. However, it corresponds to the representational dimension of the player character, which belongs to a different analytical order than the one discussed by Aarseth. Although the representational dimension of the character is included in my methodological grid, close analyses performed in this study will focus on the structural/mechanical aspects of the character.

An important question to be asked as far as "stereotyped visual bipolarity of game characters" and "restrictive gender bipolarity" are concerned (Schmieder 2009, p. 5), is whether gender should be an appearance feature in the first place. In most video games and virtual worlds (e.g. *Second Life*, *Project Entropia*) graphical representation of sex follows a strong hetero-normative pattern – a strongly built male character and a slender female PC. As Christian Schmieder notices with regards to *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004):

> At first glance, sex seems to play an oppressive role in WoW. Immediately, when choosing their characters, players have to decide whether they want to play a male or a female character. Regardless of [the PC's race] male characters are bigger and more strongly built […] whereas female characters are more delicate and show articulate breast curves. (2009, p. 8)

It is worth noticing that such a strong hetero-normative standardisation of characters in video games is influenced by the views shared by a general body of players, who obtain access to 'beta tests' and 'alpha tests' before a given game is released to the market (Rubenstein 2007; qtd. in Schmieder 2009, p. 9). In most cases, the game designers' decisions reflect the beliefs of their target gamers.

6.3.1.3 Interaction with Props and NPCs

Coming back to the geographical construction of space, I shall yet again establish my point of reference in theatre studies, for which the construction of stage space is of paramount importance. As Ubersfeld notices, theatrical space is not a void, but a space filled with a series of concrete elements (1999, p. 120), such as: the actors' bodies, accessories and the elements belonging to the décor. It should be emphasised that in theatre the analysis of objects may be performed both on the textual and on the stage level. However, when analysing video games from the PC's perspective, it only makes sense to scrutinise the functionality of the in-game objects. We do not need to go deeper into the level of 3D modelling, animation and texturing, at least not in the analysis performed in this thesis.

As Ubersfeld observes, the relationship between the characters and the inhabited world may be determined by focusing on the types of objects, on their number and on the way they function on stage and beyond it. Her typology of theatrical objects seems to be overlapping with the distinction provided by Jeff Howard (2008) with regards to items present in cRPGs. As he remarks, "role-playing games [are] abound in objects, which can be organized into 'tiers' according to their relative functional and thematic importance" (2008, p. 77). The three levels introduced by Howard comprise:

1. Decorative elements;
2. Functional objects;
3. 'Quest items' or 'plot items'.

The lowest level (decorative elements) includes props which lend a sense of realism to the in-game world and do not influence the course of gameplay from a mechanical point of view. Functional objects (such as weapons, armour or food), on the other hand, have a direct impact on the PC's performance within the game. Such props may be distributed as the rewards of quests or they may be looted from other agents in the game. Many functional objects may be also found randomly in the gameworld or purchased from non-player characters. The third level designates 'quest items', which "play an essential role in the back stories behind a quest" (2008, p. 77). Those props are normally handed over to the PC and stored in their inventory.

Ubersfeld's description of theatrical objects is reflected in Howard's depiction of video game entities. Since theatre and cRPGs seem to have a lot in common in terms of abstract rules governing character and space construction, this parallelism may contribute to a wider understanding of PC's experience within video games. There is, however, one apparent difference with regards to object classification according to the above typologies. Among theatrical elements Ubersfeld places actors' bodies. Actors, according to Ubersfeld, may function either as the performers of locutionary acts or as objects, in much the same way as other on-stage items do. This, however, may be done only when the actors represent inanimate entities. In cRPG games non-player characters tend to be classified as separate elements to props. This is because they are modelled on animate creatures, which react to the PC's input in a meaningful way.

Gameworlds are also filled with more generic NPCs, whose primary function is to populate the gameworld in a decorative fashion. Such NPCs, when interacted with, generate simple responses, which do not contribute to the way the story unfolds in a cRPG game. The player character cannot hold a coherent conversation with those agents as the dialogue tree is non-existent in this case. Taking into consideration a limited interaction model of the generic non-player characters, they may be compared to inanimate decorative objects responsible for the activation of suspension of disbelief in a given gameworld. Since those agents do not contribute to the construction of the PC, I will only examine the significance of those NPCs which react to the player character's input in a meaningful way.

In the introductory part of section 6.2 we assumed that player characters exist within a concrete game space and are constructed via the interaction with its elements. The actions a PC may perform by means of functional objects and quest items define its role within the gameworld. Very often, the use of certain props is distributed in accordance with the PC's attributes selected at the early stages of the game. The allocation of experience points may also influence further interaction with in-game objects. For instance, if the PC's lockpick skills (allowing to open the lock without the proper key) in *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Softworks 2008) are not good enough, the character will not be able to obtain access to some locations, which require very high lockpick skills. Locks are rated according to the following 25% increments: Very Easy - 0%, Easy - 25%, Average - 50%, Hard - 75% and Very Hard - 100% (Fallout Wikia). The lockpick skill in *Fallout 3* is closely related to the attributes of perception

and agility. Therefore, the more experience points we allocate to the above traits, the higher the chance we have of opening an ammunition box or unlocking an inaccessible location. By upgrading the lockpick skills and related attributes, the player character may eventually gain the Infiltrator or Thief perk. In such complex cRPG worlds as that of *Fallout 3*, the interaction with objects is closely related to the system of attribute allocation, which is responsible for constructing the player character's persona. Of course, not all the instances of interaction with functional objects need to be linked with intricate characterology and the acquisition of experience points. Simple actions of opening the door or picking up the loot do not always shape the PC or influence their role within the gameworld. Further examples of PC's interaction with props will be discussed in Chapters 7-9, in which close analyses of concrete cRPG games will be provided.

A rich collection of various manifestations of interaction with functional objects in video games is being collated by the Game Ontology Project (Zagal et al. 2005). The top levels of GOP include: interface, rules, goals, entities and entity manipulation. The last category, which aims at listing diverse activities grouped around in-game objects, is of primary importance to the study of player character's experience within the gameworld.

In order to understand the significance of the last category, we should first examine how the entities included in the ontology are defined. Zagal et al. describe entities as "the objects within the game that the player manages, modifies or interacts with at some level" (2005, p. 5). This definition encompasses all the three types of game props Jeff Howard refers to (decorative elements, functional objects and quest items) as well as in-game agents or NPCs. Focusing on the representational layer we may also classify the entities as "objects [such as agents, obstacles, walls or power-ups[49]] that make up the reality of the game world" (2005, p. 8.). Notably, in-game objects acquire meaning and influence the game play predominantly when they are interacted with. This interaction has been defined by Zagal et al. as entity manipulation, which denotes the actions performed by the player character towards or by means of other in-game entities. Those in-game objects are determined by their attributes (such as velocity, damage, owner) and their abilities (such as jumping, flying, teleporting).

[49] Power-ups denote the objects which equip the player character with extra abilities during the gameplay. One of the most popular power-ups in video game culture includes the Super Mushroom in *Super Mario Bros* (Nintendo 1985).

The first category refers to simple entity description by means of adjectives. Entity attributes may be altered by various abilities assigned to them. Those abilities denote the actions performed by the entities. As Zagal et al. explain, “attributes [may be] altered permanently (changing character statistics in a role-playing game) or temporarily (receiving a power-up that changes the power of a character’s punch for a short period of time)" (Zagal et al. 2005, p. 8). An example of a permanent ability may be the speed boost in *Super Metroid*.
A temporal ability, on the other hand, may be illustrated by a super pellet in *Pac-Man*, which enables the character to eat ghosts (Gameontology.org). Some of the examples of entity manipulation listed by the Game Ontology Project include the following actions: to collide, to create, to move or to customise.

The objective of the Game Ontology Project is to create a “framework for describing, analyzing and studying games, by defining a hierarchy of concepts abstracted from an analysis of many specific games” (Zagal et al. 2005, p. 1). Such an analysis will enable the authors of the GOP to perform a detailed study of the design space of games and to understand the relationships between different elements present in the gameworlds (2005, p. 2). The question is, however, how the working principles of the GOP may enhance the study of the player character within cRPG gameworlds.

The category of entity manipulation may be a useful tool in performing a close analysis of a PC in a concrete game. When focusing on the spatial interactions between the PC and the props and NPCs, we may create an exemplary list of actions the player character is able to generate in the gameworld. As I have demonstrated on the example of *Fallout 3*, entity manipulation in cRPG games contributes to the construction of an individual PC. The player shapes their character not only via appearance modifications or initial attribute allocation, but also via the choices made in the game. In cRPGs, attribute modification is closely related to entity manipulation in that the latter in many cases is not possible without the previous allocation of required skills and traits or the acquisition of needed information. This mechanism may be observed for instance in *The Witcher* (CD Projekt Red 2007), where the player character has to acquire knowledge about certain alchemical ingredients to be able to use them for mixtures, which in turn enhance the PC’s performance in combat. The gameworld in *The Witcher* is also filled with special ingredients obtainable by killing unique monsters or by picking up rare plants. Those ingredients may be used to obtain mixtures

granting powerful effects, which may contribute to the acquisition of new talents or skills (The Witcher Wiki). The number of different skill combinations and available functional objects that may be interacted with by the player character lead to a considerable range of attribute combinations. Therefore, a tangible analysis of the PC may be performed only from the perspective of a concrete character constructed by a professional gamer researcher. Chapters 7, 8, and 9 will constitute such a methodological attempt to apply all those categories and elements to the development of concrete characters in selected cRPGs.

By the same token, player characters are sculpted when interacting with the AI (Artificial Intelligence) agents in the gameworld by means of dialogue options. In theatre a dialogue may be defined as a "conversation between two or more characters, […] generally a verbal exchange" (Pavis & Shantz 1998, p. 96). Let us assume a similar point of reference for video games. In offline cRPG games, dialogues between the player character and non-player characters constitute a substantial part of the gameplay. By accessing the dialogue options the player not only familiarises themselves with the background story, accepts or rejects quests or exchanges items, but also – in the case of more complex games – indirectly shapes the moral profile of their PC persona. For instance, in *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007) choices made by the PC during the gameplay (access to those choices is granted by dialogue options) place them on a continuum between Paragon and Renegade. Paragon points may be obtained as a result of committing good deeds. Moreover, "points are often gained when asking about feelings and motivations of characters" (*Mass Effect* Wiki). On the contrary, Renegade points are attached to ferocious actions and negative or sarcastic responses selected from the dialogue tree. "Renegade or Intimidate dialogue choices (colored red in dialogue trees) generally lead to people disliking and even fearing [the player character]" (*Mass Effect* Wiki). It should be noticed here that in *Mass Effect* morality is not reflected on a single scale, but is represented by two separate scales. Therefore, a positive action or response attached to the Paragon scale will not influence the Renegade scale.

Another important function is fulfilled by dialogue. In theatre "the dialogue may sometimes seem to be the individual or specific property of a character. Every speech by a character has its own rhythm, vocabulary and syntax" (Pavis & Shantz 1998, p. 98). Those verbal individuality indicators contribute to the overall construction of the character's persona. In offline cRPGs, on the other hand, the player character has pre-designed dialogue options at

their disposal. There is no variation in vocabulary or rhythm. In some games – for instance in *Fallout 3* – the voice of the PC is not heard at all. The player can only read the dialogue trees and select a specific response from the list. Dialogue in video games – applying Anne Ubersfeld's terminology again – does not constitute "a set of determinations [which] make[s] an individual out of the character" (1999, pp. 83-84).

Although single dialogue options in cRPGs are pre-designed sets of choices and their greater significance very often cannot be observed immediately,[50] the choices made by the player alter the way the PC is perceived by other characters (NPCs) in the game. Usually, the dialogues are constructed in such a way that players need to select one option over another. For example, they have to decide whether to accept the quest offered by a non-player character or not. Depending on the choice, the PC may discover new locations in the gameworld and gain new weapons or information necessary to proceed in the game. Needless to say, very often the dialogue options influence the morality of the character, as has been presented in the previous paragraph. A detailed evaluation of dialogue trees and the way they contribute to the construction of the PC in selected video games will be provided in Chapters 7, 8, and 9.

6.4 Concluding Remarks

The current chapter provided an overview of elements, which comprise a comprehensive methodological tool for the player character research in offline cRPGs. Characters in role-playing video games are not constructed in the same way as their literary or cinematic counterparts are. Therefore, a need for a medium-specific methodology is more than self-evident. In establishing a methodological foundation for the PC research, various levels and phenomena need to be taken into consideration. Thus, the Player Character Grid emphasises the importance of the inclusion of two ontological planes – a structural and a referential one. Acknowledging both dimensions of the PC has the potential to grasp its complexity, not confining the possible methodological research to one mode of perception.

[50] The operational principle of dialogue trees may be compared to the *modus operandi* of links in hypertext. Hypothetically, each link takes the user to a different place in text and may alter the way that text is read and interpreted.

Among many other theories discussed in Chapter 4, I have looked into theatre studies for valid points of reference for this study. Anne Ubersfeld's theatrical Character Grid provides a rich source for the structural analysis of the PC in cRPG games. The terminology Ubersfeld uses to scrutinise the actor, both on the textual and on the stage level, is highly applicable to computer role-playing games. The Player Character Grid and its components discussed in this chapter will constitute a model framework for the close analyses of the PCs in concrete games, such as *The Witcher* (CD Projekt 2007), *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Softworks 2008), and *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* (Activision 2004) conducted in Chapters 7, 8, and 9.

Chapter 7

Applying the Player Character Grid to *The Witcher*

As has been previously mentioned in Chapter 6, according to Ubersfeld, in contemporary semiology a theatrical character is no longer perceived as a copy of a human being, but rather as a point in which different functions intersect (1999, p. 72). Keeping this assumption in mind, I shall, in what follows, adapt Ubersfeld's theory to the video game character, and examine the PC in *The Witcher* (2007) as a set of traits, and a central element within the game's system. The process of player character construction will be demonstrated by means of the first-person player's narrative experienced by myself. However, before delving deeper into the game's content and applying the Player Character Grid to it, I will briefly outline the game's backstory and, by doing so, contextualise my further analysis of the PC.

7.1 The Backstory

The game's story and main characters have been inspired by "The Witcher" (1990), a collection of short stories by Andrzej Sapkowski, a Polish fantasy writer. The opening sequence of *The Witcher* adapts Sapkowski's first story of the same title ("The Witcher"), depicting the adventures of Geralt of Rivia, who is asked to cure King Foltest's daughter Adda of a fatal curse that turned her into a fierce monster referred to as Striga. The overall gameplay, although based on the above literary piece, diverges from it and directs the characters towards entirely new plot paths. The introductory cutscene pictures Geralt's successful battle with Striga. The protagonist does not kill the monster but instead cures her with the help of magical signs and turns her into a human being again. Several years pass after the encounter with Striga and one day Geralt is found unconscious on a field by his fellow witchers. He is transported to the witcher's fortress of Kaer Morhen.

There he meets a few other witchers and the sorceress Triss Merigold, who help him regain strength and improve his combat skills. Unexpectedly, the castle is attacked by the Salamandra bandits led by a mysterious assassin, the Professor, and two mages named Savolla and Azar Javed. Geralt, the other witchers and Triss fight a battle against the opponents, but unfortunately the latter manage to escape with the mutagens – alchemical substances that genetically modify the witchers and enhance their combat skills. After curing Triss of the wounds she receives during combat, the witchers leave Kaer Morhen and set off in different directions to trace the Salamandra. Geralt heads south to Vizima, the capital of Temeria, which is under the reign of King Foltest. However, before reaching the gates of the city Geralt stops at the outskirts. From now on the PC's mission is to expose the Salamandra, their leaders and the motifs behind their actions. The gameplay in the Outskirts of Vizima will constitute a sample material for the close analysis performed in section 7.3 of this Chapter.

7.2 Typical Gameplay

Before close-analysing a concrete section of gameplay in *The Witcher*, I should emphasise that the case study presented in this chapter will be conducted through the prism of the constituent elements of the Player Character Grid discussed in Chapter 6, and in relation to the theatrical character methodology introduced by Ubersfeld. The main driving force behind the proposed methodology is the actant-actor spectrum, illustrating the transition from the character as a potential set of attributes to a concrete construct embodied by the player. In relation to the character in theatre, Ubersfeld notes that the character's concrete existence can only be realised on stage through the performance of an actor (1999, p. 92). The character depicted in the text is only a virtual entity, an actant out of which an actual character may be formed. Performativity is also a crucial element in the construction of the player character in cRPGs. Unless embodied by the player, the VG character is an unrealised form, "an empty shell" (Adams & Rollings 2007, p.151), or, as Rehak refers to it, "a semiotic vessel" worn by the player (2003, p. 173).

This section demonstrates various interface solutions used during a typical gameplay sequence to create a character in *The Witcher*. The presented framework focuses on different solutions in the mechanics of the game, which empower the player and enable them to construct the actorial dimension of the player character. It should be noticed here that at the actantial level the framework is game-specific. Although in every cRPG the mechanism of constructing the player character involves the same set of elements (see the Pivot Player Character Model and its components), their representation within the actual gameworld differs and may involve various inventory options, different character attributes available, or a unique system of levelling up.

The gameplay in *The Witcher* is divided into seven parts: Prologue, Chapters I-V, and Epilogue, during which the player develops the main character by means of various interface elements and decision points crucial for the game's plot and the character's significance within it. At the actantial level of the PC's existence (see fig. 6.3 in Chapter 6: the first part of The Player Character Grid), they are perceived in terms of an abstract construct with a set of possible traits and decision points, which will be selected once the PC is embodied by the player. In *The Witcher* the development of the character – in terms of their traits, gained equipment, the knowledge of the gameworld, and the immediate condition of the PC (their *health, energy, and intoxication level*) – is illustrated by means of five different interface elements:

1. Character Development System,
2. Inventory,
3. Map,
4. Journal (comprising 8 subsections: Quests, Characters, Locations, Monsters, Formula, Ingredients, Glossary, Tutorials),
5. Medallion.

All the above components are crucial in the process of PC formation. As they are gradually filled with content, the process of PC animation (transition from an actant to an actor) takes place. As mentioned in Chapter 6, the term 'player character animation' is used in this thesis as an equivalent of character theatricalisation discussed by Ubersfeld with reference to theatre. Theatricalisation is achieved by means of individual signs, such as names and

physical determinations, which are responsible for constructing an actor out of a character. In video games the process of PC animation also involves the allocation of individual visual and conceptual signifiers. Those are made accessible to the player in the game's mechanics (XP distribution across various attributes and skills or the usage of in-game objects) and may be viewed in selected parts of the interface. In the subsequent sections I will introduce the five parts of the interface, and in section 7.3 I will present how they are filled with specific content selected by the player.

7.2.1 The Character Development System

As previously discussed, an actant is a construct with a potential set of attributes that an animated PC may be equipped with by the player. In The Witcher the actantial figure is depicted as a witcher characterised by a set of possible traits. Once this pre-designed actant is embodied by the player, customised according to their preferences, and placed in a particular story, he becomes an actor/animated PC – in this case Geralt of Rivia actualised by myself during gameplay. It should be emphasised that cRPGs do not always grant their players the ability to influence a character's physical attributes. *The Witcher's* developers (CD Projekt Red) made a decision to adapt a literary character into a gameworld and, by doing so, restrict the player's control over certain aspects of character creation. The player thus cannot alter the character's appearance, select their sex or specify their name. The same practical reason influenced the nature of the PC's trait distribution, which is related predominantly to combat rather than personality, morality, or diplomacy skills. The character development tree-like system consists of the following 15 traits (see fig. 7.1):

a) 4 Attributes: Strength, Dexterity, Stamina and Intelligence
b) 5 Signs: Aard, Igni, Yrden, Quen, and Axii [51]
c) 3 Steel Sword fighting styles: Strong Steel, Fast Steel, Group Steel
d) 3 Silver Sword fighting styles: Strong Silver, Fast Silver, Group Silver

Every trait includes five skill levels, each of which comprises three (level 1 and 5) or four (level 2, 3, and 4) skills. The PC accumulates experience points, and once a higher level is

[51] Signs constitute simple magic spells which enhance the witcher's combat skills by employing: a telekinethic thrust (Aard), gush of flames (Igni), a magical spikey trap (Yrden), a protective field around the character (Quen), and a mental wave turning the opponents into allies for a short period of time (Axii).

achieved they are exchanged for three types of talents (bronze, silver, gold), which the player can then distribute among selected skills. It should be emphasised, however, that all those different combinations of skills influence combat and the PC's career path can be developed only in the swordsmaster direction.

Figure 7.1 Character Development System in *The Witcher* (2007)

The PC is also characterised by the levels of progression in the witcher's career:[52]

1. Novitiate (level 1-9)
2. Rising (level 10-19)
3. Skilled (level 20-29)
4. Seasoned (level 30-39)
5. Master (40-49)
6. Legendary (level 50)

[52] *See the advancement table:* http://www.gamebanshee.com/thewitcher/advancementtable.php (Accessed 20 June 2011).

7.2.2 Inventory

Unlike the Character Development System, which is a list of the PC's traits and various abilities that may be gained by the character, the Inventory provides a visual representation of the items (e.g., weapons, potions, herbs, scrolls, food and others) collected throughout the game. The inventory consists of several sections, which depict the weapons used by the PC, give an overview of accumulated wealth, and provide storage space for quest items and other props, which may be collected in the gameworld. In *The Witcher* all the in-game objects are carried by the PC in a Satchel, which may contain: alcohol, blade enhancements, books and scrolls, bombs, food and drink, gifts, oils, potions, herbs, minerals, and monster parts.[53] Quest items are stored in a separate pocket.

Figure 7.2 Inventory in *The Witcher* (2007)

[53] In the enhanced edition (2008), the main inventory space has been divided into a Satchel (the main storage space for collected objects) and an Alchemy Sack (exclusively for alchemical ingredients, such as herbs, minerals, monster parts, and mutagens).

Apart from the Satchel and the Quest items compartment, some items may be stored or worn by the player character. Those include predominantly weapons (they cannot be stored anywhere else), armour, jewellery (there are two ring slots), and potions and bombs, which may be carried in Quickslots – the number of compartments depends on the type of armour worn by the PC (Studded Leather Jacket has one slot, Excellent Leather Jacket has two slots, while Raven's armour can store up to three items). There is also one trophy hook slot, where the PC may keep a trophy head.

The props accumulated by Geralt indirectly influence his development, and may change his state of knowledge about the surrounding world. For instance, only after the Witcher gains access to the Book of Swallow can he familiarise himself with 5 different formulae for potions, which have the power to upgrade the character's skills during combat. As a crucial part of the gameworld the objects enliven the game space, and often advance the plot (quest items, such as the ring of Eternal Fire, without which Geralt cannot complete quests at the Outskirts of Vizima). It should also be emphasised that the gameworld consists of three different kinds of objects: functional, quest items, and decorative items (Howard 2008, p. 77), the significance of which will be further discussed in section 7.3 following a close-analysis of a concrete gameplay scenario. Another valid point for discussion refers to the fact that the in-game objects can alter the PC either temporarily – changing the attributes for a short time – or permanently – changing the PC's overall statistics (Zagal 2005, p. 8). Section 7.3.2 will provide concrete examples of this process.

7.2.3 Map and Journal

From the point of view of characterisation, Map and Journal are crucial interface elements as they mirror the state of the PC's knowledge about the gameworld. Once a certain area has been explored by the PC, it appears on the map and displays various markers, which indicate specific locations and objects, such as: Campfire, Places of Power (spots allowing the performance of rituals)[54], Circles of Elements (points with strong magic enabling the PC to

[54] There are three types of rituals the PC can perform in *The Witcher:* Ritual of Magic (sign increase by 100% for 5 hours), Ritual of Purification (purifies the body of toxicity), and Ritual of Life (responsible for regeneration).

learn new signs and reinforce the ones already known)[55], some NPCs, quest locations, and quest NPCs.

Some of the elements depicted on the Map are further elaborated upon in the Journal, especially in the Locations category. At the actantial level, the Journal is an empty interface category that is gradually filled in by the information about the world surrounding the character. When viewed from such an angle, the information represented in the Journal may be perceived as the reflection of spatial or environmental storytelling, which privileges "spatial exploration over plot development" (Jenkins 2003, p. 8). In the case of The Witcher the PC's exploration of and interaction with in-game space enables the progression of events. More importantly, the Journal reflects the state of the PC's knowledge about the gameworld, and includes the following categories (see fig. 7.3):

1. Quests
2. Characters
3. Locations
4. Monsters
5. Formula
6. Ingredients
7. Glossary
8. Tutorials

Figure 7.3 Journal Categories in *The Witcher* (2007)

[55] There are five Elemental Circles, connected with blessings for each of five signs: The Circle of Lifeless Air, The Circle of Inner Fire, The Circle of Gate of Water, The Circle of Hanging Stones, and The Circle of Unwanted Power.

As can be observed from the categories listed above, with progression in the story the PC acquires a vast knowledge of the world surrounding him. Not only does the Journal represent the PC's internal knowledge (gained through the interaction with the objects and NPCs found in the game space), but also it develops an emergent narrative created as a result of gameplay (Jenkins 2003, p. 12). It should be mentioned here that the character's knowledge does not have to equate to the player's active knowledge about the gameworld. Geralt's apprehension of the surrounding reality is stored computationally and represented by in the Journal (Quests, Characters, Locations, Monsters, Formulas) and Inventory. The player, on the other hand, may forget certain aspects of the game, and in such a case the character's memory constitutes the in-game database, which allows the player to sink into the gameworld after a longer period of absence.

The Quests section of the Journal summarises new tasks and provides updated information on the existing or completed ones. This part of the interface illustrates the PC's internal knowledge, and contains not only data useful for the in-game character, but also meta-gaming elements directed exclusively to the player, such as the two browsing categories of quests (*by chapter or by progress*). It is the player that perceives the events in the game in terms of its constituent parts, i.e. chapters. Geralt operates on the level of the story and he cannot be familiar with the structural properties of the game's plot.

The Characters tab of the Journal gives access to information on the most crucial non-player characters encountered by the PC throughout the game. Likewise, the Locations category displays the most significant regions. In the Monsters tab the player can browse through numerous Bestiary entries, which describe the monsters either encountered by the PC himself, told about by other NPCs, or read about in the books and scrolls found in the gameworld. The Formula section is updated whenever the PC acquires new information about potions, bombs, and oils. This can be done by reading various books and scrolls. Similarly, the Ingredients tab presents the PC's level of knowledge about the ingredients needed for making numerous potions. As it is in the case of formulae, the information about the ingredients needed and their location may be either obtained from the NPCs or from books and scrolls. The Glossary includes selected information indispensable for the

understanding of the gameworld, its culture, locations, and inhabitants (e.g., Temerian history, dice poker, *Ithlinne's prophecy* and many others).[56]

The final category of Tutorials is not inherently connected with the PC, but rather constitutes a meta-gaming element, which breaks the immersion and is addressed to the player (similarly to the two quest categories discussed above). The entries provide information on how to confront NPCs in combat, pick up items in the gameworld, meditate in order to assign talents to the PC, or instruct the player on the various options of moving the character.[57]

7.2.4 The Witcher's Medallion

The last crucial part of the interface connected with the PC is the Witcher's medallion, which is placed in the upper left corner of the screen. The ring around the medallion functions as the progress meter of the experience points (XP). Every time the PC approaches the completion of a level, the ring fills up. It also shows the icons depicting active effects, such as magic signs, potions and spells. More importantly, however, the three bars attached to the medallion indicate the levels of: vitality (PC's health level), vigour (PC's energy level), and toxicity (PC's intoxication level).

To conclude, we need to look at the interface design as a whole to arrive at a systematic analysis of the PC's characterisation process. On the structural level, it entails all the elements stored and depicted in the five interface categories discussed above (Character Development System, Inventory, Map, Journal, and the Medallion).

7.3 Case Study

In case of role-playing video games, such as *The Witcher*, the designed character is an empty semiotic vessel (Rehak 2003, p. 173) unless embodied by the player. Since this moment of thrusting a virtual life into the character is a crucial turning point in the process of PC animation, this section will focus on the analysis of an actualised PC and the experience of

[56] A list of Glossary entries may be accessed here: http://witcher.wikia.com/wiki/Glossary_entries (Accessed 20 June 2011).
[57] A list of entries found in the tutorial may be accessed here: http://witcher.wikia.com/wiki/Journal_Tutorial_Entries (Accessed 20 June 2011).

levelling up, assigning traits, interacting with NPCs and props, and making decisions during the gameplay.

The table in figure 7.4 summarises the structural characterisation of the PC on the basis of the game specific elements extracted from the Pivot Player Character Model and applied to selected scenes from the game's Chapter I: Outskirts of Vizima. Outlining the integral elements that shape the PC in the form of a table illustrates more clearly the complexity of the relations between the PC, in-game objects, and other non-player characters. Table 7.4 constitutes a framework for the player centric case study of the PC development presented in section 7.3.2.

7.3.1 Terminology

Before discussing the construction of the PC, I shall explicate the meaning of the table's components (fig. 7.4), which were preliminarily mentioned in Chapter 6.

Entities refer to all the in-game objects that may be modified and/or interacted with by the player, and they include NPCs, and various objects found in the gameworld (Zagal 2005, p. 5). It should be emphasised here that in-game objects gain ludic meaning and shape the PC predominantly when they are interacted with. This interaction may be referred to as entity manipulation. It consists of altering the attributes (e.g., owner, velocity etc.) or abilities (e.g., fight, drink, wear etc.) of the entities (Zagal 2005, p. 8). Entity manipulation may be also referred to in terms of interaction options (Consalvo & Dutton 2006, n.p.).

Applying the terminology introduced by Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. (2008, pp. 178-179) and Parsler (2011, pp. 136-137), non-player characters (NPCs) may be divided into:

a) NPAs (non-player agents)/functional characters – they perform general functions within the gameworld, such as trading with the PC, distributing quests and quest items, displaying dialogue options (see Reverend and Abigail in fig. 7.4)
b) Cast – they are assigned specific functions closely related to the story, such as fighting with the PC who can loot their bodies after a won duel, fist-fighting, playing dice-poker, getting drunk (see the Salamandra Bandits, Drowners, or Fat Fred in fig. 7.4)

c) Stage – they constitute a part of the scenery and cannot be interacted with, for instance the dead body of Ilsa, chickens, random villagers (see fig. 7.4).

Here I would like to emphasise that the difference between functional and cast characters does not seem to be entirely clear. Both categories entail the character's functionality and its degree depends on whether the performed functions are general or specific. Neither Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. (2008) nor Parsler (2011) provide a sufficient explanation of the difference between the two types. In some cases it becomes extremely difficult to classify the degree of functionality of the characters. For instance, it is not apparent why the dialogue options constitute a determining factor in differentiating between functional and cast characters. Therefore, I modified the two categories and decided to allocate the NPCs to two groups based on the complexity of the interaction model. In the first group (functional) I place non-player characters that contribute to the PC's experience by offering quests, dialogue options crucial for the advancement of the storyline, or by distributing various items, which contribute to the development of the PC. The second category (cast) includes all the other NPCs who populate the gameworld and react to simple actions activated by the PC. In *The Witcher* cast characters usually entail generic opponents (Salamandra bandits), ghouls, various beasts, and random drunkards at the Inn.

Similarly to NPCs, the in-game inanimate objects or props fall under the following classification (Howard 2008, p. 77):

a) Functional – they have a direct impact on the PC's performance within the game, such as various books and scrolls, food items, weapons (see The Book of the Tawny Owl or Temerian sword in fig. 7.4)
b) Quest/plot items – they play an essential role in the back stories behind quests; without them the quests cannot be completed and the plot does not advance (see key, white myrtle, or sygnet ring in fig. 7.4)
c) Decorative – they constitute a part of the scenery and cannot be interacted with (see barrels, beds, cupboards in fig. 7.4)

Although both functional and quest/plot items can be interacted with by the PC (unlike decorative ones), the difference between them is related to the significance from the perspective of the plot. The objects in the second category can only be acquired after

activating a specific quest and lose their functionality after its completion. For instance, once Geralt lights up all the candles in the chapels surrounding the village in the Outskirts (the Holy Flame quest), they cannot be used by the PC on any other occasion. Functional objects, on the other hand, may be used irrespective of the quest that is currently fulfilled by the player character.

It should also be noted that, unlike decorative objects, functional and quest items have the ability to influence the character's development throughout the game. Applying Zagal's terminology, we notice that the PC's attributes may be either altered permanently (changing the PC's statistics) or temporarily (changing the PC's attributes for a short period of time) (Zagal 2005, p. 8). Concrete examples of this permanent and temporal attribute change will be provided in section 7.2.2.

The last main category present in the table is connected with what Consalvo & Dutton call interaction mapping, which "involves examining the choices that the player is offered with regards to interaction not with objects, but with other player characters, and/ or with Non-Player Characters (NPCs)" (Consalvo & Dutton 2006, n.p.). This may include significant choices made by the PC on the basis of dialogue options related to particular NPCs. As Consalvo & Dutton emphasise, certain choices made in the game illustrate the diversity of branches to explore.

As far as agency is concerned, we should focus on the question of the extent to which a PC may be individualised and shaped according to the player's will. The more freedom the player is given in customising and constructing their character, the more intricate the characterisation process becomes, and the more diverse the gameplay. We may come to the conclusion that the more individuality indicators are present within an RPG, the bigger its replayability value. This may be true if the multiplicity of the PC's attributes corresponds with a wide range of plot scenarios and NPCs' reactions towards the players' moves.

The above assumption seems to be reflected in Jesper Juul's observations related to emergence games, which consist of simple rules combined to form interesting gameplay variations. Those games, according to Juul, tend to be replayable as their rules allow for a variety of game sessions (2002). Emergent games are contrasted with progression games, which focus on the completion of a certain combination of pre-designed actions to finish the

game. As Juul observes, their replayability value is very low (2002, n.p.). According to Juul progression games usually have walkthroughs and their structure is based on the sequence of events. He also emphasises that progression entails storytelling and is closely related to the adventure genre (2002, n.p.). Keeping this assumption in mind we might consider cRPGs and MMORPGs progression games due to the importance of storylines and quests. However, Juul's close analysis of *EverQuest* (1999) demonstrates the complexity of MMORPGs, which include both elements – "[a]s such *EverQuest* is a game of emergence, with embedded progression structures" (2002, n.p.). The gameplay system underpinned by the PC's statistics, levels and skills exemplifies an emergence structure. The story-based element in the form of quests, on the other hand, is a progression-like element.

A similar observation may be made with reference to *The Witcher*, entailing the elements of both types of games. On the general gameplay level The Witcher exhibits the characteristics of a progression game (the player has to complete the main quests in order to advance in the storyline and finish the game). However, within each of the 7 parts the player is given a certain degree of freedom to form the character and make more or less significant choices. It seems that high replayability requires the presence of emergent structures, which allow the player character for a lot of variation and improvisation. A very good example of this phenomenon is *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008). From the point of view of plot completion, Rockstar's adventure game fulfils the requirements of a progression game. The player faces a number of challenges while completing subsequent quests, which unravel the parts of a linear storyline. However, unlike the majority of cRPG and adventure games, *GTA IV* does not finish after the execution of all the quests leading to the end of Niko Bellic's story in *Liberty City*. Once the game of progression finishes, the emergent structures take over the gameplay experience. The player may wander around the city landscape, drive cars, fight with NPCs, and interact with physical objects. All the actions, however, no longer have any significance related to plot. The player-centred case study discussed in the next section will demonstrate how those aspects are realised in a concrete game scenario.

Before analysing the contents of the table I shall explicate the importance of colour coding. A few fields have been marked in gray in order to signify the lack of interaction mapping, a category defined by Consalvo & Dutton (2006, n.p.). In accordance with this category the character impersonated by the player can only interact with the game's AI represented by

other characters (functional and cast NPCs). Therefore, the inanimate elements, such as Objects and Selected Location cannot be analysed with reference to this category. Since stage characters do not react to the PC's actions, similarly to decorative objects, they cannot be interacted with.

ENTITY TYPE	ENTITY SUBTYPE	ENTITY	GENERAL DESCRIPTION	ENTITY MANIPULATION (interaction options)	INTERACTION MAPPING
NPCs	**NPAs/ Functional**	Abigail	Witch	The PC talks to Abigail. The PC buys a few books from Abigail and brings her 5 petals of White Myrtle. The PC can also have sex with the witch in the cave.	Abigail appears in the Of Monsters and Men quest (phases: White Myrtle Petals, The Witch's Innocence, The Witch is Cornered). The PC needs to interrogate Alvin to find out where the Beast came from. The boy has to drink a potion, for which Abigail needs 5 petals of White Myrtle. The PC has to collect or buy the Myrtle and bring it back to the witch. The PC considers Abigail not guilty of summoning the Beast and helps her escape the village. He also has sex with her in the cave.
		Alvin	Source (with innate magical abilities)	The PC talks to Alvin and finds out the source of the Beast (phase: Alvin's Prophecy).	
		Haren Brogg	Merchant	The PC talks to Haren after showing him the Eternal Fire sygnet ring from the Reverend. The PC can also play dice with him.	The PC has to kill Drowners for Haren to gain the Reverend's trust. Haren pays for killing the monsters (sub-quest: Strangers in the Night).
		Kalkstein	Master alchemist	The PC talks to him and asks questions about alchemy. At the Merchant's Gate the PC saves Kalkstein and fights with Salamandra.	In Chapter I Geralt cannot buy items from Kalkstein, but after saving his life Kalkstein promises the PC a discount once they are in Visima.
		Mikul	Viziman guard	The PC talks to him at the Visiman gate after showing him the Eternal Fire sygnet ring from the Reverend, and accepts a quest for Ghoul hunting in the Crypt.	Geralt slays the Ghouls in the Crypt and comes back to Mikul for the prize (sub-quest Buried Memories). At the end of Chapter I the PC visits Mikul at the Mill Gate, and shows him the Letter of Safe Conduct to enter Visima. Mikul betrays

					Geralt.
		Odo	Merchant	The PC talks to Odo, gets drunk with him and agrees to kill Echinops plants for him. The PC accuses Odo of killing his own brother.	Geralt negotiates with Odo and agrees to kill the plants for 200 Orens. After killing Echinops, Geralt sees Odo's dog in the garden digging for something. At the end of Chapter I, Geralt finds out that Odo killed his brother and finds him guilty of the crime (Abigail the witch is considered innocent by the PC).
		Reverend	Village priest	The PC talks to him on numerous occasions during the Of Monsters and Men quest (phases: The Good Shepherd, The Holy Flame, The Dying of the Light, The Beast is Dead)	The PC accepts the quest of lighting flames at 5 chapels around the village. He receives the Eternal Fire sygnet ring and is asked to visit Odo, Harem, and Mikul. At the end of Chapter I the PC saves Abigail and finds Reverend and other villages guilty of summoning the Beast.
		Shani	Medic	The PC talks to her and saves her from the Salamandra at the end of Chapter I. Shani leaves the Outskirts and travels with Geralt to Visima.	
		Zoltan Chivay	Dwarf, friend of the PC	The PC talks to Zoltan and learns how to play Dice Poker, which grants him the Novice status.	The PC saves Zoltan against the bandits (he has an option not to). The PC finds out from Zoltan that they used to be friends. Zoltan may be found in the Inn and Geralt can play dice with him to win money.
	Cast	Barghests	Haunted creatures summoned by the Beast	The PC fights with them, kills them and then loots their dead bodies (Barghest skulls, Beast fangs, ectoplasm, and Death Dust)	The interaction with cast NPCs does not lead to any significant choices. The beasts and other creatures can only be fought with, while dialogue options with

		Beast	Also known as hellhound	The PC fights with the Beast and kills it, completing Chapter I.	Olaf or Salamandra bandits in Chapter I do not have any implications on the storyline.
		Drowners	Dead creatures of the night	The PC fights with them, kills them and loots their dead bodies (Drowner brain tissue). Geralt kills the Drowners to gain Haren's trust.	
		Drunkard	Drunken NPC in the Inn	The PC drinks Kaedwen Stout with him and gets drunk.	
		Fat Fred	Fist Fighter in the Inn	The PC finds him at the Inn and challenges him to a fistfight duel. Geralt loses and needs to pay Fat Fred 25 Orens.	
		Innkeeper Olaf	The owner of the In	The PC stores a few items with him. Later in Chapter I Geralt finds Olaf's dead body and loots it for the key to the Salamandra hideout.	
		Salamandra Bandits	Members of a mysterious 183rganizatio n the PC needs to discover	The PC fights with them, kills them and loots their bodies (Salamandra brooches, swords, armour, food). Geralt also talks to them but all the dialogue options lead to combat.	
	Stage	Chickens	Scattered around the village	Stage NPCs cannot be interacted with and serve a decorative purpose in the gameworld.	
		Ilsa	Dead body found in the	At the end of Chapter I the PC finds out that Ilsa has been raped by Mikul, and she killed herself by	

		Crypt. Random villagers	They populate the village and speak random dialogue lines	drinking the potion obtained from Abigail.	
OBJECTS	**Functional**	Barghest skull Barrel Beer Books Campfires	Storage space Light alcohol Monstrum (Portrayal of Witchers) – an anti-witcher pamphlet. Fireplaces scattered around the gameworld.	Geralt can buy/sell it. It has no alchemical value (Abigail, Kalkstein) Contains other in-game objects Geralt can buy it and get drunk; sell it in the Inn and get money; collect it from barrels and chests. In Chapter I the PC finds it in Antiquary in the Outskirts' Inn. Describes how ordinary people perceive witchers The PC can rest at a campfire and meditate. The meditation mode enables the PC to access the Character Development System, and distribute talents. It also unlocks the mixtures panel (preparation of potions, oils, and bombs). Meditation restores health and endurance, and clears intoxication levels.	

		Chicken, Grapes	Food	When eaten, the food increases the PC's vitality. It may be found, sold or bought.	
		Flint	Fire source	The PC can use it to light campfire.	
		Oren	Official currency unit in Northern Kingdoms	The PC can earn money killing monsters and performing other quests or find it in barrels, chests etc.	
		Scrolls	Frightener's Vision Scroll	The PC has to read it. Once in the meditation mode, the PC can prepare the potion (provided he has the right ingredients). The FV potion grants him one Bronze Talent. It is not for sale.	
			The book of the Swallow	Contains 5 formulae for potions. The PC has to read it in order to acquire the knowledge. It is not for sale.	
			Hellhound's Soul	The PC has to read it and acquire ingredients. The HS potion grants one Silver Talent.	
			The Book of the Tawny Owl	The PC finds it in the cave at the end of Chapter I.	
		Swallow potion	Accelerates Vitality regeneration	Geralt needs one measure of Vitriol and Aether, and two measures of Rebis to make it.	
		Tawny Owl	Increases Endurance	Geralt needs one measure of Vitriol and two measures of Aether to make	

		potion Temerian steel sword	regeneration A two-handed longsword	it. It lasts 8 in-game hours. The PC finds them on many bodies in the game. It may be sold or bought.	
	Quest/plot items	Box of Dice Eternal Fire sygnet ring Key Letter of safe conduct Candles White Myrtle	Used to play Dice Poker A ring given to the PC by the Reverend as a sign of his approval. Key to the Salamandra hideout A pass to the city of Vizima. Part of The Holy Flame quest Abigail uses 5 petals of White Myrtle to prepare a potion for Alvin.	The PC can play dice poker with the Gambler NPC in the Inn or with Zoltan Chivay, depending on whether the PC chooses to save the dwarf in Chapter I. The PC puts on a ring and it enables him to talk to more prominent citizens of the Outskirts of Vizima. The PC collects it from Innkeeper Olaf's body at the end of Chapter I. It cannot be bought or sold. The PC collects it from the Reverend's dead body. The PC obtains them from the Reverend lights them in 5 chapels surrounding the village. The PC can either pick up the 5 petals in the village or buy them from a Herbalist for 45 Orens.	

	Decorative	barrels, beds, cupboards, dead bodies, flowers, household items, trees, and others	Random objects placed in the gameworld to create believable scenery.	Those items cannot be interacted with are placed in the gameworld for purely aesthetical purposes.	
SELECTED LOCATIONS	**The Outskirts of Vizima** (there are 58 active locations the PC can interact with)	Abigail's house Odo's house		Geralt enters the house, talks to the witch and buys an item from her (Herbalism Book for 200 Orens). Abigail need White Mytle to make a potion for Alvin (Quest: Of Monsters and Men) Geralt enters the house, talks to Odo, gets drunk with him, and agrees to kill Echinops in his garden for 200 Ordens.	

Figure 7.4 Selected NPCs, objects, locations and emerging scenarios from Chapter I of *The Witcher* (2007

7.3.2 Case Study – Player-Centred Approach

The present case study refers to Chapter I of the game and does not include a preliminary character's appearance customisation present in many other cRPG games, such as *Fallout* series, *Dragon Age*, and *Mass Effect*. Since in *The Witcher,* Geralt of Rivia performs a culturally and intertextually precoded role, a pre-designed conceptual and visual set of attributes belonging to the PC does not allow for full avatar customisation. Due to a closed template of the storyline, which is based on a literary character from Andrzej Sapkowski's short story ("The Witcher"), the process of individualisation of the character by means of arbitrary names or physical determinations on the first level of Personalised Avatar Construction (see fig. 7.5) is not available. As Adams & Rollings observe, using such predefined characters "enables the designer to tell a story in which the avatar already has a past and relationships with other characters when the game begins" (2007, p. 527). In *The Witcher* an individualised animated PC is created by the player on the level of attribute modelling (which differs depending on the player's preferences), and choices influencing the storyline, made in the critical moments of the game (e.g., when Geralt has to abide by one of the fractions of the conflict – The Squirrels or the Order of the Flaming Rose).

<table>
<tr><th colspan="3">Personalised Avatar Construction in The Witcher</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Level 1 Appearance Customisation: not available; predetermined appearance
(The PC has a predetermined set of visual attributes, an assigned race of a white witcher, the witcher's profession, swordsmen's career path – those attributes cannot be altered during gameplay).</td><td>Level 2 Attribute Modelling: available</td></tr>
<tr><td>Level 1.1 Name: predetermined; Geralt of Rivia</td><td>Level 1.2 Sex: predetermined; male</td><td>Level 2.1 Attribute system: Talent distribution across 15 traits presented in figure 15</td></tr>
</table>

Figure 7.5 Personalised Avatar Construction in *The Witcher*

The case study of the PC development presented here will focus on selected scenarios from Chapter I taking place at the Outskirts of Vizima, the capital city of Temeria.[58] The Prologue

[58] Temeria (*The Witcher*) – one of the northern kingdoms with its capital in Vizima. The plot of *The Witcher* is set in Temeria. Vizima (*The Witcher*) – the capital city of Temeria.

in Kaer Morhen (the witcher's fortress) consists of numerous introductory cut-scenes and tutorials, therefore it has not been selected for this analysis. Arriving at the Outskirts in Chapter I, the PC (Geralt of Rivia) is still a relatively unformed character, with only a few talents assigned to the four basic skills (strength, dexterity, stamina, intelligence), and an elementary knowledge of the Aard magical sign (level 1 out of 5), which was unlocked by Leo (non-player agent) in the Prologue. Geralt is also acquainted with a few non-player characters (Vesemir, Lambert, Leo, Eskel, Triss Merigold, Azar Javed, Professor, Salamandra bandits, and Savolla mage). However, it is in Chapter I that the actual development of the player character begins. The main task of the PC is to follow the Salamandra's trail.[59]

At the beginning of Chapter I Geralt arrives into the village and faces the Barghests at the gates of the Inn. After slaying the beasts, the PC loots their dead bodies and places the Barghests skulls in the satchel. He also gets acquainted with two NPAs – Shani (the medic) and Alvin (a boy with innate magical abilities). Geralt is advised by Shani to learn more about Salamandra from the Reverend, who may be found in one of the houses at the Outskirts (at night) or in front of the Chapel (during the day). In the meantime the PC enters the Inn and interacts with a few non-player characters. Geralt talks to Innkeeper Olaf, who offers him a storage space in his chest free of charge. The PC loses a fist fight with Fat Fred and has to pay him 10 Orens.[60] He also gets drunk with a random drunkard, which affects his vision and coordination. Following Zagal's argument related to the temporal change of attributes *(2005, p. 8)*, it may be observed that any alcoholic objects Geralt interacts with temporarily affect him by changing his perception skills for a short period of time. Finally, the PC approaches Kalkstein (a master alchemist) and seeks advice about alchemy. He then explores all the chests and barrels outside the Inn and places all the found items in the inventory (Toussaint wine, chicken, milk, Orens).[61]

After interacting with the NPCs in the Inn, Geralt explores the village and finds the Reverend in his house. The man refuses to reveal any information unless the PC kills the Beast by lighting five Holy Flames around the village. Geralt receives the quest items and sets off. In

[59] Salamandra (*The Witcher*) – a criminal organisation led by a mage called Azer Javed.
[60] Orens (*The Witcher*) – a currency used in the gameworld.
[61] *Toussaint wine* (*The Witcher*) – an alcoholic beverage from a duchy within Nilfgaard – one of the geographical locations in the gameworld.

order to gain the Reverend's and the villagers' trust, he also needs to help three prominent inhabitants of the Outskirts: Odo, Haren, and Mikul. Since the characters will not talk to Geralt without the Reverend's consent, he is given the Eternal Fire Signet Ring (another quest item) to convince the villagers of the Reverend's support towards him.

Odo is the first villager Geralt decides to help. The PC enters his house, talks to him and both characters drink Temerian rye, which results in their temporary intoxication. Geralt is given the Secret Garden quest and is asked to kill the carnivorous Echinops plants growing in Odo's garden. The PC kills the plants, picks up spores containing Aether (an alchemical substance), and comes back to collect the reward from Odo (100 Orens). He then explores all the chests and wardrobes in Odo's house and empties them (watermelon, water, two pieces of flint). Having completed the task, Geralt approaches the nearest campfire and meditates (one in-game hour), which enables the player to access the Character Development System and distribute talents, unlock the mixtures panel (preparation of potions, oils, and bombs), restore health and endurance, and clear intoxication levels. After the accumulation of experience points, the player distributes the three bronze talents and assigns them to: Strength (level 2), Strong Steel fighting style (level 2 Crushing Blow: damage +25%), and Group Steel style (level 2 Half-spin: damage +25%). Geralt's development path as a Novitiate Witcher so far is as follows:

Attributes: Strength level 2; Dexterity level 2; Stamina level 2; Intelligence level 2
Signs: Aard level 2
Steel Sword: Strong Steel level 2; Fast Steel level 2; Group Steel level 2
Silver Sword: Strong Silver level 1; Fast Silver level 1; Group Silver level 2

After completing Odo's request, Geralt finds the house of Haren Brogg, a local merchant. Haren asks for the Sygnet before he is ready to speak with Geralt. The PC is asked to kill the *Drowners* in the nearby river at night. Geralt agrees to Haren's request and sets off. After leaving the merchant's house, he meets Zoltan Chivay, a former friend (the PC does not remember his own past). The dwarf is surrounded by angry villagers. The PC decides to save him and kills the hostile bandits. Zoltan invites Geralt to a dice poker game, so the PC has the opportunity to learn a new skill and use it further in the game as one of the sources of

income.[62] Similarly to alcohol, the interaction with dice alters the PC's attributes, by either multiplying or reducing his financial resources. In order to be more effective, Geralt coats his sword's blade with Necrophage oil that inflicts increased damage on certain creatures. During the night Geralt kills the Drowners, loots them (brain tissue), and comes back to Haren to collect the prize (200 Orens).

Mikul, one of the guards, is the last NPC Geralt has to help to gain the villagers' and the Reverend's trust. Geralt finds him at the Merchant's Gate in the Outskirts. After presenting the Signet Ring, the PC is asked to clear the nearby crypt out of ghouls. Geralt enters the crypt just to find a young woman's body and a vial of poison lying next to it. He then kills a few ghouls and collects various items found in the crypt: two scrolls, a book, and Orens. He also finds the Circle of Inner Fire and learns the Igni sign. After leaving the crypt, Geralt meditates at the campfire and prepares the Swallow potion (it accelerates the regeneration of Vitality), and the Frightener's Vision, a mutagenic potion that grants Geralt one bronze talent he uses to enhance his Group Steel Sword style (Half-spin level 1).[63] The PC comes back to the Gate and has to face the Salamandra at the bridge, and defend Kalkstein. He defeats the bandits (looting their brooches), reports about the girl to Mikul, and learns that he was in love with the young woman found in the crypt (Ilsa). Geralt gains Mikul's trust, receives 200 Orens and 4000 experience points (XP).

The PC finds the Reverend and reports to have gained the villagers' trust. Geralt is asked to find out more about the Salamandra from Abigail and Alvin, and is promised a reward of 200 Orens. The PC enters Abigail's hut and approaches the witch, who may be interacted with threefold: the PC can trade with her, sleep in her bed and restore Vitality levels, and talk to her about the Beast. Firstly, Geralt buys a Herbalism Book from her and reads it. The knowledge he gains will enable him to recognise and collect herbs, and prepare potions. This will cause a permanent attribute change of the PC. Geralt asks Abigail about the possible source of the Beast in the village. The witch has to interrogate Alvin to find out where the Beast came from. In order to do this, however, she needs to prepare a potion. Geralt is thus

[62] Dice Poker (*The Witcher*) – a game played with in-game characters, which may become a source of the character's income.
[63] Swallow causes temporal attribute change, whereby the regeneration of Geralt's Vitality (hit points) is enhanced for the duration of 2 hours within the game.

asked to bring her five petals of white myrtle. The PC finds a merchant in the nearby Inn, buys the necessary ingredients, and comes back to Abigail to witness Alvin's prophecy.

He then comes back to the Reverend and reports on the findings. It turns out that the villagers' deeds summoned the Beast. Geralt also asks the Reverend about Salamandra, and is asked to approach Innkeeper Olaf for the key to the Salamandra hideout in one of the houses. Geralt sets off to the Inn and finds Shani in trouble, surrounded by a group of rascals. He uses the Strong Steel style to defeat the bandits. After the fight the PC looks for the Innkeeper Olaf, who appears to be dead. Geralt loots his body for the key (quest item), and talks to Shani, who reveals the location of the Salamandra hideout. The player character kills the two guards in front of the house and enters the building to defeat four more. He then finds trap door in the corner of the room, opens it, and proceeds to the cave. Geralt slaughters more Salamandra bandits and loots the hideout. One of the crates contains *The Book of the Tawny Owl*, which will enable the PC to prepare the Tawny Owl potion. Geralt finds the campfire in the cave and enters the meditation mode to distribute the talents and prepare the potion (Tawny Owl temporarily increases Endurance regeneration). He then meets Abigail hiding from the villagers, who accuse her of summoning the Beast and want to lynch her. Geralt decides to get to know Abigail closer by having a sexual encounter with her. He also agrees to protect her and talk to the villagers gathered outside the cave. The PC faces Odo, Haren, Mikul, and the Reverend. In each of the dialogue options for the first three NPCs, Geralt selects "I don't believe you". In case of the Reverend, the PC can either blame the villagers or Abigail. The PC decides to oppose the Reverend and considers Abigail not guilty of summoning the Beast. The witch helps Geralt defeat the angry mob and the Beast. The last part of Chapter I involves looting the dead body of the Reverend in search of the Letter of Safe Conduct (quest item), which enables Geralt and Shani the medic to cross the Gates, enter Vizima, and thus begin Chapter II.

As may be observed from the table in figure 7.4 and the player-centred description provided in this section, the player character's formation is a complex process based on the PC's interaction with the gameworld and the player's choices made within it. This meaningful interaction with the functional in-game elements is what defines the PC's development, which is illustrated by means of various interface components (see section 7.2 of this

Chapter). The following table (figure 7.6) summarises Geralt's development path reached at the end of Chapter I of the game.

Interface Category	Development Elements
Character Development Tree	**Level:** Novitiate Witcher level 7; 28.000 XP **Attributes:** Strength level 2; Dexterity level 2; Stamina level 2; Intelligence level 2 **Signs:** Aard level 2; Igni level 2 **Steel Sword:** Strong Steel level 2; Fast Steel level 2; Group Steel level 2 **Silver Sword:** Strong Silver level 1; Fast Silver level 1; Group Silver level 2
Inventory **Quest items** **Satchel**	1017 Orens, Temerian steel sword, the witcher's steel sword, leather jacket, torch Letter of Save Conduct, box of dice (x4), key to the Salamandra hideout, Eternal Fire sygnet ring, candles, white myrtle Barghest skull (x10), Salamandra brooch (x6), scrolls (Frightener's Vision Scroll, the Book of the Swallow, Hellhound's Soul, the Book of the Tawny Owl), chicken, grapes, water, book (Portrayal of Witchers),silver ruby ring, sapphires, local pepper vodka, flint (x11), Kaedwen stout, white vinegar (Vitriol), powder, phosphor (Vermilion)
Journal	**Characters:** Abigail, Alvin, Azar Javed (Prologue), Berengar (Prologue), Eskel (Prologue), Lambert (Prologue), Leo (Prologue), Professor (Prologue), Triss Merigold (Prologue), Vesemir (Prologue), Haren Brogg, Kalkstein, Mikul, Odo, Shani, Reverend, Zoltan Chivay **Places:** Kaer Mohren (Prologue), Lab (Prologue) Temeria, Outskirts of Vizima, Inn, Crypt (only the major places are listed in the Journal; minor locations may be viewed on the maps) **Bestiary:** Frightener (Prologue) **Recipes:** Blizzard, Frightener's Vision, Hellhound's Soul, Potion for Triss (Prologue; quest item), Swallow, Tawny Owl, Thunderbolt, White Gull, White Honey

Figure 7.6 Player Character Development Path in Chapter I of *The Witcher*

The above table presents the player character's development as it is visible within the game's interface. One has to realise, however, that the characterisation process is far more complex and goes well beyond the elements listed in the interface. In *The Witcher* Geralt's overall development is shaped by:

1. Progression level (e.g. Novitiate Witcher level 7 at the end of Chapter I) and the accumulation of experience points (XP)
2. Talent distribution across four attributes, four signs, and fighting styles (see Character Development Tree)
3. NPCs met and locations visited during the gameplay (they form the character's knowledge of the world and may be accessed via the Journal: Characters, Places, Bestiary; the complex interrelations between those elements may be viewed in figure 7.4)
4. Significant functional objects accumulated in the inventory
5. Significant choices triggered by the selected dialogue lines

The first three points, addressed in figure 7.6, may be viewed directly from the level of in-game interface. Although the same may be said about point four, it differs from the previous ones in that the importance and meaning of the objects collected by the PC cannot be extrapolated directly from their graphical representation or description provided in the inventory. Their significance upon the characterisation process of the PC may be detected only in the context of actions associated with them. As previously mentioned in section 7.3.1, some entities, when manipulated, may alter the PC's attributes. The following list in figure 7.7 includes selected objects that cause temporary or permanent changes in Geralt in Chapter I of *The Witcher*:

Object	Temporary change	Permanent change
Alcohol (e.g., Temerian rye, Kaedwen stout)	Temporarily raises intoxication levels, blurs the PC's vision and slows down his reaction time, which may affect the outcome of a fight, e.g. killing Echinops after drinking with Odo.[64]	
Torch	Its usage temporarily changes the surroundings by illuminating them, and enhances Geralt's vision during a fight, e.g. slaying and escaping ghouls in the Crypt is	

[64] Kaedwen Stout (*The Witcher*) – an alcoholic beverage originating from the largest of the Northern Kingdoms.

	easier when it is lit.	
Alchemical substances (e.g., aether, rebis, white vinegar, vitriol)	When combined with alchemical knowledge and other necessary ingredients make up various potions temporarily enhancing Geralt's combat skills.	
Potions (e.g., Swallow, Tawny Owl, Thunderbolt, White Gull, White Honey)	Cause temporal attribute changes, for instance Swallow enhances the regeneration of Geralt's Vitality (hit points) for the duration of 2 hours within the game.	
Food (e.g., watermelon, chicken, grapes)	Causes temporary regeneration of Vitality.	
Box of dice	When used in a poker game with other NPCs, may either make the PC win or lose money (temporary change).	In the long run, the won matches contribute to Geralt's development as a dice poker player (The Novice, The Professional, The Sharper, The Legend).
Books and scrolls (e.g., Frightener's Vision Scroll, The Book of the Swallow, Hellhound's Soul, The Book of the Tawny Owl, Portrayal of Witchers)		Permanently change the state of Geralt's knowledge about the gameworld, and some of them equip him with potion recipes.
Quest items (e.g., Letter of Save Conduct, key to the Salamandra hideout, Eternal Fire sygnet ring, candles)		Necessary to proceed in the storyline and in further character development.

Figure 7.7 Temporary and Permanent Changes

The above examples demonstrate how the interaction with various in-game objects indirectly alters Geralt's development. Some items, such as alcohol, potions, or food, contribute to the PC's temporary attribute status, lowering or raising the levels of vitality, vigour, and toxicity. Various combinations of those three factors influence the outcomes of battles. When won, they multiply the number of the PC's experience points (XP), contributing to the acquisition of talents, which are then distributed across various

attributes and fighting styles. Other objects, for instance books and scrolls, do not cause immediate change, but, when combined with other props (alchemical substances and herbs) enable the PC to use the acquired knowledge to make potions, petards, or recognise and collect necessary herbs. Quest items, on the other hand, are indispensable to proceed in the storyline. Without them, Geralt cannot complete the main quests in Chapter I and advance to Chapter II in Vizima.

Another important aspect refers to the number of functional and stage characters present in the gameworld. Fewer stage characters performing purely decorative roles, and more functional NPCs contribute to a more intricate characterisation process of the PC. In *The Witcher* many in-game characters do not contribute to Geralt's development and cannot be interacted with or the interaction is limited (e.g., villagers in the Outskirts, chickens, random drunkards at the Inn). Stage characters constitute an important building material for the gameworld, but do not influence the construction of the PC. Also, Geralt's flexibility in dealing with NPCs is limited and has to comply with the game's narrative. The PC cannot thus kill his allies or refuse a battle with the Salamandra. It should be noticed, however, that both games (*The Witcher* and *The Witcher 2*) function on the basis of a closed world level design, which influences the extent to which the PC may be altered by the player. Since the storyline is an important factor (the games are divided into Prologue, Chapters, and Epilogue), the player character needs to comply with its assumptions. Sandbox type or open world games include fewer restrictions as the story is based on loose individual quests and may be altered depending on the player's choices. One of such games is *Fallout 3,* which will be analysed in the next Chapter.

The last point refers to the significance of selecting dialogue options, which in figure 7.4 is referred to as interaction mapping. Most of the dialogues with the NPCs (functional characters) do not offer significant choices that could change the course of the story or the NPC's attitude towards Geralt. There are, however, certain turning points in the game that include crucial dialogue exchanges with non-player agents. One of the most illustrative examples involves Geralt's interaction with the Scoia'tael warriors at the riverbank after killing the Drowners for Haren Brogg. Geralt can either let the warriors take Haren's supplies (in which case he receives 200 Orens) or kill them. Both decisions have further impact on the storyline in Chapter II. If the Scoia'taels take the cargo, they are stronger and better

equipped in further parts of the game, but one of their allies, the dwarf Golan Vivaldi gets arrested in Chapter II.

Another seemingly important decision made by Geralt at the same riverbank involves helping Zoltan Chivay (a dwarf claiming to be the PC's friend), who is surrounded by racist thugs. After rescuing Zoltan, we gain his gratefulness and in return he introduces us to the game of dice poker. However, as it turns out, when Geralt ignores the dwarf and lets him fight on his own, the decision does not have any negative implications on the relation between the characters. Such an in-game solution is an example of what Pisarski and Sikora (2009) refer to as an imbalance between formal and material constraints and affordances. In other words, it is very difficult to assign a proportional number of material actions to the formal varieties present in the game. The quest a character needs to fulfil may seem complex on the storyline level, but due to technical limitations, its solution turns out to be linear. As Pisarski & Sikora notice, the in-game characters' reactions to our varied actions are oftentimes the same, as it is in the case of Geralt's encounter with Zoltan (2009, p. 192). Such a limiting factor from the player's perspective is connected with the technological constraints faced by the developers. The variety of NPCs' reactions needs to be shrunk in order to keep the computing effort at a manageable level.

Also the interaction with Odo, Mikul, Haren, and the Reverend at the end of Chapter I at the Outskirts of Vizima seems to be far more complex that it really is. Geralt needs to make the decision and accuse either the villagers or the witch of summoning the Beast. In the case study demonstrated in this Chapter, the PC finds the witch Abigail innocent and as a result has to fight with both, the Beast and the angry villagers. Abigail helps Geralt to slay the Beast and after the fight leaves the Outskirts. The decisions made at this stage of the game, however, do not have any impact on the events in further chapters.

The constituent elements of the Player Character Grid discussed above (props, NPCs, their influence upon the PC, and the role of the player's choice) lead to the emergence of the so called social and environmental presence – the former denoting the extent to which other NPCs react to the PC, and the latter indicating the extent to which the environment itself notices the player character (Heeter 1992, qtd. in Nitsche 2008, p. 205). The extent of the socio-environmental presence in the gameworld determines the strength of the player's

agency, their impact upon the PC's development, and the perceived variety of choices. In *The Witcher* not all the NPCs react to the PC with an equal degree of diversity. The most complex interaction is performed with relation to NPAs, who have more than one simple action at their disposal. The PC can, for instance, exchange meaningful dialogue lines with them (by meaningful I mean leading to further implications in the game), and additionally trade, play dice poker or ally in the battle. Abigail, Reverend and Odo (see fig. 7.4) are examples of such NPAs that contribute to the creation of high degree of social presence in the game. Cast characters, such as Drowners, Drunkards, or Fat Fred exemplify a lower degree of social presence as they serve a limited purpose in the game. Geralt can only either fight with them or get intoxicated by means of local alcohol in the Inn. Such simple actions, however, do not shape or advance the plot in any meaningful way. It is also worth noting that the actions triggered by the objects attached to cast characters lead only to temporary changes in the PC (lost vitality, distorted vision), and do not have a long-lasting impact on the overall characterisation process. The last category of NPCs (stage characters) does not contribute to the creation of social presence as the PC cannot interact with them. Random villagers or chickens and other domestic animals scattered around the Outskirts do not respond to the PC's actions and constitute purely decorative elements.

The environmental presence is created by the inanimate elements of the game space, such as props. Similarly to non-player characters, objects are divided into categories depending on their level of functionality. Table 7.4 presents various in-game props that can or cannot be interacted with. The most interactive objects are the functional ones and these create the feeling of presence in the gameworld. By collecting (e.g., weapons, herbs), opening (e.g., door, barrels, wardrobes), reading (e.g., books and scrolls) or consuming them (e.g., water, wine, grapes, potions) the PC leaves traces of his presence in the gameworld. The more functional objects there are, the higher the level of perceived agency and control over the character's shape. It should be also emphasised that different players may construct the character differently not only by assigning different attributes or selecting varying dialogue options, but also by interacting with certain objects that cause permanent changes in the PC (fig. 7.7). Similarly to stage characters, decorative elements do not contribute to the creation of environmental presence.

7.4 References to Ubersfeld

In this Chapter I have applied the methodology introduced in Chapter 6 to the intricate process of the PC's characterisation performed in Chapter I: The Outskirts of Vizima of *The Witcher* (2007). All the crucial components of the structural plane of The Player Character Grid (NPCs, props, interface, space, the role of agency, PC's construction) have been detected and discussed in a specific gaming scenario with reference to Geralt of Rivia. The player character's development has been scrutinised by observing the following criteria:

a) Character Skill Tree and attribute allocation (the actant-actor transformation range)
b) Inventory and the interaction with objects (temporary and permanent changes and environmental presence)
c) Map and the significance of space (environmental presence)
d) Journal and the interaction with NPCs, including the significance of dialogue options (social presence)

As has been discussed in Chapter 6, the elements of the Player Character Grid originate from and are to a great extent based upon Anne Ubersfeld's methodology for the research of the character in drama and theatre. To round up the PC's analysis in games I will come back to Ubersfeld's methodology, and, referring to the close-analysis performed in this Chapter, demonstrate how the elements scrutinised by her with relation to the theatrical character are reflected in a concrete computer Role-Playing Game.

7.4.1 From Actant to Actor

The backbone of Ubersfeld's framework is the shift from an actant to a concrete actor realised on stage. This spectrum converges with two analytical orders present in her grid – the textual and the stage one. In cRPGs, as has been presented in the current chapter, that very same actant-actor transformation range is the main driving force behind the construction of the player-character. The PC is the intersection of stages – design and gameplay. At the level of interface design the character is a potential construct with an array of selectable attributes (see section 7.2 and the Character Development System in *The Witcher*), props and NPCs to be interacted with, and decision points to be made by the player. The PC becomes a realised form only when shaped by the player during a game

session. Because cRPGs feature several development paths for the PC, each player may construct their player-character differently – just as each actor may create a different profile for the character depicted in text. The crucial aspect of moulding the character relates to choice. In theatre the actor thrusts life into an actant by using individual body language, gestures, voice pitch, by interacting with space and other characters on stage (in agreement with the framework set by the director). In video games the player is empowered to make choices and to shape their character by means of various interface solutions provided by the designers (attribute allocation, appearance modification, dialogue options, interaction with NPCs and props).

7.4.2 Individualising Signs

In her methodology of the theatre character Ubersfeld emphasises the importance of individualising signs in forming an actor out of an actant. They have a considerable impact on the process of character creation. In games the individualisation occurs for instance at the stage of attribute selection by the player. Due to a variety of options to choose from (see, for instance, *Neverwinter Nights* and its 8,316 attribute combinations) choices made by the player in shaping their PCs may be perceived as individuality indicators. In various cRPGs the extent to which the PC may be individualised differs. The significance of the level of individualisation, which makes the character more flexible to the player's actions, in video games seems to depend on two factors: the integrity of the storyline, and the technological advancement of the game's mechanics. In *The Witcher* the player cannot customise Geralt's physical attributes, sex or race, which is due to a specific story scenario. The PC individualisation process is attained during gameplay as discussed above. Despite all the various character development tools available to the player, we have to realise that the game's episodic string-of-pearls structure narrows down the PC's construction possibilities (especially in *The Witcher*) (Aarseth 2003, p. 5). Irrespective of the Inventory's contents, the number of side-quest characters and objects or the direction of Geralt's combat skills development, the PC has to move from point A to point B in order to advance in the game's narrative.

7.4.3 Discourse Analysis

In her methodology Ubersfeld also focuses on the importance of discourse analysis. As she claims, the character's profile may be formed based on what they say about themselves, and how other characters perceive them. In Ubersfeld's understanding the character's discourse may be approached twofold: as a string of words and as message. In the first case, we may scrutinise different types of discourse, such as monologues, dialogues, or multiple scenes (1999, p. 91). In the second case, we may take into account the distinctive features (e.g., character's idiolect or individual style), and their relations with other characters. In video games only dialogues trigger changes in the PC, because they give the player the possibility to make significant choices during gameplay.

Of course, the characterisation process in VG also includes aspects that cannot be altered by the player, such as the PC's voice tone, the vocabulary or idiolect used in the game, which may give away the character's personality, social status or descent (see, for instance determined and severe voice pitch of Geralt in *The Witcher,* and an Italian accent of Ezio in *Assassin's Creed II*). However, since games are ludic constructs intended to be interacted with, those interactive aspects are of the greatest significance in that medium. From the point of view the player's agency, it is of particular importance to focus on the ludic elements of the PC's creation – those that make the cRPG character distinct from characters depicted in other media, be it theatre, film or literature. Taking this assumption into consideration, a ludic discourse analysis might focus on the performative function of the dialogues, particularly on the choices made by the PC during conversations with other characters. In this case various dialogue options may direct the PC onto different gameplay paths and by doing so, alter their profile.

Although discourse analysis as proposed by Ubersfeld with reference to theatre character differs from the analysis performed in this study, it underlines the importance of dialogue in the process of PC formation. Relations with other characters, mentioned by Ubersfeld, constitute a crucial dimension of the player character development in cRPGs. The selection of dialogue options by the player has been referred to as interaction mapping in figure 7.4. As mentioned in the previous sections of this Chapter, most of the conversations with NPCs do not result in significant changes in the plot or the PC. They either give the player the

illusion of social presence within the gameworld, inform the player character about the surrounding world, or have purely practical functions related to, for instance, the exchange of goods and services. There are, however, certain NPCs displaying significant dialogue lines that may change the PC and their in-game fate (e.g., the aforementioned interaction with the Reverend and Abigail at the end of Chapter I of the game). Taking into account the ludic nature of video games, discourse analysis should be performed with interactivity and agency in mind. Only those aspects involve the player's active involvement in developing the PC, and differentiate the role of discourse in games from its functions in theatre, film, or literature. Since discourse analysis does not constitute the main part of my methodology, I will not discuss it further. For the purpose of the research of the PC's development and characterisation, it is sufficient to look into the dialogue choices. However, I refer those interested in the various other aspects of discourse analysis in video games to an extensive study by Astrid Ensslin in *The Language of Gaming* (2011).

7.4.4 Space and its Elements

Discussing the significance of discourse, Ubersfeld observes that characters do not operate in a void, but in a theatrical space filled with actors, accessories and decorative elements (1999, p. 120). According to her the relations between the character and the world may be perceived from the point of view of the objects existing within that world. "Theatre can use an object strictly as decoration, as an aesthetic object, or it can use an object for the most utilitarian purposes" (1999, p. 120). Interestingly, her typology of theatrical objects overlaps to a certain degree with the classification of in-game props proposed by Jeff Howard (2008), who differentiates between functional, quest, and decorative objects (see fig. 7.4 for the list of prop types in *The Witcher*). Quest objects do not appear in theatre but they may exhibit a symbolic function Ubersfeld discusses in relation to aesthetic objects. A symbolic object "appears as the metonymy or metaphor of a particular order of reality, be it psychological or sociocultural" (1999, p. 122). She gives an example of the key being a sexual metaphor and a metonymy of power in Victor Hugo. In *The Witcher* certain quest items clearly have this symbolic dimension. For instance, the Eternal Fire sygnet ring may symbolise power and respect, while candles may stand for bringing metaphorical light and hope to the villagers. On a symbolic level, such connotations related to certain in-game objects also signify the player-character. By means of the Reverend's sygnet ring Geralt gains power and trust of the

villagers, and the candles lit around the village by the witcher denote his good will and eagerness to improve the villagers' fate. On a mechanical level, those symbolic objects unlock new paths in the game and allow the player to develop their PC through quest completion and plot advancement, which unlocks new talents and adds experience points.

7.5 Concluding Remarks

This chapter analysed the player character in *The Witcher* by means of the constituent elements of the Pivot Player Character Model introduced in Chapter 6: NPCs (NPAs/functional, cast, stage), objects (functional, quest, decorative), and locations. In the discussion of the process of PC formation the following interface components were taken into consideration: Character Development System, Inventory, Map, Journal, and Medallion, featuring temporary attributes, such as health, energy, and intoxication levels. The character development tree-like system turned out to be the most crucial element directly influencing the construction of the PC. In *The Witcher* the system comprises traits related to combat rather than personality, morality, or diplomacy skills. As I will demonstrate in Chapters 8, 9 the situation is a lot more complex with reference to the PCs in *Fallout 3* and Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines. More importantly, the character has been discussed in the context of interactions with the NPCs and objects, and their effects on the development of the PC. In order to present the process in a succinct and transparent way, the integral elements that shape the PC have been outlined in the form of a table (fig.7.4). The same method of mapping the PC's interactions onto a grid will be used in Chapters 8 and 9.

Chapter 8

Applying the Player Character Grid to *Fallout 3*

In this chapter I will examine the player character in *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios 2008). Similarly to the analysis carried out in the previous chapter, the process of PC construction will be based on the gamer's narrative experienced from my own first-person perspective. As in Chapter 7, I will first briefly introduce the backstory in *Fallout 3*, which will be followed by a short description of the typical gameplay and interface solutions necessary for character development. Finally, I will present the mechanism of PC construction in a case study involving a close analysis of the player character at three early stages of *Fallout 3* gameplay: inside Vault 101,[65] and later on in the Capital Wasteland, after leaving the vault.[66]

8.1 The Backstory

The story of *Fallout 3* is set in the year 2277, 200 years after a nuclear war. The post-apocalyptic setting covers the regions of Washington D.C., northeast Virginia and Maryland, which in the gameworld are referred to as the Capital Wasteland. The gameplay starts in the delivery room, where the player character is born. At this point the player chooses the sex of their character. This attribute may be changed during gameplay before leaving Vault 101, when the player may revisit their previous choices. Soon afterwards the plot moves to Vault 101, an underground shelter, which guards its citizens against the post apocalyptic outer world. The PC (by default named the Lone Wanderer) spends her/his childhood and adolescence in Vault 101 by the side of their father James, the Vault's physician and a former scientist. When the PC turns 19, she/he leaves the Vault, and wanders off to the Wasteland in search of their father James, who disappeared from Vault 101 in mysterious

[65] Vault 101 is an underground shelter where the PC (Lone Wanderer) resides before he/she leaves the vault and enters the gameworld in search of their father.
[66] Capital Wasteland is the name given to the ruins of the in-game Washington, D.C. and its surroundings, which constitute the game space.

circumstances. Searching for their father, the PC is taken on a journey through the Wasteland, beginning in the town of Megaton, the Galaxy News Radio station and Rivet City. The main driving force behind the plot is the activation of Project Purity. After tracking the player character's father to Vault 112 we find out that before the PC's birth he was involved in running the Project, the aim of which was to purify all the waters in the Capital Wasteland. James left Vault 101 to find the Garden of Eden Creation Kit (G.E.C.K.) and restart the unfinished project. Our player character, the Lone Wanderer, is given the possibility to join his/her father in the mission to bring life back to the Wasteland. However, as I will demonstrate in the case study in section 8.3, an intricate morality system allows for a great variety of choices, not necessarily in line with James' plan.

Since *Fallout 3* is a sandbox game, various quests may be solved in a sequence chosen by the player. The gameworld is so vast that certain locations and quests may not be discovered at all. Unlike in *The Witcher* (2007) the unravelling of the plot is not dependent on the specific order of quests, and thanks to a complex system of character development and decision making, *Fallout 3* may finish with 29 endings. The game, unlike *The Witcher,* features an open system of level design, hence it becomes difficult to judge which quests are optional, and which lead to a direct plot advancement.

8.2 Typical Gameplay

The gameplay in *Fallout 3* is not divided into specific parts constituting a linear plot, but takes place in an open world, where the player can wander freely and choose the order of quest completion. As I will further demonstrate in section 8.3, exploring the Wasteland and engaging in complex interactions with the environment and the NPCs contributes greatly to the development of the player character. There are also more visible meters of the PC's development available by means of specific interface elements.

8.2.1 Appearance Customisation

First of all, at the beginning of the game the PC in *Fallout 3* undergoes a detailed appearance customisation. The second scene of the introductory film sequence features a Gene Projection device, which enables the player to adjust four basic aspects of the character: sex, race, face, and hair (see fig. 8.1). Each of the four categories includes further subcategories.

The player can choose between a male and a female character. There are four races available: African American, Asian, Caucasian, and Hispanic. The PC's face may be randomised according to sex and race or fully customised, taking into consideration the following three features: Shape, Tone, and Eye Colour. Each of the features contains further categories, such as Forehead, Brow, Eyes, Nose, Mouth, Cheeks, Jar, and Chin. Those are later adjusted with the usage of various range bars (e.g., Forehead adjusted on a scale from small to large). The fourth main category (Hair) contains three main options: Hair Style, Hair Colour, and Facial Hair.

Figure 8.1 Appearance Customisation in *Fallout 3 (2008)*

8.2.1 Attribute Modelling

More importantly, apart from appearance customisation, the player character in *Fallout 3* undergoes a complex attribute modelling process, which involves the following set of values:[67]

a) seven Primary Statistics referred to as S.P.E.C.I.A.L. (Strength, Perception, Endurance, Charisma, Intelligence, Agility, and Luck) displayed on a scale from 1-10;

[67] See *The Official Strategy Guide* (Howard 2008) for a full list of values with detailed descriptions.

b) seven Derived Statistics (Carry Weight, Critical Chance, Damage Resistance, Health, Melee and Unarmed Damage, Poison and Radiation Resistance, and Movement Speed) determined automatically based on the value of Primary Statistics;
c) 13 Skills which form the backbone of the player character and are rated between 0-100 (Barter, Big Guns, Energy Weapons, Explosives, Lockpick, Medicine, Melee Weapons, Repair, Science, Small Guns, Sneak, Speech, and Unarmed); and
d) 58 Perks allowing for a high level of specialisation (e.g., with Black Widow perk selected at level 2 a female PC may inflict an extra 10% damage to all male NPCs) . The PC can select Perks from the list, which expands every two levels (there are 20 levels)

The above values may be set once the PC gains a certain number of experience points (XP) allowing them to level up. The choices constitute a strategy, which forms a particular type of the character, and influences the interactions with NPCs, which also determine who the PC becomes later in the game. As Todd Howard, the author of *The Official Strategy Guide* for *Fallout 3*, explains, "a series of complementary statistics, skills, and perks help create a well-rounded and extremely adept character" (Howard 2008, p. 28). To support his statement, he presents a few character archetypes, which may be created in the game by allocating certain combinations of available attributes. For instance, the player may build a "quick-handed assassin", who is extremely effective in fist fighting. To build this character type Howard suggests the following strategy (2008, p. 28):

1. Primary Statistics focus: Agility and Luck
2. Skill focus: Unarmed
3. Exemplary Perks focus: Iron Fist, Ninja, Paralyzing Palm

Of course, judging by the complexity of all the statistics, the number of character type variations is enormous (the designers do not provide an exact value or an estimate), and the player may choose to build a much more complex character than the one demonstrated above.

Another important aspect shaping the player character during gameplay is her Karma. It is a measurement tool of the PC's morality levels based on the previous actions. The Karma value ranges from -1.000 (very evil) to +1.000 (very good). The PC starts the game with the

Karma value of 0. During gameplay the player cannot see the Karma meter, but instead is informed of the Karma loss or gain with every major action undertaken towards an NPC, and is presented with a character type based on Karma points (see The Power of the Atom quest described in section 8.3):

Karma Value	Character Type
-1.000 to -750	Very Evil
-749 to -250	Evil
-249 to +249	Neutral
+250 to +749	Good
+750 to +1.000	Very Good

Figure 8.2 Karma Value and Assigned Character Types (Howard 2008, p. 29)

Several actions in the game are responsible for Karma loss or gain, for instance: killing a very evil NPC raises the PC's Karma value by 100, while murdering a neutral or good character lowers it by the same value. Stealing an item from a neutral or good NPC has a negative effect and subtracts 5 points from the Karma meter. Karma affects a variety of elements in the gameworld – "from how you're treated by others, to the Followers who agree to join you, to areas of the Wasteland you can visit" (Howard 2008, p. 29). The PC Karma also affects the type of the game's ending after finishing the expedition.

All the above character development elements may be accessed via an electronic Personal Information Processor (Pip-Boy 3000), which constitutes the player's heads-up display (HUD) in the game. The Pip-Boy has three major tabs: Stats, Items, and Data. In the Stats tab the PC can acquire information about the character's general status (PC's condition, radiation levels, and currently active effects), her S.P.E.C.I.A.L. attributes, selected Skills and Perks, and general information about the PC's Karma level. The Items tab acts as a traditional inventory and is divided into five categories: Weapons, Apparel, Aid, Misc, and Ammo. Extra information refers to the weight of the stored items, XP (Experience Points gathered so far), AP (Action Points), HP (Hit Points), and the number of Bottle caps, which constitute the in-

game currency. The third Data tab includes such information as: Local Map, World Map, Quests, Notes, and Radio.

Figure 8.3 Pip-Boy 3000 in *Fallout 3* (2008)

Similarly to *The Witcher's* character development system the Pip-Boy 3000 allows the player to monitor the PC's progression level and illustrates the character's status by means of graphical information and written descriptions, which mirror the character's development process.

The last aspect directly influencing the PC is related to the interaction with the non-player characters. In *Fallout 3*, as I will present in the case study, it is much more complex than in *The Witcher*. The PC can interact with every character met in the gameworld and the actions taken against them shape the PC's development path. For instance, the PC can attack every possible NPC, which changes the Karma value and the NPCs' attitude towards her. Non-player characters also react to stealing. After a certain point they start attacking the PC and defending their goods (unlike in *The Witcher*, where the NPCs do not react to being robbed). For instance, stealing numerous items from Silver in Springvale (the side quest ordered by Moriarty in Megaton) triggers her anger towards the PC, who subsequently has to fight Silver and kill her in order to survive.[68]

[68] Silver is a former citizen of Megaton, a settlement build around an undetonated nuclear bomb. Megaton shelters its inhabitants against the dangers of the Wasteland.

The player character's rich appearance customisation and a complex process of attribute modelling discussed above are the backbone of the gameplay focused on the PC's development (see the table in fig. 8.4).

<table>
<tr><th colspan="3">Personalised Avatar Construction in Fallout 3</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Level 1 Appearance Customisation: available
(Fallout 3 features a highly complex appearance customisation system, which allows for a very intricate adjustment of facial features)</td><td>Level 2 Attribute Modelling: available</td></tr>
<tr><td>Level 1.1 Name: selectable; e.g. 'Sonika'</td><td>Level 1.2 Sex: selectable; e.g. female</td><td>Level 2.1 Attribute system:
Primary Statistics (S.P.E.C.I.A.L.), Derived Statistics, Skills, Perks, morality system based on Karma points</td></tr>
</table>

Figure 8.4 Personalised Avatar Construction in Fallout 3 (2008)

Having discussed the various solutions in the mechanics of the game, I will now move on to a close analysis of a concrete character constructed for the purpose of this case study.

8.3 Case Study

The gameplay sample selected for the current close analysis includes the events taking place in Vault 101 at the initial stage of the game, and during a few events after leaving the vault and setting off to the Capital Wasteland. I have selected those particular elements of the storyline as they constitute appropriate material for the analysis of player character customisation process, both on the level of appearance and initial attribute modelling (available in Vault 101), and decision making, which influences the character's morality and further shapes her status in the game (visible during the first few quests). Similarly to the analysis performed in Chapter 7, I will map the PC's development path onto a table, illustrating the interactions with NPCs, props and locations (see fig. 8.5).

As I have mentioned, *Fallout 3* is a sandbox type cRPG, which grants the player a lot of operational flexibility during gameplay, and allows for a high level of PC customisation. The

initial PC personalisation process is intertwined with the game's narrative, which allows for keeping the player immersed in the story and, by doing so, disguises the mechanism behind the customisation process. The introductory cinematic sequence begins with the birth of the player character, which is paused as the PC's father wonders out loud:

> *Let's see, are you a boy or a girl?*
> *a) boy*
> *b) girl*

This point marks the first choice a player makes as far as the character's features are concerned. After selecting the PC's sex (in this case study – female) the in-game father elaborates:

> *You're going to need a name, aren't you? Your mother and I have been thinking. What do you think about?*
> *[enter character's name: Sonika]*

The third customisation process involves the Gene Projection interface, which demonstrates what the PC will look like when they are grown up (see fig. 8.1 in section 8.2.1). The PC described in this case study is an African American female.

After finalising appearance customisation, the player experiences another scene taking place one year later. The PC is a toddler and while getting involved in her first encounter with the surrounding world, she receives a book entitled *You're S.P.E.C.I.A.L.*, including simplified descriptions of seven basic attributes discussed in section 8.2.2. At this stage the PC allocates five additional points to the abovementioned attributes. The points assigned to Sonika's S.P.E.C.I.A.L. characteristics at the initial stage are as follows:

> **Strength** (determines how much I can carry and how much damage I can take): **6**
> **Perception** (determines how well I can use my five senses to determine the threat): **5**
> **Endurance** (determines my general fitness levels): **6**
> **Charisma** (determines my likeability): **5**
> **Intelligence** (measures my intellect and allows for more point allocation with each level): **6**

Agility (measures my dexterity): **7**

Luck (it affects every other skill – high Luck raises all the other skills and increase my chance of a critical hit): **5**

After allocating all the available points to the basic skills the PC moves in time and finds herself nine years later at the Birthday Party. During this scene the PC meets the residents of the vault (Amata, Officer Gomez, Butch, Old Lady Palmer, Stanley, and Jonas) and is given her own Pip-Boy 3000, which at this point in the game displays information on basic statistics and a local map. Gradually the Items section of the personal HUD is filled with objects obtained from other characters or found inside Vault 101. Old Lady Palmer gives the PC a sweet roll, Stanley a baseball cap, and Jonas takes her to the Reactor level, where Sonika receives her very first BB gun from James (her father) and she is asked to try it out, shooting at three targets and a radroach.[69]

The next scene occurs 6 years later, when the PC has to take the G.O.A.T. exam (Generalised Occupational Aptitude Test), which will determine her abilities and assign an appropriate occupation on the basis of the answers given to ten questions. Before sitting the exam Sonika participates in a quarrel between Amata (the Overseer's daughter) and Butch and his gang of Tunnel Snakes, who bully the girl. The PC can either defend Amata and gain Karma points or further oppress her and lose Karma. This is the first event in the game which demonstrates the consequences of various interaction models with NPCs. The PC decides not to help Amata and loses a few Karma points. Since the G.O.A.T. is taken to mark the PC's tagged skills, after its completion the player has the possibility to select three Skills out of 13. In this case, the following three skills are selected: Lockpick, Sneak, and Speech.

Soon afterwards Amata informs the PC that she has to leave the vault immediately. James' unexpected escape into the Capital Wasteland turns the world in Vault 101 upside down. The Overseer's security guards kill Jonas for helping in the escape, and the PC finds herself in great danger. Amata gives Sonika a 10 mm pistol and 10 bobby pins, which can be used while lockpicking the Overseer's office. In one of the drawers in the room the PC also finds another BB gun, BBs (x50), a baseball bat, and the First Aid Box, which contains Med-X and

[69] Radroach is *a* giant cockroach mutated by atomic radiation.

Stimpaks (x10).[70] Sonika's current mission is to open the Overseer's Tunnel and escape from the vault. On her way to the operating room she gains XP points for killing radroaches with a baseball bat, slaying the Overseer and stealing all the necessary items (including the key to the Overseer's office) from the dead bodies, various drawers and cupboards. The stolen key opens the Robco Industries Unified Operating System, giving the PC access to detailed information Security Dossiers, Scouting Reports and messages exchanged between the Overseer and James. The last option in the System allows the PC to activate the opening of the tunnel, which takes her to the vault's opening valve. Before leaving Vault 101 for good the player is given the possibility to revise their player character by selecting one of the following options:

1. Edit Name
2. Edit Race/Sex
3. Edit S.P.E.C.I.A.L.
4. Edit Tag Skills
5. Finished – Exit Vault 101

After the player selects the fifth option the character leaves the vault and progresses to level 2, which gives the PC the possibility to assign 16 points across 13 available Skills. The following table demonstrates all the Skills and the number of points assigned to them on a scale from 0-100.

Skill	Points assigned
Barter	15
Big Guns	17
Energy Weapons	15
Explosives	25
Lockpick	27
Medicine	22

[70] Med-X is an analgesic which reduces the perception of pain by the PC. This chemical substance increases the PC's damage resistance by 25%.
Stimpack is a medication which heals minor wounds in the PC's body.

Melee Weapons	20
Repair	17
Science	19
Small Guns	21
Sneak	31
Speech	30
Unarmed	17

Figure 8.5 Skill Points in Fallout 3 (2008)

As may be observed the three tagged skills (Lockpick, Sneak, and Speech) received the highest number of points, and they mark the initial status of the PC's attributes. Before setting off to the Capital Wasteland the PC also chooses one Perk – Thief. It has three ranks available and with every level the PC gains a one-time bonus of 5% to the Sneak and Lockpick skills.

The first location the player character heads for is a little town of Megaton, which is north east of the vault's entrance. It is worth noting here that at this point the PC is free to wander off in any possible direction "as there are infinite numbers of routes to and from the various locations across the Wasteland" (Howard 2008, p. 66). Before opening the gates of Megaton Sonika meets a trade caravan with Lucky Harith, a caravan merchant specialising in selling guns. The PC sells a few items stored in her inventory. She opens the Items section of the Pip-Boy 3000 and browses through the available objects: Stimpaks (x11), 10 mm Pistol, 10 mm Round (x175), BB Gun, BBs, Baseball Bat, Bobby Pins (x15), Frag Granade, Mentats (x2), Med-X, Radroach meet, Vault 101 Security Armour, and Vault 101 Security Helmet. After selling selected goods and receiving Caps from Lucky Harith, the PC enters Megaton, where she is greeted by Sheriff Lucas Simms. Sonika wanders around Megaton, meeting various characters and finally stopping at a saloon run by Colin Moriarty, who promises to tell her where James went to, provided she pays him 100 Caps. Since the PC does not have enough money, she agrees to go on a mission for Moriarty. Sonika has to locate a ranch house belonging to Silver, a woman who borrowed some caps from Moriarty and never paid back.

After accepting this task, Moriarty raises the price to 300 Caps. In order to gain some information about James the PC needs to accept his conditions. She heads out of town to find Silver's house in a nearby town of Springvale and convince her to pay her debts back to Moriarty. The woman gives the PC 300 Caps. Before leaving, Sonika decides to rob the house (Jet, Psycho, and Chems) and kill Silver, which lowers the character's Karma value. Since extra points have been assigned to Speech skills, the PC manages to convince Moriarty that Silver left town. Sonika pays him 100 Caps and finds out the direction her father James headed for (Galaxy News Radio offices in the city).

Before leaving the saloon the PC approaches a mysterious individual dressed smartly in a suit – Mister Burke. He encourages Sonika to take up a quest of detonating the atomic bomb, which is placed in the centre of Megaton. Following are the crucial dialogue lines with Mr. Burke:

> ***Mr. B:*** *I represent certain… interests. And those interests view this town, this Megaton, as a blight on a burgeoning urban landscape. You have no connections here. No interest in this cesspool's affairs, or fate. You could assist us in erasing this little accident off the map.*
>
> ***Sonika:*** *1. Go on. I'm listening. [Rejected options: 2. Wait… You're going to destroy the town? 3. You're a sick man, Burke. This conversation's over.]*
>
> ***Mr. B:*** *The undetonated atomic bomb for which this town is named is still very much alive. All it needs is a little motivation. I have in my possession a Fusion Pulse Charge constructed for a singular purpose – the detonation of that bomb. You'll rig it to the bomb. Then you'll get paid. Handsomely. What do you say?*
>
> ***Sonika:*** *1. (Speech, 17%) Throw in an extra 500 caps, and you've got yourself a deal. [Rejected options: 2. Megaton is under my protection. You're going to leave… now. 3. All right, Mister Burke. I'll do it. Megaton will burn]*

The PC accepts the task and uses her Speech skills to raise the rate by 500 Caps. Mister Burke agrees to pay her 1000 Caps and equips Sonika with the Pulse Charger. Before blowing up Megaton, the PC decides to earn some money and the residents' trust by taking part in

the experiments run by Moira Brown, a 24-year old inventor, who wants to write a survival book about the Capital Wasteland. To do that she needs someone with experience and courage, ready to test her inventions in the real life scenario. One of the quests the PC accepts requires searching for food and medicines at the Super Duper Mart filled with hostile Raiders, the Wasteland residents who are known for murdering and plundering. Of course, since Fallout 3 is an open world game, it gives the PC the possibility to stumble upon the supermarket not necessarily after the conversation with Moira Brown from Megaton.

After earning some money, the PC detonates the bomb by placing a Fusion Pulse Charge inside the bomb. In order to perform the task, Sonika's Explosive skills must be at least 25 (see Skill Points in figure 8.5). She then leaves Megaton and looks for Tenpenny Tower, where Mister Burke and his employer wait for her to report on the completed task. The PC enters the Tower, gets to the top floor penthouse and together with Burke watch Megaton blow up. On top of the earnings the PC receives a suite for her disposal at Tenpenny Tower. Completing The Power of the Atom quest causes a Karma loss of 1000 points, which makes the PC a very evil character and places her at the bottom of the Karma range (-1000).

Having seen her new flat, the PC sets off to explore the Wasteland and see what is left after blowing up Megaton. As the PC approaches the town she can see the survivors running around the debris. Amongst them is Moira Brown (turned into a Ghoul after the explosion), who is happy to see the PC, not knowing Sonika was responsible for her misery:

> ***Moira:*** *Oh, my head's still ringing from that explosion… What happened?*
>
> ***Sonika:*** *3. I have no idea. I wasn't even here. <Lie.> [rejected options: 1. Moira? Is that you? You don't look so good. 2. The bomb in town just blew up. You're lucky to be alive.]*

After talking to me she walks away, and the PC shoots her in the back. Having killed Moira she receives the following message: The Wasteland Survival Guide: Moira Brown has died, and her book will never be written. Soon afterwards the PC loots her body and takes a few useful items, including 10mm Round (29), Mentats, and a jumpsuit. In this case, the PC's action against an NPC influenced the future outcome of the events in the gameworld.

After killing Moira Brown the PC sets off to the Galaxy News Radio offices to look for her father. This case study, however, will not elaborate on further events in the game. The quests and interactions with NPCs presented above are considered sufficient for performing a close analysis of the player character. Below is a table (fig. 8.6) summarising the player character's interactions with other non-player characters, props and locations outlined in the above case study.

ENTITY TYPE	ENTITY SUBTYPE	ENTITY	GENERAL DESCRIPTION	ENTITY MANIPULATION (interaction options)	INTERACTION MAPPING
NPCs	**NPAs/ Functional**	Amata	The Overseer's daughter	The PC bullies Amata, losing Karma points. She talks to the NPC and accepts a 10 mm pistol. Amata can also be beaten.	The PC can either bully Amata or defend her against Butch and the Tunnel Snakes. This choice does not have long term implications upon the storyline.
		Colin Moriarty	The owner of the saloon in Megaton.	The PC talks to him and agrees to get back Moriarty's money from Silver. Moriarty can be attacked.	Dialogue lines with Moriarty are complex. The PC can either convince him to tell where James went to (high Speech skills), pay him 100 Caps, find Silver for him and pay him 100 or 300 Caps, or break into his terminal (high Science skills).
		Mister Burke	Allistair Tenpenny's right hand.	The PC talks to him and accepts the quest of blowing up Megaton	The PC has numerous dialogue options to choose from – she can either accept the quest from Burke (and raise the payment rate with high Speech skills) or refuse and disarm the bomb, saving Megaton. She can also report about Burke to the Sheriff. This event requires the PC to kill Burke. Accepting Burke's offer and detonating the bomb lowers the Karma value by 1000!
		Moira Brown	The owner of Megaton's Craterside Supply and an inventor.	The PC talks to Moira, accepts quests, kills her and loots her body	Thanks to Moira the PC gains a lot of new experience and items. After killing Moira the PC prevents her from writing the *Wasteland Survival Guide* and loses Karma points.
		Overseer	The leader of Vault 101	he PC kills him and loots his	The PC can either hack his Terminal

			who has a God-like status	body	or kill him and loot his body in search of the key to the Terminal. Both actions bring the same result. Killing him lowers the Karma value.
		Sheriff Lucas Simms	*The sheriff and mayor of Megaton*	The PC talks to him and asks questions about Megaton. The Sheriff (like all the other NPCs) can be attacked and killed.	If the PC disarms the bomb, she gains the Sheriff's trust, is paid 500 Caps and gets a small flat in Megaton. She also gains Karma points. The PC can also report Mister Burke's plans to Simms, which leads to a fight between the two. The PC can save the Sheriff and kill Burke or wait until Burke kills him and only then finish off Burke. This allows the PC to loot both bodies without gaining negative Karma and turning Megaton's settlers into hostile enemies. Blowing up Megaton leads to Sheriff's death.
	Cast	Butch (DeLoria)	Resident of Vault 101 known as the Serpent King of the Tunnel Snakes.	The PC talks to him and bullies Amata. Later on the PC refuses to help his mother, kills him and loots his body.	The interaction with Butch does not lead to any significant choices in Vault 101.
		James	The PC's father	The PC talks to him and listens to him on numerous occasions in Vault 101	The interaction with James in Vault 101 is rather scarce and one-directional. In this part of gameplay James is an episodic cast character.
		Jonas (Palmer)	Resident of Vault 101 and James' assistant.	The PC follows Jonas to the Reactor level.	The interaction with Jonas does not have any further implications.
		Lucky Harith	Caravan merchant in the Wasteland	The PC talks and trades with him.	The PC can trade with Lucky Harith or try to kill him, in which case she can loot all his belongings or die in

					battle.
		Officer Gomez	Resident of Vault 101 and officer of Vault Security	The PC talks to him.	The interaction with this NPC does not lead to any significant choices.
		Old Lady Palmer	Resident of Vault 101	The PC talks to her and accepts a sweet roll.	The interaction with this NPC does not lead to any significant choices. The PC can either accept a sweet roll (it raises Heath Points) or reject it.
		Radroaches	Mutated cockroaches	The PC shoots them and kills them with a baseball bat.	
		Raiders	Hostile settlers of the Wasteland.	The PC fights with them on numerous occasions.	The PC has only one option of interacting with Raiders – fighting. After killing them she can loot their bodies and gain new weapons.
		Silver	Former citizen of Megaton living in the ranch house in Springvale	The PC talks to her, kills her and loots her body.	The PC can either talk her into giving the money back to Colin Moriarty and leave, or kill her looting her body. The latter option decreases Karma points.
		Stanley	Technician in Vault 101	The PC talks to him.	The interaction with Butch does not lead to any significant choices.
	Stage	Random residents of the Capital Wasteland.*		Stage NPCs cannot be interacted with and serve a decorative purpose in the gameworld.	*There are no typical stage characters in *Fallout 3.* All characters can be interacted with. Those that cannot be talked to, can be killed and looted.
OBJECTS	**Functional**	10 mm pistol 10 mm Round Baseball bat Baseball cap	Weapon Weapon Weapon Apparel	The PC can use, loot, buy, sell or repair all weapons found in the Wasteland.	

		BB gun	Weapon		
		BBs	Weapon		
		Bobby pins	Other equipment	Bobby pins are used while Lockpicking (the success rate depends on how high the PC's Lockpick skills are).	
		Caps	Currency	Caps can be used to pay for goods or stolen/looted.	
		Frag Granade	Weapon		
		Med-X Mentats	Chemical Chemicals	Chemicals boost the PC's mental skills or heal the body (Stimpaks)	
		Pip-Boy 3000	Personal HUD	Pip-Boy is the main user's interface	
		Radroach meet	Food	Food raises Health Points (HP) and lowers radiation levels.	
		Stimpaks	Chemicals		
		Sweet roll	Food		
		Vault 101 Security Armour	Apparel	Armour, helmets, glasses etc. influence the PC's health status and constitute an extra defence during combat.	
		Vault 101 Security Helmet	Apparel		
	Quest/plot items	You're S.P.E.C.I.A.L. book	Book and interface	Introductory interface responsible for assigning points to basic skills	
		Key to the Overseer's terminal		Enables the PC to open the valve and escape from Vault 101.	
	Decorative	Walls, some screens, pipes,	Objects placed in the gameworld to create	Those items cannot be interacted with and are placed	

		devastated cars, some buildings, windows, door, shelves	believable scenery.	in the gameworld for purely aesthetical purposes. However, unlike in *The Witcher*, in *Fallout 3* even the decorative objects display marks of abuse when hit with e.g. a baseball bat, which deepens the feeling of environmental presence.	
SELECTED LOCATIONS	**Vault 101** **Parts of the Capital Wasteland** **Megaton** **Springvale** **Super Duper Mart** **Tenpenny Tower**		Each of the main locations listed here includes further detailed locations that are part of a building or town, e.g. Moriarty's saloon, Moira's Craterside Supply, Brass Lantern bar and others are buildings in Megaton the PC can enter and explore.	Locations as such do not shape the character, but are filled with props and NPCs that influence the player character's developmental path.	

Figure 8.6 Selected NPCs, objects, locations and emerging scenarios in *Fallout 3* (2008)

8. 4 Discussion

The close analysis performed above and in fig. 8.6 demonstrates the complex relations between the player character and selected NPCs, props, and locations visited by the PC. As I emphasised in Chapter 6 player characters do not exist in a void, but are placed within a geometrical space constructed from the aforementioned elements. Interacting with them creates the feeling of social and environmental presence; the former denotes the extent to which other NPCs react to the PC, while the latter indicates the extent to which the environment itself notices the player character (Heeter 1992, qtd. in Nitsche 2008, p. 205). In *Fallout 3* those two types of presence differentiated by Heeter seem to be major factors creating a high sense of agency in the game, empowering the player and at the same time thrusting more life into the character, making her more round and believable.

All the non-player characters in the game react to the PC in one way or another. With some, the interaction is complex and involves choices that affect further events in the game. Mister Burke is a good example of such a complex interaction model. If the PC chooses to take up his offer and detonate the bomb in Megaton, her Karma levels decrease by 1000 points, placing her at the bottom of the Karma scale. This changes the way the PC is perceived by other inhabitants of The Wasteland. As an evil character we can recruit Clover or Jericho as our companions (they cannot be selected by the PC with neutral or good Karma). Karma value may also influence the dialogue options available with certain characters. For instance, with evil Karma the PC gains access to Paradise Falls and is welcomed by the Slavers. Evil characters should also beware of the enemies with the opposite Karmic range (this also applies to very good characters). Another striking example of social presence in Megaton relates to Moira Brown, who is shot by the PC after blowing up Megaton. Killing Moira prevents her from writing the *Wasteland Survival Guide* and permanently removes her from the gameworld. This choice gives the player a very strong impression of the reality of the implications caused by their actions.

The second type of presence related to the in-game environment may be observed while performing simple actions towards the objects scattered around the gameworld. Vault 101 is filled with collectable props, including weapons, armour, chemicals and food (e.g., 10 mm pistol, baseball bat, radroach meat, Mentats etc.). Interestingly, the environmental presence

in *Fallout 3* may be closely connected with the social one. This becomes visible when the PC tries to steal items from other NPCs. Not only does she lose Karma points, but also at some point she has to fight with non-player characters, such as Silver in the Ranch House who refuses to be robbed and turns hostile.

Comparing the contents of the tables (fig. 7.5 and 8.6) relating to the two games discussed so far (*The Witcher* and *Fallout 3*), we may notice that in both of them the process of player character construction includes the same components (NPCs, objects, and locations; *description, entity manipulation, interaction mapping*). Moreover, in *The Witcher* the spatial relations between the player character and other NPCs, and in-game props constitute the core of the gameplay. Yet the PC in *Fallout 3* seems more elaborate and the perceived level of agency – triggered by the social and environmental presence – higher. Where then does the difference stem from? As may be observed from the table in figure 8.6, *Fallout 3* does not feature stage non-player characters, which in *The Witcher* perform decorative functions. In Bethesda's production all the NPCs react to the PC's actions, although the complexity of those reactions differs. Even if the character does not trigger intricate dialogue lines, the PC can always attack, kill or loot their bodies, losing or gaining Karma points, depending on the context of the fight. The same rule applies to the props scattered in the gameworld – although the game involves purely decorative elements (e.g., walls, some buildings, screens, windows etc.), the majority of the objects found during gameplay can be interacted with.

Furthermore, the extent to which the PC may be individualised and shaped according to the player's will differs substantially in both games. As I presented in this chapter, high levels of freedom in the PC's construction results in a more intricate process of characterisation (see fig. 8.4). Also, as I noticed in Chapter 7, the more *individuality indicators are present within the game, the bigger its replayability value. It stems from* the level of the PC's plasticity, which denotes the degree to which we can alter the character from one gameplay to another. For instance, every time we play through Chapter I of *The Witcher* the events evolve in more or less the same order. The only difference relates to the completion or non-completion of side quests, which help the PC gain more experience points, but do not influence the main storyline. The player can develop Geralt's combat skills in a different sequence, but this will not produce noticeable changes in the plot or the character himself. In *Fallout 3*, on the other hand, almost every single choice the player makes during gameplay

influences further events and directs the PC towards different paths. Starting in Vault 101, we may create various permutations of the PC, changing their sex, appearance, basic and tagged skills. As we leave the vault, the choices become even more diverse. Not only can we shape the PC's attributes and change their morality system (Karma value influences the reactions of other NPCs towards the PC), but also choose a unique geographical path (e.g., instead of starting from visiting Megaton, we can go straight to the Galaxy News Radio or wander off in any of the possible directions on the map). We can also meet different NPCs, the interactions with whom will shape the PC and further events.[71]

8.5 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have presented the characterisation process of the PC in a few quests of *Fallout 3*, a complex sandbox type cRPG. The elements of the structural plane of The Player Character Grid (PC's development, NPCs, props, interface, space, and the role of agency) have been discussed with reference to the player character (Sonika) constructed for the purpose of the close analysis performed in section 8.3. The PC's development was discussed taking into consideration the following aspects:

e) Appearance customisation (sex, name, Gene Projection)
f) Attribute allocation (Primary Statistics, Derived Statistics, Skills, Perks)
g) Karma value and its implications
h) The interaction with objects
i) The interaction with NPCs and the significance of dialogue options.

I also focused on the point raised in the conclusions of Chapter 7, relating to the significance of the level of the PC's individualisation. I compared the player characters of *The Witcher* and *Fallout 3* with reference to the categories listed in the tables (fig. 7.4 and 8.5) and discussed the elements responsible for the differences in the complexity of characterisation of both PCs. In *Fallout 3* the character is more complex and less archetypal due to a rich morality system, a rich pool of determinants shaping the PC, and an open structure of level design, which gives the player more freedom in traversing throughout the gameworld. The criteria discussed with reference to the characters in *The Witcher* and *Fallout 3* will also

[71] *Fallout 3* features 319 characters in total (see: www.fallout.wikia.com/wiki/Fallout_3_characters)(Accessed 20 Sep. 2011).

constitute the core of the analysis in the next and final chapter devoted to *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* (2004).

Chapter 9

Applying the Player Character Grid to *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines*

The final close analysis of the player character will be performed in the gameworld of *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* (Troika Games 2004). The structure of the current Chapter will mirror the previous ones presented in Chapters 7 and 8. Thus, in the first section, I will briefly introduce the backstory behind the game. I will then discuss typical gameplay and interface options, enabling the creation of the player character. The final and most significant section will concentrate on the close analysis of the PC in Santa Monica and Hollywood, two of the game's main regions. The contents of the case study will then be mapped onto the methodological toolkit, and discussed in relation to its components.

In comparison to *Fallout 3* analysed in the precious chapter, *VTMB* is concentrated on linear storytelling rather than the explorative dimension of a vast gameworld filled with multiple characters, which have the power to influence the PC's morality system. The vampire gameworld is also filled with relatively few functional objects, when contrasted with *The Witcher.* As *VTMB* features the most simplified gamespace of all the discussed games, this chapter will focus on the nature of the spatial aspect and its influence upon the player character's development.

9.1 The Backstory

Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines (*VTMB*) is a digital descendant of the classic pen-and-paper *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991), the first of the *World of Darkness* games published by the White Wolf studio. The series depicted vampires in a gothic-punk contemporary world and gave rise to the entire supernatural mythology behind the fictitious characters.

The *VTMB* video game developed in 2004 by Troika Games introduces the player to the dark and dingy vampire underworld of modern-day Los Angeles. The central driving force of the

game's plot is the Ankaran Sarcophagus, an ancient artefact, which is believed to contain the body of a Mesopotamian king or the oldest and most powerful Antediluvian vampire,[72] and becomes the bone of contention between four vampire organisations – the Camarilla,[73] the Anarchs,[74] the Sabbat,[75] and the Kuei-jin[76]. The player character's task is to decide which faction, if any, to join in that battle.

The story begins when the PC is newly embraced by a Sire,[77] and as a result becomes a vampire themselves. Because the Sire did not seek permission from Prince LaCroix (the local leader), he is publicly sentenced to death for his disobedience to the authority. The event brings up an ironical undertone of killing a vampire, who is supposed to be an undead creature. While the PC is awaiting the same deadly fate, an Anarch leader protests against such drastic measures. The Prince spares the PC's life in exchange for their loyalty and submission. The first few introductory scenes take place during a Sabbat attack, so the PC needs to learn their skills quickly. Luckily, the first encountered NPC (Smiling Jack) gladly helps them survive the invasion and enter the streets of Santa Monica, L.A., the first main location in the game (the three other regions of the city include Downtown, Hollywood, and Chinatown).[78]

9.2 Typical Gameplay

In this section I will discuss different interface solutions used during the creation of the PC in *VTMB*. As I will demonstrate in further sections of this chapter, the structure of the gameplay enables players to construct an individual, actorial representation of the main character. Although the constituent elements of the character sheet in *VTMB* are different

[72] Antediluvians are considered to be the founders of the thirteen vampire races depicted in the *World of Darkness* games.
[73] The Camarilla is the largest vampiric organisation which acts in accordance with the Masquerade, a set of rules concealing the existence of vampires, and by doing so protecting them from people.
[74] The Anarchs are the vampires who reject the rules governing the vampire socjety. They also oppose the ruling Camarilla sect.
[75] The Sabbat is an organisation of vampires who reject the Camarilla's ruling and all the other vampiric traditions. They are hostile towards all the remaining vampire groups, the Anarchs, the Camarilla, and the Kuei-jin.
[76] The Kuei-jin is a vampiric sect affiliating the Kindred of the East.
[77] Sire refers to a parent vampire who embraced their childe and monitors their progress in the vampire life. The act of embracing denotes passing vampirism to mortals. It involves draining and replacing a victim's blood with the vampire's blood.
[78] Smiling Jack is a Brujah vampire belonging to the Anarchs. The player character meets him early in the game during tutorial scenes.

to the ones discussed with reference to *The Witcher* and *Fallout 3*, on a more generic level they relate to the categories of the Pivot Player Character Model (see Chapter 6). I will thus examine the PC's attribute allocation model, the NPCs, the objects scattered around the gameworld, and the interface solutions, for instance allowing the storage of picked up items.

Since *VTMB* is not a sandbox type game, similarly to *The Witcher*, its gameplay is divided into distinct sections, each of which is associated with a given number of quests. In *VTMB* the player character is developed in four main locations of the game. The close analysis performed in this chapter will focus on the construction of the PC during the selected quests from Santa Monica and Hollywood. The development of the PC – in terms of their attributes, equipment, the knowledge of the world and their immediate condition (energy and Blood Buff levels) – is illustrated in the following interface components:

1. Log:
   a) Character Sheet
   b) General Character Information
   c) Quest Log
2. Inventory
3. Energy and Blood Buff[79] meters

It should be noted here that before the PC enters the gameworld and has the chance to develop through the undertaken decisions and solved quests, their initial shape is selected by the player. *VTMB* is modelled on the traditional role-playing game system developed by White Wolf for their pen-and-paper *Vampire: The Masquerade* in 1991. The Storyteller System (altered into the Storytelling System in 2003) introduced nine character Attributes (Intelligence, Strength, Presence, Wits, Dexterity, Manipulation, Resolve, Stamina, Composure) depicted in three groups: Mental, Physical, and Social. Each Attribute was assigned five dots symbolising the character's level of advancement. Before the gameplay commenced each player character was given a number of dots to distribute among the Attributes. The characters also had a wide range of Abilities, which were divided into three groups: Knowledges, Talents, and Skills. Similarly to Attributes, Abilities were measured on a scale from one to five. Furthermore, the Storyteller System featured derived statistics, which

[79] Blood Buff – the vampire's health meter. It must be replenished, otherwise the PC dies.

included: Defence, Health, Initiative, Moralist, Size of the character, and Willpower. The battles were executed by means of dice rolling and the experience points were assigned by the game master. Those aspects vary in a digital version of RPGs, where the computer calculates the outcomes of battles and other actions, taking into consideration the current profile of the player character. As will become clear in section 9.2.1, the original Storyteller System in *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) was very closely mapped onto the computer-based *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* (2004), which includes the majority of the original player character's attributes, abilities and their numerical values.

9.2.1 Character Development System

In *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* the player is not allowed to perform a detailed appearance customisation of their character. At the initial stage of the PC's development the player is given two possibilities – they can either answer a series of descriptive questions and allow the game's engine to create the base character on the basis of the answers given, or acquire instant access to the character creation sheet and distribute the available experience points themselves.[80] Since the second option gives the player greater control over the character construction process, it will be elaborated upon in this section. It is, however, worth remembering that less RPG-savvy players are given a more descriptive option. They can also avoid an intricate system of manual XP distribution by turning on the AutoLevel in the character sheet. This will enable the game's engine to automatically spend the experience points gained with the completion of every quest to improve the PC's statistics.

Before the player can commence assigning specific attributes, they are presented with three dropdown lists: Clans, Sex, and History. The first option allows for the choice of a vampire clan the PC will belong to. There are seven different groups to choose from: Brujah, Gangrel, Malkavian, Nosferatu, Toreador, Tremere, and Ventrue. The choice of a vampire clan has an impact on the development possibilities of the PC, from statistical weaknesses and benefits to different powers and disciplines available to the player. Those in turn may influence the

[80] The character creation system in *VTMB* may be compared to the G.O.A.T. (Generalized Occupational Aptitude Test) test in *Fallout 3*, discussed in Chapter 8. It should be noticed that the answers in *VTMB* influence the shape of the PC for the rest of the gameplay. In *Fallout 3* the results obtained from G.O.A.T. do not have to have further implications on the player character. The tag skills obtained as a result of the test may be altered by the player. However, the mechanism of attribute or skill adjustment based on the answers to the questions is a common denominator for both games.

dialogue options and the way the NPCs react to the player-character. Each vampire may also exist as a male or a female. The third optional dropdown list (History) includes various behavioural backgrounds the player may adjust to the character. The thirteen available options include: Megalomaniac, All-Star Athlete, Well Educated, Presentable, Black-Hearted, Occult Nut, Eco-Terrorist Hacker, Generalissimo, Ex-cop, Perv, Pot Head, and Deaf. The player may also give the PC a specific name. At this stage of the character creation process, there are between 14 obligatory and as many as 182 combinations of choices to make. In the first case I am taking under consideration the seven clans and two sexes, which allow for the creation of 14 different vampires. The pool of possibilities increases exponentially after adding the thirteen History options to the seven Clans and two Sexes.

The next stage in the PC's creation process unravels a detailed character sheet enabling the player to allocate statistics. It is worth noticing here that the character sheet in *VTMB* very accurately mirrors the pen and paper RPG system of the original game. It features nine Attributes, twelve Abilities, three Disciplines, and four different Feat groups. Before entering the gameworld the player is given a certain number of experience points to allocate to every Attribute, Ability, and Discipline available for their selected clan. Depending on the vampire's heritage the number of allocation points in three different sets of Attributes (Physical, Social, Mental), and Abilities (Talents, Skills, Knowledges), the list of three Disciplines, and the Feat groups vary. For instance, as a Tremere the PC receives a lot of points to allocate to Mental and Physical Attributes, and very few to Social. Likewise, they obtain a lot of Knowledge points and a minimal number for Skills. As far as the Disciplines are concerned, in the case of the Brujah clan, they include Celerity (supernatural speed), Potence (supernatural strength), and Presence (emotional manipulation of the opponent). Tremere, on the other hand, are equipped with Auspex (supernatural senses), Dominate (overwhelming the opponent with the character's will), and Thaumaturgy (blood sorcery).

While distributing the points across Attributes, Abilities, and Disciplines, the player can also control the Feats, which are the statistics derived from the selected Attribute and Ability scores. For instance, the Melee Feat comprises the ratings of the Strength Attribute and the Melee Ability. By the same token, the Intimidate Mental Feat exhibited by the Brujah Clan depends on the Intimidation Ability and the Manipulation Attribute. Looking at the allocation points of a Tremere described in the above paragraph, we see that that particular

vampire character is good at computer code Hacking (7 points derived from Intelligence and Manipulation) and Melee (4 points derived from Melee and Strength), but not as good at Lockpicking (1 point) or Range combat (2 points derived from Firearms and Perception). Feats are rated between 1 and 10.

Each vampire clan is also assigned a certain number of humanity points at the start of the game (see figure 9.1). The continuum between a beast and a human is spread on a 10-point scale. Depending on the actions taken during the gameplay, the vampire may either increase or decrease their level of humanity. When the PC loses all the points and becomes a beast, they are prone to frenzy, which deprives the player of the control over their character and leads to their in-game death.

The character's premature death may be also caused by a multiple violation of the Masquerade code of conduct, which is illustrated in the character sheet by means of five masks symbolising the vampiric face of human nature (see figure 9.1, top right corner). Each time a vampire loses a mask, they sacrifice their human attributes and become more susceptible to the influence of the Beast within them. The Masquerade violation may occur, for instance, when the PC tries to feed on a human in public. Not only do they lose a Masquerade point (thus getting closer to becoming an uncontrollable Beast and killing the PC), but also fall prey to a police hunt, which makes them more likely to lose energy and sufficient blood levels to live.

Having accepted all the choices made in this complex character creation system, the player enters the first cut scene, and soon afterwards the gameplay tutorial begins. Section 9.3 will further elaborate on selected gameplay scenarios contributing to and illustrating the PC's development.

Figure 9.1 The Player Character Sheet in *VTMB* (2004)

9.2.2 The Interface Depicting the PC

The Character Sheet discussed in the previous subsection (9.2.1) is part of a Log, which also includes the Info and the Quest Log tabs. The former displays general character information, including name, clan affiliation, and physiognomy/appearance. The Quest Log, as the very name suggests, comprises a list of accepted, completed, and failed quests, which are assigned to the four main in-game locations. Similarly to *The Witcher*, *Fallout 3* and other cRPG games, summaries of completed or to-be-completed quests mirror the state of the PC's knowledge about the gameworld and their role in it. The Quest Log in *VTMB* is gradually filled with content as the PC traverses the game's universe and contributes to the development of the emergent narrative (Jenkins 2003, p. 12). Unlike *The Witcher* and *Fallout 3,* the map in *VTMB* is not part of the PC's heads-up display (HUD), but may be accessed directly in the gameworld at selected bus stops. It does not, however, represent the PC's gradually increasing knowledge of the in-game's topography. The maps of Santa Monica,

Downtown, Hollywood, and Chinatown illustrate the individual areas irrespective of whether the PC has already visited them or not. In other words, the display options in the maps do not depend on the PC's progress in the game and all the locations within a visited part of the city are available to the player character right at the beginning of their journey. The function of the maps is strictly informative, and they always include a legend with all the explorable regions that are assigned to specific quests and may contribute to the advancement of the plot. In *The Witcher* and *Fallout 3*, on the other hand, the map areas are uncovered consecutively as the PC progresses in the gameplay, and therefore they illustrate the PC's developing knowledge of the surrounding game space.

The inventory in *VTMB*, similarly to *The Witcher* and *Fallout 3,* provides a graphical representation of the obtained in-game items (such as: blood packs, weapons, money, books, quest items and other objects I will discuss in section 9.3) collected by the player character. It is divided into four parts, each of which contains different types of items:

1. Clothing
2. Miscellaneous items, such as: lockpicks, wooden stakes, pills, books, money, etc.
3. Weapons, such as: severed arms, baseball bats, knives, etc.
4. Firearms, such as: small-calibre handguns, home defence rifles, etc.

Since the PC does not carry any bags or satchels during gameplay, the Inventory constitutes a virtual space where all the gathered items reside. The only plot driven space where the PC can leave their items is the flat in Santa Monica, which may function as a storage place. However, unlike in *Fallout 3,* the PC can carry as many objects as they manage to collect, so there is no practical reason to leave them behind.

As in the case of the games discussed in the two previous chapters, the props accumulated by the PC have the power to influence their development, for instance through altering the state of their knowledge about the surrounding gameworld. Such is the case of books and some quest items, such as the Horror Tape Part 1, obtained from the mausoleum at the cemetery in Hollywood (quest: Dead Ex). The contents of the tape demonstrate the first part of the mysterious murder the PC has to unravel in order to proceed in the plot and unlock

the second main quest in Hollywood (Snuff is Enough). The PC can also buy and sell the props at Santa Monica's Pawn Shop.

In Chapters 7 and 8, with reference to *The Witcher* and *Fallout 3*, I discussed the significance of three types of objects present in those gameworlds – functional, decorative, and quest items (Howard 2008, p. 77). I will perform a similar analysis in relation to the gameworld in *VTMB,* which also contains those types of props, albeit in different quantities and ratios. The case study in section 9.3 will prove that the majority of objects in *VTMB* are decorative, and the functional ones are scarce. I will also focus on the relations between the PC and the objects they interact with. Following Zagal's differentiation between items that cause temporary and permanent changes in the character (2005, p. 8), I will look for concrete examples of such items in various gameplay scenarios.

Two more interface elements depicting temporary changes in the player character refer to the Health and Blood Buff meters. The two bars on the left and right side of the screen depict the character's health status and their energy, measured in blood concentration (they perform a similar role to the Medallion in *The Witcher*, and Health Point meter in *Fallout 3*). The health status changes for instance during combat. It may be boosted by raising the PC's blood levels. The Blood Buff meter needs to be replenished during gameplay; otherwise the PC is weakened and may easily die during combat or through exhaustion. High blood levels signify the amount of strength a character has and may be used to boost the PC's performance in a battle by using clan-specific mystical powers, such as Celerity (supernatural speed), Potence (supernatural strength), and Presence (emotional manipulation of the opponent), mentioned in section 9.2.1. Although blood influences the speed of the vampire's health regeneration, its complete lack does not cause an immediate death of the PC. Without blood the character is considerably weakened; they cannot use vampiric sorcery, and are prone to frenzy, which makes the character uncontrollable to the player. Such a condition may contribute to the ultimate loss of health through exhaustion or during a battle.

It is worth mentioning that from a semantic point of view the circulation of fresh blood in the character does not automatically signify their health status. As the PC is an undead vampire, they do not have their own blood, but feed upon other human beings and animals

(e.g. rats). The collected blood points allow the PC to grow stronger and to use the full potential of all their powers. Lack of it does not have as far-reaching consequences as the complete loss of health. For the other non-player characters, however, blood loss signifies immediate death.

The blood may be obtained either from the non-player characters' bodies or bought in the Blood Bank in Santa Monica. The panel on the right may also list three disciplines representing the PC. Depending on the clan affiliation, the disciplines vary. The Brujah player character, for instance, features Celerity, Potence, and Presence. Those three clan-specific skills may be selected during combat to temporarily boost the character's efficiency in battle. Each of the three disciplines also has a blood meter illustrating their level of use.

9.3 Case Study

The present case study is performed in relation to the selected scenarios from two different locations in the game: Santa Monica and Hollywood. Contrary to *The Witcher*, in *VTMB* the player can preliminarily customise their character before entering the actual gameworld (see figure 9.2). Although it is not possible to adjust the PC's appearance (see *Fallout 3* in Chapter 8), the player is given the possibility to select the PC's sex, enter their name, and choose one of seven Vampire Clans and different historical backgrounds assigned to them. Unlike in *Fallout 3*, the initial personalisation process has not been incorporated into the game's narrative. It does not have any significance for the theoretical framework presented in this thesis. This self-referentiality to the medium can, however, affect the degree to which the players identify themselves with the fictitious character. In *VTMB* the player builds their character before the introductory cinematic sequence takes place. For the purpose of this study, the created player character is a female Brujah vampire with no specific history selected and a name of MatsuKaze. The three clan-specific disciplines of Brujah include: Celerity, Potence, and Presence. They may be used during combat and are instantly accessed by flipping over the Blood Buff meter on the right side of the screen.

Personalised Avatar Construction in *VTMB*		
Level 1 Appearance Customisation: unavailable (*VTMB* does not feature an appearance customisation system; the player is only allowed to adjust the PC's name and sex.)		**Level 2 Attribute Modelling:** available
Level 1.1 Name: selectable; e.g. 'MatsuKaze'	**Level 1.2 Sex:** selectable; e.g. female	**Level 2.1 Attribute system:** Attributes, Abilities, Disciplines, and Feats; Humanity points and the violation of the Masquerade code

Figure 9.2 Personalised Avatar Construction in *VTMB* (2004)

Similarly to the analysis performed in Chapters 7 and 8, I will map the PC's development path onto a table, illustrating the interactions with NPCs, props and locations (see figure 9.3).

9.3.1 Selected Quests from Santa Monica

After the introductory tutorial section the player character arrives in Santa Monica, one of four main parts of Los Angeles pictured in *VTMB*. In exchange for sparing the PC's life, Prince LaCroix demands that she finds Mercurio, his agent (quest: Wherefore Art Thou, Mercurio?).[81] The first location the PC heads for is her flat above Trip's Pawnshop. MatsuKaze explores the flat (which predominantly consists of decorative objects that cannot be manipulated) and finds a note on the table. Since it is a functional quest item, the PC is able to interact with it. Mercurio's note provides the player character with a password to their computer and a hint to open an e-mail box. The PC enters the password and is able to access her mailbox. The email from Mercurio contains his exact address (24 Main Street,

[81] The names of the quest and the character bear a strong resemblance to William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. In Shakespeare's play Mercutio is a close friend of Romeo, but he is neither a Capulet nor a Montague. In *VTMB* the ghoul Mercurio is also excluded from the four opposing vampire clans and is in great pain after receiving an injury (unlike Mercutio, the character in the game does not die). There does not seem to be any further resemblance between Shakespeare's Mercutio and *VTMB's* Mercurio, other than the name of the game's quest (Where Art Thou, Mercurio?), which parodies the rhetorical question posed by Juliet (Wherefore Art Thou Romeo?). It should be noticed here that the game's cross-reference to *Romeo and Juliet* does not influence the structural part of the Player Character Grid, but may be used in a cultural intertextual analysis related to the referential plane of the proposed theoretical framework.

apartment 4). Before leaving the flat, MatsuKaze explores all the possible functional objects and picks up five items: a Normal Watch from the bathroom's floor, a Pill Bottle from the cabinet, and three Blood Packs from the refrigerator. Having left the building, the PC finds blood marks on the street, which lead her into Mercurio's apartment. During a conversation with Mercurio, the PC learns that he was attacked while trying to purchase some Astrolite explosive. Prince LaCroix's agent asks the PC for help in retrieving the Astrolite and the stolen money. The PC agrees to help Mercurio and is instructed to make her way to the Beach House and return with the lost items (quest: Surf's Up).

The PC leaves the apartment and heads down the Main Street towards the underground parking lot, which includes the Beach Access area. At the beach a female NPC approaches MatsuKaze and explains where the bandits may be found. She proposes to foretell the future for $100. The PC refuses to take up the offer due to its high cost. There are a few other NPCs (the so called Thin Bloods) gathered around the campfire that may be interacted with. The dialogue with a shirtless male character activates a side quest (Thin Bloods). The PC ignores it and climbs up the cliff towards the Beach House to retrieve the Astrolite. After defeating the opponents (using melee combat skills) the PC locates the explosives in one of the rooms, collects them, and heads back without further looking for Mercurio's stolen money (2 Experience Points earned).[82] Reporting back to Mercurio grants the PC one more Experience Point and unlocks another quest (Explosive Beginning), in which the agent asks the PC to plant the recovered Astrolite in a warehouse used by the Sabbat.

To gain access to the warehouse, the PC needs to meet with Bertram Tung, a Nosferatu vampire hiding in the oil tank at the Sunco Gasoline facility in Santa Monica. To do so, MatsuKaze has to visit the Baroness of Santa Monica, Therese Voerman, who resides in The Asylum night club. Before the PC is given the opportunity to explore the warehouse facilities, however, she has to engage in four further main quests (The Ghost Haunts at Midnight, Slashterpiece, Bad Blood, and Sibling Rivalry). Because of the spatial limitations of this chapter, I will not go into detail about all the quests required to be completed in Santa

[82] After the completion of the quest, the beach house cannot be accessed any longer. A similar situation applies to a few other locations in the game, such as Dr. Grout's Mansion or the Ocean House Hotel. All the explorable locations within the four main parts of the city may be visited at all times.

Monica. Instead, I will briefly summarise the PC's interaction model in the Explosive Beginning quest and move on to examples from Downtown and Hollywood.

Since the Sabbat warehouse is the first huge combat zone the PC experiences, before heading there she visits the Pawnshop and equips herself with extra ammunition for the thirty-eight pistol, and a few additional blood packs. The PC proceeds to the oil tank to meet Bertram Tung, who then leads her to the entrance. After accessing the first room and taking down an opposing NPC, the player character searches the room and finds a crate with six rounds of .38 calibre ammunition (Ammo). She collects the items and places them in the inventory for later use. The PC takes a look around the room and notices a hole in the wall covered with wooden planks. Upon approaching the barrier, it turns out to be a functional object, which can be interacted with (the icon of a hand is displayed over the object, meaning it can be lifted). The PC removes the planks and exits the building through the hole in the wall. The first NPC encountered beyond the wall is a vagabond standing by a fireplace. The PC feasts upon him to increase her Blood Buff meter, which temporally strengthens health and energy levels. In this case, following Zagal's argument (2005, p. 8), this particular NPC and all the other NPCs that may be fed upon in the game, function as elements which temporarily alter the player character's attributes. After the blood feast the PC searches through the available crates and finds a box with shotgun shells (12 Gauge Tubefeed) for Utica m37 (a shotgun with a magazine capacity of six rounds), which the player character stored in the inventory. MatsuKaze wanders around the train carriages and fights with the opposing NPCs she stumbles upon. Before moving to another building she approaches all the in-game props in search of functional objects that may be interacted with. Since MatsuKaze has a Lockpick skill of 4, she is able to pick the door to one of the rail carriages where she finds more ammunition (.38 Ammo). After opening the opposing door in the same carriage, the PC sees two gang members playing cards. She sneaks up on them and surprises them with a successful shotgun attack. The PC enters their carriage and finds another crate with 12 Gauge Tubefeed, which she collects.

Using the stealth skill the PC moves to the garage with a railway engine, defeats two NPCs, climbs up the ladder, and manages to enter the Sabbat warehouse without being detected by the guards. She then makes her way to the main office, where the Astrolite has to be planted in the desk. Before successfully detonating the explosives, the PC confronts all the

armed NPCs gathered in the warehouse, and searches through the functional items, such as crates and various cargo containers, in search for ammunition. Once the NPCs are taken down, MatsuKaze returns to the office and plants the explosives. She now has three minutes to evacuate herself from the building. On her way out she combats a ghoul, using melee skills (a baseball bat and a knife). As soon as the Astrolite discharges, a cutscene interrupts the gameplay and the PC is approached by Beckett, a mysterious figure representing the Gangrel Clan. Once the conversation with the NPC concludes, the PC is granted two experience points. The completion of this quest unlocks the Downtown region, where MatsuKaze has to proceed next in order to report her actions to Prince LaCroix, who resides in the Ventrue Tower in the middle of the city.

9.3.2 Selected Quests from Hollywood

In order to travel to Downtown, the PC has to look for a yellow cab on the streets of Santa Monica. The dialogue lines with the taxi driver are always the same and, irrespective of the option selected, the PC is always able to travel to the desired destination selected from a map that is activated. Once Downtown MatsuKaze enters the Ventrue Tower building and talks to the guard, who opens the lift for her. The guard can only be interacted with by means of the specified dialogue lines. When the PC tries to feast on him or kill him, she finds out that no weapons are allowed in the building. The PC heads for the lift and presses the 'PH' button in order to get to LaCroix's Pent House. The Prince expresses his gratitude and the PC is given one point of experience for destroying the warehouse. LaCroix asks the PC to prove her loyalty and complete another mission on a ship called the Elizabeth Dane.

Due to spatial constraints, the quest mentioned above and two others (Calling Dr. Grout and Patron of the Ancient Arts) assigned to Downtown will not be delineated here. Instead, I will focus on the PC's experience in two other quests in order to illustrate more diversified gameplay in another region of the game – Hollywood.

The search for the Ankaran Sarcophagus activated in Downtown (quest: The Epic of the Ankaran Sarcophagus) leads the PC to Hollywood, where she needs to find Gary, the oldest living Nosferatu ancestor, who may be able to reveal the location of the Sarcophagus. In order to find Gary the PC has to first visit Isaac, the Baron of Hollywood, who resides in the

Abrams Golden Age Jewellery shop. Before Isaac exposes the information about Gary, the player character has to do the Baron a few favours as a token of her respect.

The first mission to be completed involves retrieving a video tape from a mysterious individual. In order to find him, the PC has to go to the Ground 0 Internet Café in Hollywood and check an email in one of the computers. After typing in the password provided by Isaac ("Kafka")[83] the e-mail box is activated, and the meeting place is revealed. MatsuKaze logs out, leaves the Internet Café, and searches for the alley behind the Fast Buck building. There she meets a delirious man who denies knowing Isaac. After the PC threatens the NPC, he admits to the fact that he was supposed to sell Isaac a tape, but he no longer has it. The NPC mentions the name of Ginger Swans and runs away in panic. The PC returns to Isaac and reports back on the news. Isaac unravels the mystery behind Ginger Swans, an extremely attractive actress, whose grave is still visited by some men in Hollywood. This gives the PC a hint as to where to go in search for clues. She explores the streets and back alleys of Hollywood, and eventually finds a cemetery wall with a hole covered with debris. Upon further examination it turns out that the logs may be moved (the hand icon appears when the PC approaches the wall), which opens the entrance to the cemetery. The PC sneaks through the fence and explores the graveyard until she finds a mausoleum. She enters the building and searches through all the crypts to find the one with Ginger's name on it. Since MatsuKaze has an Inspection feat of 3, the crypt she is looking for is highlighted in blue, which makes it easier to find it. The PC opens it and acquires the Horror Tape Part 1. She then heads back to Isaac's, who plays the tape and both of them watch the film. The PC learns from Isaac that the contents of the tape may be connected with the gradual disappearance of the Nosferatu clan members from the streets. He wants the PC to track down the remaining part of the tape. The acceptance of this task activates the Snuff is Enough quest, which will not be further covered in this close analysis.

The PC's inventory at this point of the game contains the following items:

1. Light clothing

[83] Most of the Personal Computers in the gameworld are functional objects that may be interacted with, in which case the PC icon pops up onto the screen. If the player character does not know the password to a particular machine, they can try to hack it by pressing Ctrl + C. The success of the operation depends on how high their Hacking level is. In the case of MatsuKaze it is 3 out of 10 at the beginning of gameplay in Hollywood.

2. Miscellaneous items: keyring (Carson's Apartment Key – quest item –, Maintenance Room Key, Skyline Apartments Unit 4 key), wallet ($378), lockpick, wooden stake, pill bottle (Estrogen), books (Computers for Grandma – reading this will boost your computer skill. Research skill of at least 2 required; unknown – you need research skill of at least 6 to read it), diary (quest item found in the Ocean House in Santa Monica)
3. Weapons: a baseball bat, a severed arm, a knife
4. Firearms: Thirty-eight pistol (small-calibre handgun), Utica M37 (home defence weapon)

In the next section the significance of the elements found in the game space will be discussed in relation to the player character. The components depicted in the table (fig. 9.3) and the meaning behind colour coding have been explained in Chapter 7.

ENTITY TYPE	ENTITY SUBTYPE	ENTITY	GENERAL DESCRIPTION	ENTITY MANIPULATION (interaction options)	INTERACTION MAPPING
NPCs	**NPAs/ Functional**	Mercurio	A ghoul from Santa Monica	The PC talks to Mercurio and agrees to regain his Astrolite and money from the Beach House (quest: Surf's Up). The PC can also pass some painkillers to Mercurio (side quest: The Pain of Being Mercurio). After bringing the Astrolite back Mercurio asks the PC to use it to blow up the Sabbat warehouse (quest: Explosive Beginning).	Although the PC enters a dialogue with Mercurio,[84] there is only one option to interact with him. Unless the PC fulfils Mercurio's request to regain the Astrolite, she cannot proceed in the game.
		Bertram Tung	A Nosferatu elder living in an oil tank in the warehouse of Santa Monica	The PC talks to Bertram and informs him that Therese has called of her hunt for him. He then leads the PC to the entrance of the warehouse.	Bertram appears only at the beginning of the game in Santa Monica.
		Prince LaCroix	The Camarilla Prince of Los Angeles	LaCroix orders the PC to go to Santa Monica and find one of his agents, Mercurio. After completing all the main quests in Santa Monica, the PC encounters the Prince in his mansion Downtown and fulfils further orders.	The PC encounters LaCroix on numerous occasions. The Prince first appears in the introductory cut-scene when he spares the PC's live and in return demands their loyalty.

[84] *1. I'll go get the Astrolite.*
2. Is there anything I can do to help you?
3. Don't go anywhere, slick. I'll be back soon.
4. I can't believe the prince trusted an idiot like you.

		Isaac	The Baron of Hollywood	The PC talks to Isaac at the Abrams Golden Age Jewellery store and finds out that he does not hold Prince LaCroix in high esteem. In order to pay respect to Isaac, the PC has to accept a quest from him and pick up an item in a set location (quest: Dead Ex). Otherwise, Isaac will not cooperate and it will not be possible to proceed in the game.	The PC has to interact with Isaac on two occasions during her stay in Hollywood. The PC accepts two quests from Isaac (Dead Ex and Snuff is Enough), which finally lead her back to Downtown.
	Cast	Prostitutes Strippers at night clubs Salesman at the Pawn Shop Taxi driver	Scattered around different parts of the city Dancers at The Asylum (Santa Monica), Club Confession (Downtown), Vesuvius, and Sin Bin (Hollywood) A man who sells items in Santa Monica A connection hub between Santa Monica, Downtown, Hollywood, and Chinatown	The PC pays for their services and once in a secluded place blood feeds on them. The PC pays to watch them perform a dance. The PC talks to him to buy and sell goods. The PC uses his services to move between different parts of the city. The dialogue lines are always the same and lead to identical outcomes.	The interaction with cast NPCs does not lead to any significant choices and does not have any implications on the storyline. Strippers in various clubs diversify the gameplay experience and enliven the gameworld mostly filled with stage NPCs that cannot be interacted with at all. The functions performed by the salesman and the taxi driver are always fixed and predictable.
	Stage	Random town residents, some dancers at night clubs*		These characters exist in the gameworld for mainly decorational purposes. The PC cannot exchange any conversations with them, and	* Although they do not perform any vital functions from the point of view of plot and gameplay progression, stage characters (unlike in The Witcher) can be

				they are not attached to any quest. They are not, however as passive as stage character in *The Witcher*, as they may be killed by the PC by either blood feeding or using firearms.	attacked by the PC, either through blood sucking or shooting. They cannot be interacted with on any other, more meaningful level. Since they exhibit a low level of functionality, I will refer to them as potentially functional.
OBJECTS	**Functional**	Thirty-eight pistol	Weapon	The PC can use, loot, buy, and sell all weapons found in the gameworld.	
		Utica M37	Weapon		
		Baseball bat	Weapon		
		Blood Pack	Food	Blood used for transfusions in hospitals. When drunk, it restores blood points.	
		Severed arm	Weapon		
		Lockpicks	Other equipment	Lockpicks (similarly to bobby pins in *Fallout 3*) are used while lockpicking (The success rate depends on how high the PC's Lockpicking feat is. These may be temporarily boosted with blood from the Blood buff meter).	
		Pill bottle	Estrogen		
		Book	Computers for Grandma	Reading this book boosts the PC's computer skills. In order to read the book, the PC needs to have Research skill of at least 2.	
		Dollars	Currency	Dollars can be used to pay for goods, hookers, lap dancers or to bribe NPCs, such as the	

		Computers, newspapers, maps at the bus stops		owner of Sin Bin in Hollywood. .	
	Quest/plot items	Note from Mercurio	Found on the desk in the PC's apartment in Santa Monica.	The PC reads the note, which enables her to proceed in the game. The note contains the password to the computer and further instructions on how to find Mercurio.	
		Astrolite	A liquid explosive made from over-the-counter chemicals.	The PC regains the explosives for Mercurio and then sets them on fire in the Sabbat warehouse.	
		Horror Tape 1	A battered videocassette	The PC acquires the tape from the mausoleum at the graveyard and brings it to Isaac, the Baron of Hollywood. The PC watches the film on the tape with the Baron.	
	Decorative	Walls, doors, buildings, plants, tables, newspapers, posters, vending machines, cars in the car park and many others	Objects placed in the gameworld to create believable scenery.	Those items cannot be interacted with and are placed in the gameworld for purely aesthetical purposes. Unlike in *Fallout 3* and similarly to *The Witcher* the decorative objects do not display marks of abuse when hit with e.g. a baseball bat. In *VTMB* most of the objects cannot be interacted with, which decreases the feeling of environmental	

				presence.	
SELECTED LOCATIONS	**Santa Monica** **Downtown** **Hollywood**	Mercurio's Apartment, The Pawnshop, The Asylum, Diner, Pier, Beach House, The Sabbat Warehouse, Gallery Noire The Ventrue Tower Vesuvius, Abrams Jewellery store, Dr. Grout's Mansion, Cemetery, Sin Bin, Ground 0 Internet Café, Fast Buck	Each of the main locations (Santa Monica, Downtown, Hollywood) listed here includes further explorable locations that are part of a building or town, e.g., The Asylum, Gallery Noir, or Dr. Grout's Mansion among many others.	Locations as such do not shape the character, but are filled with props and NPCs that influence the player character's developmental path.	

Figure 9.3 Selected NPCs, objects, locations and emerging scenarios in *VTMB* (2004)

9.4 Theatrical and Video Game Space

The driving force of the structural Pivot Player Character Model introduced in Chapter 6 is the dynamics emerging from the spatial relations between the PC and the other elements within the gameworld. This spatial dimension is not only a prerequisite for the concrete existence of the PC in offline cRPGs, but also an important element in theatre. As Ubersfeld observes, "if the primary characteristic of theatre is the use of characters played by human beings, the second characteristic, indissolubly linked to the first, is the existence of a space within which those living beings are found" (1999, p. 94). According to Ubersfeld, the theatrical text must have a locus in which characters exist and interact with one another. The spatial relations become even more significant in the construction of the PC in computer role-playing-games, where they have strictly functional implications upon the development of the character. In this section I will take a closer look at the properties of a theatrical space introduced by Ubersfeld, and apply and compare them to the spatial relations present in *Vampire: the Masquerade – Bloodlines*. I will demonstrate how the theatrical categories of space refer to video games and the *VTMB* gameworld, and more importantly, how they influence the construction of the player character.

In order to perform a comprehensive analysis of the game space and its impact on the PC in *VTMB*, the following aspects will be taken into consideration:

1) a topographical map of the PC's relations with objects and NPCs;
2) social and environmental presence (Heeter 1992, qtd. in Nitsche 2008, p. 205);
3) the performative role of the player in making decisions within the gameworld.

The first element is closely related to the complex network of interrelations depicted in fig. 9.3. Since the player character is literally surrounded by various in-game elements and characters, she undergoes a development process by establishing her position in relation to those components. Those spatial relations between characters and objects in the game illustrate the Player Character Grid (see Chapter 6), which relies upon the structuralist principle of juxtaposing individual elements with one another in order to define an entity. In this context the PC may only be defined in relation to other in-game elements they interact with during gameplay.

Another analytical perspective directly connected with the in-game objects and NPCs relates to the social and environmental presence, which has been already discussed in Chapters 7 and 8. In accordance with those categories, the player character is scrutinised from the point of view of their impact upon other in-game characters and the game's environment. The extent to which the PC may interact with the gameworld depends on the number of functional props and NPCs placed within it. The lower their concentration, the less responsive the game space seems to the player's actions, and thus the smaller the scope of the social and environmental presence. As will be demonstrated in this section, in comparison to *The Witcher* or *Fallout 3*, *Vampire: the Masquerade – Bloodlines* features relatively low levels of functionality. This has further implications upon the process of player character creation.

This question brings us to the third aspect of the topographical analysis, which focuses on the agency exhibited by the player. The possibility of making choices in the gameworld resonates well with the previous two arguments. The extent to which a PC may interact with the game's animate and inanimate elements is reflected in the number and the complexity of available choices.

9.4.1 Properties and Actors versus Objects and NPCs

In her analysis of theatrical space Ubersfeld (1999) emphasises the importance of concrete elements, such as actors' bodies, the elements belonging to the décor, and the properties. Since, in games, the NPCs represent animate objects with their own AI steered by the game's system, they are placed in a separate category to the inanimate objects, such as weapons, armour or food. The latter two categories mentioned by Ubersfeld find their equivalents in gameworlds and may be referred to as decorative and functional items.

In theatre, a décor object is usually referential, for instance indicating a particular historical period. Ubersfeld highlights how the décor in romantic plays reflects a historical accuracy, and a naturalistic object evokes a framework of mundane life (1999, p. 122). In video games, the decorative elements also play an important role and allow the player to immerse themselves in the scenery and ambience depicted in the game. For instance, the décor in

Fallout 3 is homogenous and consistently refers to post apocalyptic times and to an idyllic pre-war period in the history of the United States before the nuclear explosion. All the decorative and functional objects in the game are illustrated in the convention of the 1950's mawkish America. *Fallout 3* features the iconic style of the gameworld so meticulously that even the HUD elements comply with the overall décor of the gameworld.

However important the decorative elements may seem in video games, they do not influence the process of the player character construction. Nor do they shape the character and their actions in theatre. The properties, on the other hand, may play a strictly utilitarian role. As Ubersfeld observes, "if a duel is to be portrayed, two swords or two pistols are necessary" (1999, p. 122). In video games this theatrical principle becomes an important element of the mechanics. The gameworlds in cRPGs are filled with functional objects of all sorts, which contribute to the PC's development in multiple ways. Some of them reflect a particular skill acquired by the player character. In *VTMB*, in order to get access to certain computers, the PC needs to have high Hacking skills to decode the password. Otherwise, none of the information displayed on the in-game's screen is available to the character. The same principle refers to some of the doors guarding access to certain buildings and rooms. Unless the PC has obtained a required rank in the Lockpick skill, they cannot enter the area. For instance, during the Explosive Beginning quest the PC with a Lockpick skill of 4 can pick the door to one of the rail carriages and gain access to yet another functional object (.38 Ammo) hidden in a box. The acquired ammunition may be used further and may contribute to the outcome of the combat with the Sabbats in the warehouse.

The space in *VTMB* is also filled with functional objects, which expand the character's knowledge about the surrounding gameworld. One such item is the diary revealing the secrets of the Ocean House Hotel in Santa Monica. The diary constitutes an important quest item as it leads to the completion of one quest (The Ghost Haunts at Midnight), and triggers further events developing the game's plot. A similar function is performed by the note from Mercurio, which the PC finds in her apartment in Santa Monica. Only after reading it does she acquire the password to her personal computer and further instructions on how to find the NPC. Not knowing the contents of the note, the PC is not able to proceed in the game.

Such items, in accordance with Zagal's observations, cause permanent changes in the player character and alter their overall statistics (2005, p. 8). For instance, after reading the *Computers for Grandma* book the PC improves their computer skills, which increase their chances of hacking passwords needed to access various computers in the game. It should also be noted here that the knowledge about the gameworld, once gained, is retained until the end of the gameplay. At this point I should emphasise that the character's internal knowledge does not always overlap with the external knowledge and the skills gained by the player who impersonates the character. The plot-related functional objects discussed above expand both the player's and the character's knowledge of the gameworld to the same degree. However, certain in-game behaviours exhibited by the PC depend on the external genre-specific knowledge of the player. For instance, a player who is familiar with cRPGs realises that the PC may interact with a lot of objects found in the game. Therefore, the active exploration of the space in search of functional props (e.g., removing the planks and finding the entry to the cemetery in Hollywood through the hole in the wall) oftentimes depends on the ludic know-how of the player.

Functional objects also indirectly contribute to the accumulation of experience points, which are crucial from the point of view of the character's development. The XPs constitute the driving force behind the ludic mechanism in role-playing games. The PC's interaction with the game space (props and NPCs) ultimately leads to the completion of and progression between individual quests. Each completed task grants the PC a few extra experience points, which she can then distribute amongst various attributes (see fig. 9.1 for a full list of abilities and skills available in *VTMB*).

As I have mentioned in Chapters 7 and 8, the gameworlds may be also filled with objects causing temporary changes in the PC (Zagal 2005, p. 8). In *VTMB* the most illustrative props belonging to the above category include Blood Packs, which may be either found in various containers and refrigerators, or bought by the PC in the Blood Bank in Santa Monica. Since the *VTMB* gameworld does not include any traditional representations of food items, blood is the only means to temporarily boost the player character's health and energy supplies. Apart from drinking refined blood from plastics packages, the PC can feed upon animate objects, such as certain NPCs (bums, police officers, night club dancers, and random passers-

by in Santa Monica, Downtown, Hollywood, and Chinatown). Viewed from this angle, they may be classified as functional objects causing temporary changes in the character.

In her extensive research on food representations in video games, Astrid Ensslin emphasises the fact that "[n]ourishment as an integral element of physical health management is [...] constitutive for sustaining the gaming process" (2011, p. 38). In other words, the player characters in certain game genres need to keep a constant food supply in order to stay alive and healthy. To prove her point Ensslin refers to *Fable*, *Elder Scrolls*, and *Everquest* (2011), examples based on a similar mechanics to *Vampire the Masquerade: Bloodlines*. As I have presented in the example above, when perceived from the player character's perspective, food (in the case of *VTMB* – blood sources) is a functional object sustaining and temporarily altering the condition of the PC. In this sense, food and energy provision - no matter in what material or abstract form - are the vital components of the game's macrostructure (Ensslin 2011).

When considering the role of props in video games and their affinities to the objects depicted in theatre, one should take into account the variety of VG genres. For instance, the objects in puzzle games (e.g., *Machinarium*) or platformers (e.g., the *Little Big Planet* series) do not perform the same function as those in a computer role-playing game. In cRPGs the functional and quest props constitute important elements of the storyline and contribute to the construction of the player character, who is the central point in those games. Puzzle games and platformers, on the other hand, focus on the development of the *player*, who masters the game space by solving its puzzles, and overcoming its obstacles when steering the character. In this case, the objects do not influence the character herself, but are necessary to move around the gameworld. Sport games, for instance, do not require a multitude of functional objects at all. For instance, in *NBA 2K* series there is only one functional item – the basketball. All the other props perform a strictly decorative role.

9.4.2 The Theatrical Audience and the Players

In her evaluation of the theatrical space, Ubersfeld adopts three different points of departure: the text, the stage, and the audience (1999, p. 103). As has been discussed in Chapter 6, the concrete character may only be conceived on stage. Otherwise, they

constitute an abstract actantial figure. More importantly, in order to be fully realised the theatrical character needs an external element – the audience. It is the spectators and their perception of stage that, according to Ubersfeld, form the third perspective for the study of stage space and its components (1999, p. 103). The physical relations between the actors on stage cannot exist without the intervention of the audience. As Ubersfeld further explains, "[w]hat is presented on stage is never a merely binary or triangular relation between actors; it is always a complex relationship in which a spectator plays a part" (1999, p. 112).

Ubersfeld's focus on the spectator's role in theatre gains a wider perspective when transferred to video games, where players are not only the observers (belonging to the audience) but also active participants (realised on a virtual stage). A staged play in traditional theatre Ubersfeld refers to, cannot exist without the presence of the audience, but their contribution is not a prerequisite. In video games, on the other hand, it is the player's actions and choices that create a gaming scenario and, in the case of offline cRPGs discussed here, construct the PC.

The mutual relation between the player and the character (the theatrical audience and stage) is based on the mechanism of a feedback loop, which refers to the interaction between the text machine and the human operator (Espen Aarseth 1997). When it comes to video games, such as *Space Invaders* the feedback loop is illustrated by the performative capability of the medium – "[t]he game plays the user just as the user plays the game […]" (Aarseth 1997, p. 162). In offline cRPGs such as *The Witcher*, *Fallout 3* or *VTMB* the bidirectional relation between the player and the game's content not only leads to an individual storyline choice, but is predominantly connected with the development of the fictional on-screen character.

The avatars are customised at various points in *VTMB* through the player's interaction with the game's space and interface. This interaction leads to the accumulation of experience points, which are then distributed across different skills and attributes by the player. Those in turn influence further processes of spatial exploration, which oftentimes depends on a particular rank in the PC's skill. For instance, the character in *VTMB* needs to have a certain number of Lockpick points (skill level of 5) in order to enter the manager's room in the basement of the Sin Bin video shop in Hollywood. Otherwise, she cannot fulfil one of the

side quests (Hot Stripper Assassin Action!) without killing the shop's proprietor and taking his keys. Also, in order to get access to the computer and hack its content, the PC needs to have a high computer skill. Another example of how spatial exploration is influenced by the PC's skills in *VTMB* may refer to the *Computers for Grandma* book bought at the Pawnshop in Santa Monica. After reading the manual the PC's computer knowledge is permanently upgraded. However, in order to be able to read the book, the PC needs to have Research skill of at least 2. It is therefore important that the player distributes the gathered experience points between the Computer ability and the Intelligence attribute.

The multitude of vampire clans, various abilities, attributes, and the derived statistics (Feats) in *VTMB* gives the player a lot of freedom in creating their own version of the character. MatsuKaze, as presented in this case study, specialises in physical attributes rather than knowledge abilities. As a result, she is very effective in lockpicking, sneaking and melee combat, but less so in finance and computer skills. Also, her interaction with other NPCs concentrates on intimidation (skill of 5) rather than persuasion (skill of 1) or seduction (skill of 1). In this case the player's choices in XP distribution have led to the creation of a dexterous, strong Brujah vampire with a violent nature. Depending on point allocation in the character sheet, the same initial character might develop a totally different profile. In the case of *VTMB,* the most significant choices in terms of PC construction are made when the player spends the accumulated XPs. As I will present in the following section (9.4.3), the interaction with the game's space and its non-playable characters does not lead to as much diversification as expected on the basis of numerous adjustments in the character's sheet.

9.4.3 Social and Environmental Presence

As I have emphasised in the previous sections, the player's active participation in developing the character is not only related to assigning the PC's attributes, but also to interacting with the elements found in the gameworld. In theatre, the spatial elements enable "[t]he establishment of physical [and psychological] relations between the actors" (Ubersfeld 1999, p. 112). Contrarily, in computer role-playing games the objects and NPCs the player character communicates with, apart from causing temporary and permanent changes in the PC, contribute to the creation of social and environmental presence (Heeter 1992, qtd. in Nitsche 2008, p. 205). The first one denotes the extent to which other non-player characters

react to the PC and by doing so boost the feeling of agency in the gameworld. The latter category introduced by Heeter is associated with the inanimate environment and its reaction to the actions executed by the player character.

In comparison to *The Witcher* and *Fallout 3*, the game space in *VTMB* is less responsive to the PC's actions. The functional objects creating the sense of environmental presence are in scarcity (see the table in figure 9.3). For instance, during the Explosive Beginning quest, when the PC explores the Sabbat warehouse, it turns out that most of the crates and boxes are decorative and cannot be manipulated. Those that contain other functional items, such as weapons and ammunition, are not in abundance. It seems as if the gameworld contains a minimum level of props necessary to conduct the gameplay. The reason may be twofold – technological and strategic. *VTMB* was published in 2004, when the technological constraints of the medium did not allow for the creation of high levels of environmental presence. The second possible issue may refer to the fact that fewer functional objects such as guns force the PC to use the ammunition wisely as she may run out of it before the end of the quest.

The streets of Santa Monica and other available districts (Downtown, Hollywood, Chinatown) hardly contain any functional objects apart from a few phones (activated only during certain quests) and the sewers entrances.[85] Even the vending machines are solely decorative. Most of the functional items in Santa Monica are available at the Pawnshop, where they may be bought by the PC or exchanged for other items.

The PC's apartment in Santa Monica entails the biggest number of objects that may be interacted with. MatsuKaze may open the fridge, access her own personal computer, read the note from Mercurio, or watch TV. Interestingly, none of the objects, either functional or decorative, bear any signs of abuse. The PC can strike the computer with a baseball bat and a severed arm, or try to damage its screen by shooting at it, but it will not display any damage. Again, the reason might be purely technological. Another explanation points towards the mechanics of the game. Since only the objects that contribute to the advancement of the plot may be impaired in *VTMB*, from the point of view of storyline development, it does not make sense to allow the player to engage with every possible

[85] In Santa Monica, for instance, the phone in the Diner is activated during the Bad Blood quest. After its completion the phone is no longer a significant item from the plot's perspective. Therefore, it cannot be interacted with any longer and becomes a strictly decorative item.

object in the gameworld. This phenomenon may be observed, for example, in Chinatown, during the Original Gangster quest, the PC finds herself in Zhao's office in a warehouse. After the NPC is killed by the Tong gangsters, the player character has to face them in combat. It turns out that the windows in the office may be smashed either by shooting or by throwing the cupboards at them. This particular game space shows the marks of the PC's abuse. However, it should be noted here that the reason is strictly practical. The PC may use the smashed windows as another route of escape from the office. In this case the functionality of the space is connected with its role as a combat zone. The PC's apartment in Santa Monica is only useful as long as it provides the plot clues for the first quest. Creating a greater feeling of environmental presence by enabling its destruction does not make any sense from the plot's perspective as it does not contribute to its advancement.

In *VTMB* the character is constructed predominantly through the allocation of points assigned for the completion of quests. The functional objects found in the gameworld rarely make a direct contribution to the PC's development, unless they are quest items necessary for the completion of the task and the accumulation of XPs. In *The Witcher* the role of the objects in shaping the PC seems to be considerably greater. The PC develops, for instance, when reading the scrolls and books on herbalism, beasts or magical potions, which allow Geralt to acquire supernatural powers and, by doing so, improve his chances of success in battle.

As Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler notice, at present not a single video game is able to offer full agency, understood as a total freedom of behavioural choices on the part of the player (2007, n.p.). Instead, what may be observed in cRPGs such as *VTMB* is the „process of tricking a reader into believing they have greater impact on and import within the game" (MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler 2007, n.p.). In *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* this illusory agency is attained by camouflaging a limited choice of possible actions within the game space. The PC might not be able to pick up every single item in the gameworld but since the integrity of the plot directs the player's attention towards the completion of quests, they might not be interested in devoting time to interacting with unnecessary objects. As long as the player role-plays within the framework set by the game's rules, the illusion of agency is sustained. However, as MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler

emphasise, once the player starts to challenge the game, the gameplay suffers immensely (2007, n.p.).

The level of social presence – evoked by the extent to which the NPCs react to the player character's actions – is also lower than it is in the games discussed in the previous two chapters. Unlike in *Fallout 3*, in *VTMB* not all the NPCs may be meaningfully interacted with. Most of the characters occupying the streets and clubs perform a decorative or a potentially functional role. The only action the player character can always execute towards the NPCs on the streets is 'feeding' on their blood. Following MacCallum-Stewart's & Parsler's argumentation, such a limited functionality towards the majority of NPCs may be referred to as illusory functionality. The lower number of functional characters influences the perception of the complexity of the player character's attribute profile, and its relation to a limited number of NPCs and their assigned reactions to the PC. Although the player may adjust their PC by selecting a vampire clan and distributing the experience points among numerous attributes in the Character's Sheet, their real implications for the gameplay are limited. As it turns out, "[a]ll the clan choices affect the dialogue options available when talking to characters in the game but, for the most part, these options make very little real difference to the game's outcome" (MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler 2007, n.p.). No matter how the player shapes their character in terms of skill allocation, the actions will eventually lead to the completion of the same quests. This is partially due to the fact that the *VTMB's* design structure is based on main quests supported by optional side quests (MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler 2007, n.p.).

The rules governing the illusory agency exemplify what Pisarski & Sikora refer to as an imbalance between formal and material constraints and affordances (2009, p. 192). It may be observed when the formal complexity of the PC does not fully correspond to the material actions available in the gameworld. In other words, the PC's intricate statistical profile, based on the combination of attributes and abilities available in the game's system, does not lead to the same complexity of gameplay choices.

The above correlation may be observed in the dialogue options displayed when the PC interacts with various non-player characters. For instance, during the Snuff is Enough quest in Hollywood, the PC needs to ask the owner of the Sin Bin adult video shop (Flynn) whether

he knows anything about Death Mask Productions. If the PC's Intimidate or Persuasion skills are too low (which is the case of MatsuKaze analysed in this case study), Flynn will not say a word. Other available options include bribery ($500) or murder (after killing Flynn the PC collects the note with a password to Flynn's computer and gets access to the required information). The interaction with an NPC is thus based upon four different options, two of which depend on the PC's adjustable attributes. In this case, the balance between the formal and material affordances has been fulfilled. However, in a great majority of cases the interaction model with an NPC is identical irrespective of the player character's attribute profile. It should be also mentioned here that all the seemingly different ways of interacting with Flynn lead to an identical outcome and push the storyline in the same direction, which leads us back to the notion of illusory agency based upon a linear plot structure.

9.5 Concluding Remarks

In this Chapter I have examined the process of the player character construction in *Vampire: the Masquerade – Bloodlines* (2004). I referred to Anne Ubersfeld's perception of the theatrical space, and discussed the significance of space for the development of the player character. Ubersfeld's categorisation of theatrical objects into properties (utilitarian objects) and elements belonging to the décor corresponds with the object categorisation in video games (functional, cast, and decorative) introduced by Jeff Howard (2008, p. 77), and implemented in this thesis. As I have emphasised with reference to *VTMB*, the functional and quest items have a considerable impact on the player character's development in cRPGs. The analysis presented in section 9.4 focused on three different aspects of space present in cRPGs: the PC's relation to the props and NPCs, the player's role in steering the character across the game space, and the social and environmental presence and their influence upon the PC.

It should also be noticed that all the three games analysed in Chapters 7, 8, and 9 entail the elements listed in the Pivot Player Character Model, but their influence upon the PC's development varies. The gameworlds of *The Witcher*, *Fallout 3*, and *Vampire:The Masquerade – Bloodlines* are inhabited by NPCs and filled with functional objects. However, not in all of those games the abovementioned entities play an equally important role. Unlike *The Witcher, VTMB* and *Fallout 3* do not seem to feature classic stage characters, whose role

in the game is purely decorative. All the NPCs in both games can be interacted with to a greater or lesser degree. In *VTMB* all the in-game residents may be attacked as long as they are in a setting, which allows combat. In *Fallout 3* the PC may exchange dialogue lines with the majority of the characters; those that cannot be talked to, can be killed and looted. As far as props are concerned, *VTMB* does not seem to rely on their functionality significantly. In *VTMB* the functional objects rarely have a direct impact on the PC's development, unless they are quest items necessary for the completion of the task. The situation is reverse in *The Witcher* and *Fallout 3* where the role of the objects in shaping the PC seems to be considerably greater. In *The Witcher,* for instance, the PC develops after acquiring the necessary knowledge stored in the scrolls and books, which may be found in the gameworld.

To conclude, I shall emphasise that despite the simplifications listed above, the game space in *VTMB* has been designed to complement the player character and respond to their actions in order to enable the development of the PC and the progression of the storyline. The character is constructed by the choices and decisions made by the player within the fictional gameworld. The idea that the character is defined in relation to other elements of space corresponds with the structuralist nature of the methodology presented in this thesis (see the Player Character Grid and the Pivot Player Character Model in Chapter 6). Geralt of Rivia (*The Witcher*), Sonika (*Fallout 3*) as well as MatsuKaze (*VTMB*) may be defined as player characters only when juxtaposed with other characters that are not playable, and the inanimate objects that do not exhibit any evidence of agency and intentionality.

Chapter 10

Conclusions and Future Directions

10.1 Summary

This thesis was an attempt to contribute to the existing body of research in video game studies by developing a homogenous methodology for the analysis of the player character in offline computer role-playing games. So far a systematic method for the study of the PC in a particular video game genre has not been introduced. My investigations resulted in constructing a model (Chapter 6), which incorporates the methodological tendencies present in video game studies, and referred to in this thesis as structuralist and cultural (Chapters 4 and 5). I divided the Player Character Grid into two planes, the structural one – referring to the ludic components of the character creation – and the cultural one – focusing on the character's representational layer. The close analyses of the three selected cRPGs (*The Witcher*, *Fallout 3*, and *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines*), performed in the case studies presented in Chapters 7, 8, and 9, referred to the constituent elements of the structural part of the grid, such as: game space, NPCs, props, personalised avatar construction or agency. The referential aspect of the PC's creation was not closely analysed due to spatial constraints of the thesis. However, the method itself encourages other researchers to implement aspects of cultural theory into the PC analysis.

In the chapters preceding the introduction of the proposed player character methodology I provided a historical overview of the offline computer role-playing game (Chapter 2). Outlining the characteristics and providing a working definition of the genre was deemed an important element for further analysis. The components of the cRPG were examined from the point of view of the player's experience and with the player character in mind.

In order to deliver an informed methodology for player character research I investigated various theoretical frameworks used in video game studies (Chapter 3). The diverse body of research was then divided into two trajectories – a structuralist and a cultural one. Both conceptual frames of reference were applied to the Player Character Grid. My intention was to introduce a method that would lend itself to a wide spectrum of interpretive perspectives, and yet maintain strong theoretical integrity. Focusing on various analytical strands in video game studies allowed me to relate to the existing research trends and to find a place for my methodology in the already existing academic landscape.

In devising a methodological model for the player character analysis, it is not only important to familiarise oneself with the general research trends in a particular field, but also to look for points of reference in other academic disciplines. Therefore, in Chapter 4 I explored various methods used in the analysis of characters in fiction, drama, and film. Upon closer examination I noticed many parallels between characters in theatre and in computer role-playing games, and decided to adapt Ubersfeld's structural model used in theatre to video games.

Subsequently, in Chapter 5, I looked closely at different approaches to PCs used in video game studies so far. The categorisation I developed with reference to the existing body of research (characters as functions, characters as drivers of agency, representational gendered icons, and as player's re-embodied realisations) helped me create a more homogenous model, and consciously select its constituent elements.

The close analyses performed in the analytical chapters (7, 8, and 9) revealed that the discussed games exhibit different environment interactions, which influence the construction of the PCs as described in the Pivot Model. *The Witcher* and *VTMB* are characterised by a linear level design. The gameplay in *The Witcher* is divided into Prologue, five main Chapters, and an Epilogue. Also, the PC can only traverse through certain paths and does not have the ability to wander around freely and surpass every physical obstacle in the game. Although *VTMB* has not been divided into chapters, its structure is also highly dependent on core quests. *Fallout 3* on the other hand, features a sandbox type or open world level design, which places the PC in an open area, and does not impose a linear quest structure. The gameplay is broken into a series of missions, and it is up to the player how

and in what order to pursue them. It turns out that those two very different approaches to game mechanics influence the complexity of the character development, and more importantly the level of individualisation of the PC.

10.2 The Applicability of Ubersfeld's Theory

As has been presented in this thesis, Ubersfeld's structural methodology for a theatrical character constitutes a valid research perspective in the analysis of a player character in cRPGs. The underlying structure of Ubersfeld's theory is based on the principle of a continuous construction of the character in individual scenarios and situations. This assumption is reflected in the transformation from an actantial figure to a concrete actor. The former denotes an entity existing in text and prone to possible transformations based on the relation with other actants. The latter denotes an actor realised in a concrete performance on stage. This actant-actor spectrum in Ubersfeld's model became a foundation for the structural part of the Player Character Grid. Similarly to a theatrical character, a PC in cRPGs becomes fully realised once the player impersonates them during gameplay. Until that moment a PC is merely a virtual entity encoded by the designers.

Ubersfeld's theory also became a point of departure for the spatial analysis of the PC in the three selected video games. Ubersfeld emphasises the importance of space in the construction of a theatrical character, which is defined in relation to other actors and entities available on the stage. This assumption combined with research on space in video games (Consalvo & Dutton 2006, Nitsche 2009, Zagal 2005) formed the stem of the structural plane of the Player Character Grid (the Pivot Model), which perceives the PC as a central element with all the other objects and NPCs revolving around it.

Analysing the theatrical character, Ubersfeld also highlights the importance of individualising signs in the construction of a live actor in the staged semiotic set. In my theory I expanded this category and described the process of the PC's construction by means of appearance customisation and attribute modelling.

Although Ubersfeld's structural grid contributed to the overall shape of my methodological model for the PC research in cRPGs, it had to be expanded and tailored to the specificity of the interactive medium. The active role of the player, as opposed to the passive audience in

a classical theatre referred to by Ubersfeld, was discussed in the context of agency. Decision making during the interaction with the game's NPCs was deemed a crucial factor in the overall PC's construction process.

Ubersfeld's methodology, however useful it is, confines itself to the structural analysis. It does not take into account any cultural and socio-historical conditionings, which might shape the character. This shortcoming was addressed in the present study by implementing the second plane into the Player Character Grid. It expands the purely mechanical analysis of the PC and proposes to scrutinise the PC also as an element operating in a wider socio-cultural system. Due to spatial constrains such cultural analyses have not been conducted in this thesis. Future research, however, might elaborate on the ludological studies of the three PCs presented in this thesis, and expand on their social and cultural profiles.

10.3 Possible Methodological Limitations

Creating a methodology requires adopting a distinct scientific or scholarly perspective. The model introduced in this thesis selects theatre as the main point of reference and, among other sources, draws from Anne Ubersfeld's structuralist model for character research (1999). Numerous parallelisms between the theatrical character and its cRPG counterpart (see Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9) persuaded me to look for inspiration in theatre studies. Since video games are ludic and interactive constructs, the development of the PC may be viewed in terms of structural parts and processes influencing the PC. Such an analytical perspective was employed by Ubersfeld in her Theatre Character Grid, which directly contributed to the development of the Player Character Grid (see Chapter 6). Since Ubersfeld's methodology was applied to a character depicted in a traditional theatrical piece, it had to be modified in order to be implemented in a video game, which is predominantly an interactive medium requiring a substantial level of agency from the player. It should be emphasised that a video game player is emancipated and constitutes an inseparable part of the character. Such a close relationship is not analogous with the one between an actor and an audience in theatre. Therefore, any methodology drawn from a different discipline should not be implemented to video games without scrutiny.

Structuralist research of the theatrical character is only one of numerous analytical perspectives which may be employed to understand, interpret, and illustrate the player character in offline cRPGs. In order to devise a comprehensive research method one has to confine oneself to certain tools and narrow down the methodological field. It is important to notice that the choice of academic perspectives for the methodology presented in this thesis is derived from my own academic interests, and does not exclude other contexts.

A possible limitation of this study is the relatively narrow sample close analysed in Chapters 7, 8, and 9. Due to spatial constraints of the thesis, the PC methodology could not be illustrated in more than three video games. However, since the selected games belong to the same genre, their characters are formed by means of similar components. Therefore, three flag VG examples were considered sufficient for the production of a meaningful analysis. Further research projects may use the method and apply it to numerous other video games in order to verify and confirm its usability. The more examples are examined, the higher the credibility of the methodology proposed in this thesis.

10.4 Future Directions

The methodology developed in this thesis constitutes the first comprehensive framework for player character research in video games. It can facilitate a greater understanding and provide tools for a thorough analysis of the PC in offline computer role-playing games. No other research has taken so many aspects into consideration and looked for points of reference into theatre studies. However, irrespective of how complex and all-encompassing the Player Character Grid is, there are numerous additional research questions that may be taken into consideration.

One such future research perspective might examine the PC in other video game genres. After implementing game-specific adjustments, the model could be applied to other ludic forms featuring player characters, such as online cRPGs (e.g., *World of Warcraft*, *Lord of the Rings Online*) or action adventure games (e.g., *Grand Theft Auto* series, *Assassin's Creed* series). The examination of the player character could even be extended to more distant genres, such as god games and life simulations, for instance *The Sims* and *Spore*. It would be

interesting to observe what elements of the model introduced in this thesis are applied in the construction of a character in a genre different to a role-playing game.

The current model may also be an inspiration for implementing a historical perspective into the PC research. The Player Character Grid and the Pivot Player Character Model could be used as comparative tools for the study of characters in contemporary and past cRPGs. Barton's representation of the evolutionary path of cRPGs (2008) could deliver many flagship titles from different time intervals. In particular, it would be interesting to juxtapose games from the Silver Age (1980-1986) – a period in the cRPG history when the prototypes of the genre were designed (Barton 2008, p. 64) – to recent titles created in the Modern Age (2001-present). For instance, the process of player character creation in *Ultima I: The First Age of Darkness* (1981) could be compared to *Ultima IX: Ascension* (1999) from the Platinum Age (1996-2001), and *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (2006) from the Modern Age (2001-present). Such a historical overview would demonstrate the progression of the PC in cRPGs, and as a result depict current trends in game design and preferences in their reception. The findings might also address the issue of whether and how the immersive experience of embodying a VG character has changed over years.

Researchers might also engage critically in approaching player characters in mainstream and independent computer role-playing games. Upon further analysis it may turn out that the process of PC construction in 'indie' games diverges from the mainstream pattern propagated by the commercial video game industry. If so, the methodology presented in this thesis could be enriched with additional elements and represent a wider range of examples. It would be particularly interesting to look closely at independent computer role-playing games as oftentimes their creators and publishers are not focused predominantly on financial profitability. Since artistic fulfilment is an important factor for 'indie' developers, they may become forerunners of innovative gameplay solutions that have not been implemented in mainstream titles as they imply a high risk of being unattractive to a wider player community, and may be considered financially hazardous.

As has been presented above, the methodology introduced in this thesis not only contributes to the current state of the art in player character studies, but also has the potential to incite future research. The Player Character Grid and its Pivot Model will

hopefully become the starting points in numerous other projects focused on games, in which the player character is at the heart of gameplay experience.

GLOSSARY

Anarchs (*Vampire: the Masquerade – Bloodlines*) – vampires who reject the rules governing the vampire society. They also oppose the ruling Camarilla sect.

Ankaran Sarcophagus (*VTMB*) – an archaeological artefact believed to contain the hibernated body of an ancient vampire. It is the pivotal element of the game's storyline as all the misunderstandings between the vampire factions revolve around an attempt to obtain the sarcophagus.

Antediluvians (*VTMB*) – the founders of the thirteen vampire races depicted in the *World of Darkness* games.

Auspex (*VTMB*) – a discipline which allows a Tremere vampire to see the auras of the living and the undead. Depending on the colour of the aura, the NPCs' mood may be detected (white – neutral; red – hostile; blue – scared).

Auspex, Dominate, and Thaumaturgy (*VTMB*) – the three disciplines unique for the Tremere clan.

BB gun (*Fallout 3*) – the PC's first gun received at her birthday party from her father James.

Beckett (*VTMB*) – a rare Gangrel historian and archaeologist firstly encountered by the PC after blowing up the Sabbat warehouse in Santa Monica.

Blood Buff – the vampire's health meter. It must be replenished, otherwise the PC dies.

Brujah (*VTMB*) – the members of this clan are passionate and idealistic. Since they are prone to engage in combat, they tend to frenzy more often that other clans.

Brujah, Gangrel, Malkavian, Nosferatu, Toreador, Tremere, and Ventrue – the seven vampire clans, the members of which coexist in the *VTMB's* gameworld.

Camarilla (*VTMB*) – the largest vampiric organisation which acts in accordance with the Masquerade, a set of rules concealing the existence of vampires, and by doing so protecting them from people.

Capital Wasteland (*Fallout 3*) – the name given to the ruins of the in-game Washington, D.C. and its surroundings, which constitute the game space.

Caps (*Fallout 3*) – bottle caps are the standard currency in the gameworld.

Celerity (*VTMB*) – a discipline which allows the Kindred to move at high speed. There are 5 levels of speed enhancement available.

Celerity, Potence, and Presence – the three disciplines unique for the Brujah clan.

Chems *(Fallout 3)* – chemicals or medicines used to change the person's behaviour or influence their biological systems.

Clover *(Fallout 3)* – a female slave and a companion of the PC with negative Karma.

Dice Poker (*The Witcher*) – a game played with in-game characters, which may become a source of the character's income.

Dominate (*VTMB*) – a discipline increasing the vampire's strength of mind, which allows for controlling weaker kine.

Galaxy News Radio *(Fallout 3)* – a building in Washington DC., a home for a broadcasting station and the Brotherhood of Steel (an organisation operating in the gameworld).

Gangrel (*VTMB*) – the clan possessing animalistic powers. Becket, one of the game's NPCs, is a representative of this faction. A Gangrel player character cannot be created in *VTMB*.

Ithlinne's Prophecy (*The Witcher*) – an elven prediction about the end of the world, which will lead to the extinction of the human race, leaving the elves as the only survivors.

Jericho *(Fallout 3)* – a retired Raider living in Megaton and a companion of the PC with negative Karma. After blowing up Megaton, Jericho cannot be hired as he dies.

Jet *(Fallout 3)* – a highly addictive drug administered via an inhaler.

Kaedwen Stout (*The Witcher*) – an alcoholic beverage originating from the largest of the Northern Kingdoms.

Kuei-jin (*VTMB*) – a vampiric sect affiliating the Kindred of the East.

Lucky Harith (*Fallout 3*) – a caravan merchant specialising in selling guns. The PC meets him in front of the town of Megaton.

Lone Wanderer (*Fallout 3*) – the player character in *Fallout 3* born to James and Catherine, scientists working on the project related to water purification. The Lone Wanderer spent her/his childhood and adolescence in Vault 101 (an underground shelter) and thus was protected from the post apocalyptic outer world.

Med-X (*Fallout 3*) – a painkiller that raises the damage resistance to 25%.

Megaton *(Fallout 3)* – a town in the Capital Wasteland build around an unexploded nuclear bomb.

Mentats *(Fallout 3)* – chemicals boosting mental processes.

Orens (*The Witcher*) – a currency used in the gameworld.

Paradise Falls *(Fallout 3)* – a place where slave activity in the Capital Wasteland stems from.

Paragon/Renegade (*Mass Effect*) – the points obtained during gameplay by means of which the PC's morality is measured. Depending on the balance between the Paragon and Renegade scales, the dialogue options with certain NPCs alter.

PBBG (Persistent Browser-Based Game) – a computer game, which is played over the Internet using only a web browser, is persistent, and requires multiple playing sessions in order to make progress.

Petards (*The Witcher*) – one of the alchemical substances Geralt can prepare to blow up his opponents.

Potence (*VTMB*) – a discipline which increases the Kindreds' strength to unnatural levels. There are 5 levels of supernatural strength available.

Presence (*VTMB*) – a discipline which allows the Kindred to frighten their opponents and impair their Strength, Wits, and Perception.

Prince Sebastian LaCroix (*VTMB*) – the leader of the Camarilla, who established his position in Downtown, LA. The most important NPC in the game since most of the main quests are activated by the interaction with him.

Psycho *(Fallout 3)* – a drug increasing combat skills.

Radroach *(Fallout 3)* – a giant cockroach mutated by atomic radiation.

Quickslots (*The Witcher*) – sections of the armour worn by Geralt, enabling quick access to weapons and potions.

Raiders *(Fallout 3)* – a group of hostile Wastelanders, who pose great dangers to other inhabitants of the Capital Wasteland.

RobCo Industries (Robot Company) (*Fallout 3*) – one of the biggest computer and robotics corporations in the gameworld. They developed the Pip-Boy.

Sabbat (*VTMB*) - an organisation of vampires who reject the Camarilla's ruling and all the other vampiric traditions. They are hostile towards all the remaining vampire groups, the Anarchs, the Camarilla, and the Kuei-jin.

Salamandra (*The Witcher*) – a criminal organisation led by a mage called Azer Javed.

Sire - refers to a parent vampire who embraced their childe and monitors their progress in the vampire life. The act of embracing denotes passing vampirism to mortals. It involves draining and replacing a victim's blood with the vampire's blood.

Silver *(Fallout 3)* – a former citizen of Megaton, a settlement build around an undetonated nuclear bomb. It shelters its inhabitants against the dangers of the Wasteland.

Smiling Jack (*VTMB*) – a Brujah vampire belonging to the Anarchs. The player character meets him early in the game during tutorial scenes. Smiling Jack helps the PC survive the Sabbat siege and enter Santa Monica, the first main location in the game.

Stimpak (simulation delivery package) (*Fallout 3*) – a medication responsible for healing the injured body.

Temeria (*The Witcher*) – one of the northern kingdoms with its capital in Vizima. The plot of *The Witcher* is set in Temeria.

Tenpenny Tower *(Fallout 3)* – a private hotel southwest of Megaton owned by Allistair Tenpenny. After completing The Power of the Atom quest, the PC is granted with a suite at the hotel.

Thaumaturgy (*VTMB*) – a discipline relying on the magic properties of blood. By using it the Tremere can manipulate their opponent's blood levels.

The Anarchs (*VTMB*) – a group of vampires, who oppose the hierarchical order and traditions of the Camarilla, and do not wish to belong to any vampire sect. They ruled Los Angeles before Sebastian LaCroix established his position as the Prince.

The Camarilla (*VTMB*) – the ruling vampire sect led by Prince Sebastian LaCroix. They believe in upholding the Masquerade code of conduct, and punish their Kindred if they break it.

The Kuei-jin (*VTMB*) – a vampire sect known as the Kindred of the East, which resides in Chinatown. Its members plan to take over Los Angeles, and are despised by the Anarchs and by the Camarilla.

The Sabbat (*VTMB*) – the most violent vampire sect, whose members perceive humans as cattle to be fed upon. The Sabbat's aim is to destroy the Camarilla and take over the rule over Los Angeles.

Thin Bloods (*VTMB*) – semi-vampires, who retain many human characteristics. The PC encounters
a group of Thin Bloods at the beach in Santa Monica.

Toussaint wine *(The Witcher)* – an alcoholic beverage from a duchy within Nilfgaard – one of the geographical locations in the gameworld.

Tremere (*VTMB*) – one of the seven vampire clans, the members of which specialise in blood sorcery.

12 Gauge Tubefeed (*VTMB*) – a box with shotgun shells for the Utica m37 shotgun.

Utica m37 (*VTMB*) – a shotgun with a magazine capacity of six rounds.

Vault 101 *(Fallout 3)* – an underground shelter where the PC (Lone Wanderer) resides before he/she leaves the vault and enters the gameworld in search of their father.

Vizima (*The Witcher*) – the capital city of Temeria.

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