The Impact of Evolving Character Customization on Emotional Engagement and Player Behaviour in RPGs

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how dynamic visual customization in role-playing games (RPGs), where a character's appearance evolves in response to narrative decisions and in-game events, affects player emotional engagement and behaviour. Using a mixed-methods case study of Baldur's Gate 3, the research combined discourse analysis of Reddit discussions, a survey (n = 149), and semi-structured interviews (n = 10). Findings show that dynamic customization strengthens emotional engagement by visually reinforcing narrative progression but rarely redirects player behaviour, instead reinforcing pre-established roleplay intentions. Players also engaged in manual dynamic customization to maintain visual coherence when game systems were insufficient, revealing a gap between player expectations and current design practices. This study reframes customization as a sustained narrative mechanism rather than a one-time aesthetic choice, demonstrating that evolving visual identity functions primarily to support player-constructed roleplay narratives rather than to redirect decision-making in character-driven games.

Keywords

dynamic customization, avatar customization, visual identity, player engagement, narrative design, game design

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, role-playing games (RPGs) have expanded character customization systems, allowing players to personalize their avatars through detailed visual choices. These systems enable players to construct and inhabit fictional identities, aligning visual representation with their narrative interpretation of the character. Traditionally, customization has been treated as a static, front-loaded process confined to the character creation screen. However, games such as Baldur's Gate 3 (Larian Studios, 2023) are introducing dynamic customization systems, where a character's appearance evolves over time in response to player decisions or in-game conditions.

This shift raises important questions about the function of visual transformation in narrative games. If a character's body and appearance reflect their narrative journey, how does this affect player emotional engagement and roleplaying behaviour? Do visible consequences of past actions enhance immersion through symbolic confirmation of narrative progression, or do they function differently when players lack control over when and how transformations occur?

These questions are particularly relevant in Baldur's Gate 3, where players can acquire illithid powers through repeated absorption of parasitic tadpoles, resulting in escalating, often irreversible physical transformations. Unlike cosmetic customization systems, these changes are mechanically incentivized through power acquisition while carrying narrative weight as bodily evidence of moral compromise. This tension between mechanical benefit and aesthetic consequence makes Baldur's Gate 3 an interesting case for investigating how visual transformation interacts with player agency, emotional investment, and roleplay choices in narrative-driven RPGs.

While dynamic customization has appeared in other titles, these systems are often embedded within more linear narrative structures or function primarily as cosmetic extensions of progression systems. Baldur's Gate 3 presents a distinct case, as evolving visual transformations are tightly interwoven with branching narrative design and player-driven decision-making. Physical changes, such as illithid transformation, operate not only as mechanical progression but as embodied consequences within a player-authored narrative trajectory. This makes the game particularly well-suited for examining how visual transformation interacts with roleplay, agency, and emotional engagement.

This paper investigates these issues through a mixed-methods case study of Baldur's Gate 3. Data collection proceeded in three phases: discourse analysis of community discussions on Reddit (to identify relevant themes), a survey of players (n = 149), and semi-structured interviews (n = 10). This triangulated approach provides insight into how players respond to dynamic customization systems, both emotionally and behaviorally, while also revealing how such systems influence the way players inhabit their avatars.

This paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews literature on avatar customization, embodiment, and emotional engagement in digital games. The methodology section details the research design and analytical approach. Results are presented thematically, followed by discussion of how dynamic customization functions as a narrative mechanism and where current implementations diverge from

player expectations. The paper concludes by considering implications for game design and future research on evolving visual identity in character-driven games.

RELATED WORK AND KEY LITERATURE

Prior studies have primarily focused on static customization, especially the moment of character creation, as a point of identity construction and roleplay intention. This section reviews relevant literature examining how players use customization to express identity, how visual appearance may influence behaviour, and how customization affects emotional engagement. It also identifies a gap in existing research around customization that evolves dynamically throughout gameplay.

Customization and Identity Expression

Character customization in games has long been recognized as a core mechanic for player identity construction and role expression. Turkay and Kinzer (2014) offer empirical support for the idea that customization enhances player identification with their avatars. In a study conducted within Lord of the Rings Online, they found that players who engaged in avatar customization reported significantly higher levels of identification with their characters than those who used default avatars. These effects were sustained over multiple gameplay sessions, suggesting that customization fosters a lasting bond rather than a temporary cosmetic attachment. In a later work, Turkay and Adinolf (2015) found that customization increased player motivation and desire for replay. These studies position customization as more than an aesthetic feature. It functions as a mechanism for sustained engagement and emotional investment, particularly in games where player identity and narrative progression are intertwined.

Sherry Turkle's foundational works, "Life on the Screen" (1995) and "Alone Together" (2011), complement these findings by examining how digital environments allow people to explore identity through representation and performance. She introduces the idea of avatars and online personas as "second selves", used to test and express different aspects of one's identity. Turkle (1995) describes identity in virtual spaces as fluid, multiple, and symbolic rather than literal, arguing that players often construct versions of self that embody specific traits, desires, or moral alignments. This identity play is therefore not necessarily about replicating the self realistically but about experimenting with and performing identity through digital form.

These works provide the conceptual grounding for this study. Turkay and Adinolf (2015) demonstrate that customization strengthens identification and motivation, framing visual design as a source of emotional engagement, while Turkle (1995) emphasizes how avatars serve as symbolic spaces for identity experimentation rather than literal self-representation. These perspectives suggest that if customization strengthens engagement through identity expression, then evolving visual identity may deepen emotional investment and narrative cohesion by allowing players to continually express and redefine their characters. This study builds on these ideas by examining how dynamic customization systems, such as those in Baldur's Gate 3, extend this process beyond character creation into ongoing play.

Behavioral Influence and the Proteus Effect

Research suggests that avatar appearance may influence player behaviour beyond self-expression. Yee and Bailenson (2007) found that participants' behaviour shifted to align with their avatar's appearance, a phenomenon they termed the "Proteus Effect". Their controlled experiments demonstrated that participants assigned taller avatars behaved more confidently in negotiations, while those with more attractive avatars disclosed more personal information, suggesting that visual representation can shape behaviour in virtual environments.

The applicability of the Proteus Effect to narrative-driven games remains unclear. In Yee and Bailenson's experiments, participants had limited narrative context and predetermined roles. In story-driven RPGs, however, players often approach gameplay with specific roleplay intentions and character arcs in mind. This raises important questions for dynamic customization: if an avatar's appearance changes in response to player actions rather than being chosen by the player, does behaviour shift accordingly? Or does pre-established narrative intention override appearance-based behavioural cues? While the Proteus Effect has been studied primarily in controlled virtual reality environments, it offers a useful framework for understanding whether and when reactive visual systems influence player behaviour in narrative contexts.

Emotional Engagement through Customization

Eleanor Hackman (2016) conducted a focused qualitative study exploring how the opportunity to customize a character strengthens emotional engagement and identification in games. She developed a text-based branching story game in two versions: one where players could build their own character, and one using a pre-generated character. Ten participants were divided between these versions, with their emotional connections and perceptions measured through questionnaires and gameplay observation. Hackman found that players who customized their character formed deeper emotional bonds more quickly, even in the text-based, non-visual environment. Critically, she found that the act of customization itself, rather than the specific attributes chosen, was the driving force behind stronger player-character identification.

Hackman's findings suggest that player agency in identity construction, not visual fidelity, drives emotional engagement. This is particularly relevant to understanding dynamic customization: if the act of choosing appearance strengthens attachment, ongoing opportunities to modify appearance throughout gameplay may sustain or deepen that engagement. However, Hackman's study examined only initial customization in a short play session. Whether ongoing visual changes that reflect narrative progression produce similar emotional effects across extended gameplay remains an open question. By extending Hackman's insights into a dynamic context, this research examines how ongoing visual change, rather than initial creation alone, shapes emotional attachment and identification in narrative-driven RPGs.

Gaps in Existing Research

While identity construction, emotional engagement, and behavioural influence through customization have been studied extensively, with recent work continuing to examine player-avatar relationships (Banks & Bowman, 2021), avatar embodiment

(Klevjer, 2022), and identity exploration through customization (Han & Ho, 2024), recent research remains focused on static customization systems or character creation processes. Existing research establishes that initial customization strengthens identification (Turkay & Kinzer, 2014; Hackman, 2016) and that appearance can influence behaviour in controlled settings (Yee & Bailenson, 2007). However, there is limited research addressing how these relationships function when customization evolves dynamically throughout gameplay. Specifically, three questions remain underexplored: how ongoing visual transformation affects emotional engagement over extended play, whether appearance changes that result from player decisions (rather than player choices) influence roleplay behaviour, and how players respond when dynamic systems do not align with their expectations for visual progression.

This study addresses these gaps by examining Baldur's Gate 3 as a case study in dynamic visual customization. It investigates how players interpret evolving appearances, whether visual changes affect their narrative choices, and how players maintain visual coherence when game systems provide limited dynamic customization. By examining these questions through mixed methods, this research establishes how dynamic customization functions in narrative-driven games and identifies principles for designing meaningful transformation systems.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a mixed-methods approach to explore how dynamic visual customization affects player emotional engagement and behaviour in Baldur's Gate 3 (Larian Studios, 2023), a narrative-driven RPG recognized for implementing visual transformations tied to moral decisions and in-game events.

To triangulate findings, the study combined discourse analysis of Reddit posts discussing customization and transformation mechanics, a quantitative survey (n = 149) distributed across RPG communities, and semi-structured interviews with players (n = 10) who had completed or had substantial experience with the game. This layered approach enabled both breadth (via survey data) and depth (through interviews and discourse analysis), allowing the study to explore not only what players felt about customization systems but also how they engaged with them emotionally and behaviourally.

Baldur's Gate 3 was selected as the central case due to its illithid transformation system, which visually alters a character's appearance based on choices to consume "mind flayer" powers. These changes include physical traits such as blackened eyes and prominent veining, and are largely irreversible, making them a productive context for analyzing the impact of dynamic customization. The game also includes conventional customization systems (character creation, equipment), allowing the study to examine static and evolving customization within a single environment.

Discourse Analysis

Reddit was chosen as a platform for observing player discourse as an active site of meaning-making, where interpretations of game systems emerge through interaction between system affordances and player practices. Drawing on Pearce et al.'s (2009) concept of "communities of play", these discussions are treated not simply as opinion sampling but as spaces where players collectively construct and negotiate the

meaning of gameplay systems. Posts were collected from r/BaldursGate3 between February 2025 and May 2025 using targeted keywords: “customization”, “appearance”, “illithid transformation”, and “character changes”.

Twenty-three posts and comment threads met the inclusion criteria for analysis. These criteria prioritized posts that explicitly discussed customization or immersion, contained detailed reflections rather than short or repetitive comments, and excluded trolling, satire, or review-bombing patterns.

Each post was manually categorized and analysed, focusing on three key areas: emotional reactions to visual transformations, expressions of agency or lack thereof, and player-driven customization narratives (manual dynamic customization). Posts were sorted into predefined categories, and all annotations were recorded in a structured spreadsheet. Both categorization and interpretation were performed by a single researcher using predefined categories and a systematic annotation process to maintain consistency.

Table 1 presents a sample of the structured spreadsheet used to record the data, showing how posts were categorized and annotated during analysis.

ID	Community	Title	Theme	Sentiment	Notable Quote	Interpretation
7	r/BaldursGate3	Change Illithid Appearance	Dynamic customization	Neutral	“I failed a wisdom check and ‘evolved’ to get more illithid powers even though I didn’t want t. Now my character’s all creepified.”	Player expresses dissatisfaction with unwanted visual transformation
13	r/BaldursGate3	How much do you care about appearance in the char creator?	Customization importance	Neutral	“Somehow I actually felt that I don’t really care. You can color your horns and horn tips differently? Pronouns, genital choice? It’s a story driven RPG rather than a doll clothing simulator. What got me so much more excited was the choice/consequence permutations.”	Player prioritizes narrative consequences over aesthetic customization options.

Table 1: Example entries from the manually coded Reddit spreadsheet used for thematic analysis.

Survey

The online survey was designed and distributed using Google Forms to collect quantitative data on player experiences with customization systems. The survey consisted of eight statements using a five-point Likert scale (ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”), with two items dedicated to each of four thematic areas: emotional engagement, behavioural changes, customization preferences, and player experience. These themes were informed by prior studies on avatar

identification and customization effects (Turkay & Kinzer, 2014; Turkay & Adinolf, 2015; Hackman, 2016), ensuring conceptual alignment with established research on player immersion and identity expression. Example of survey statements include "I feel emotionally connected to characters I have visually customized" (emotional engagement theme) and "I prefer games where character appearances evolve based on my choices" (customization preferences theme). To keep the survey brief and encourage participation, demographic data was not collected.

The survey was distributed between the 13th of February 2025 and the 13th of March 2025 through posts in RPG-focused online communities, including r/BaldursGate3, r/rpg_gamers,[1] and r/DragonAgeVeilguard.[2] A total of 149 complete responses were collected. This convenience sampling approach provided sufficient quantitative data for identifying patterns in player attitudes toward dynamic customization systems.

Interviews

To deepen understanding of survey trends and explore nuanced attitudes, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with Baldur's Gate 3 players. Participants were recruited through a sign-up form shared in r/BaldursGate3, r/rpg_gamers, and r/DragonAgeVeilguard. Eligibility was verified through a screening question confirming participants had completed or were actively playing the game. Participants (n = 10) ranged in age from 23 to 36 (M = 30, SD = 4.87) and included five male, four female, and one non-binary individual. Eight participants reported playing RPGs frequently, while two stated that they play RPGs occasionally.

Each interview followed a flexible guide covering participants' general RPG experience, the importance of customization, emotional connection to characters, reactions to dynamic transformation, and behavioural responses to visual changes. Interviews were conducted online via Discord and Microsoft Teams between the 13th of March 2025 and the 4th of April 2025, lasting approximately half an hour. Participants provided informed consent via digital form before interviews began.

Recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai.[3] Transcripts were then analysed through inductive thematic analysis. The researcher manually coded each transcript, identifying patterns related to emotional engagement, behavioural responses, customization preferences, and reactions to dynamic transformations. While AI-generated summaries provided an initial organizational overview, all analytical interpretation was based on manual coding and close reading of full transcripts. Codes were iteratively refined and grouped into themes through constant comparison across participants, allowing identification of both converging and diverging perspectives. This process prioritized participant anonymity and maintained transparency in the interpretation of qualitative data.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with [REMOVED FOR BLIND REVIEW] ethical guidelines for human subject research. All survey and interview participants provided informed consent after being briefed on the study's purpose, data use, and their rights to anonymity, confidentiality, and withdrawal. Participants could withdraw from the study at any time during data collection phase. All survey and interview data were anonymized prior to analysis and stored securely.

For the Reddit discourse analysis, only publicly available posts were analysed in accordance with the platform's terms of service. While Reddit content is public, usernames were anonymized in reporting to protect user privacy, and quotations were selected to balance illustrative value with contextual sensitivity.

RESULTS

This section presents the results from the mixed-methods study, which combined discourse analysis, survey data, and semi-structured interviews to examine how dynamic visual customization affects emotional engagement and player behavior. Results are organized around two central themes that emerged across all three data sources: emotional engagement and player behavior. Each theme is explored through triangulated evidence from survey responses, community discourse, and in-depth interviews.

Emotional Engagement

The theme of emotional engagement addresses how evolving character appearances affect players' attachment to their avatars and investment in the narrative.

Survey results

Survey responses (n = 149) demonstrated a strong link between customization and emotional engagement. As shown in Figure 1, the majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed that visual customization creates emotional connections to characters (93.9%) and enhances their sense of immersion in the game (89.2%), indicating strong immediate emotional responses to customization.

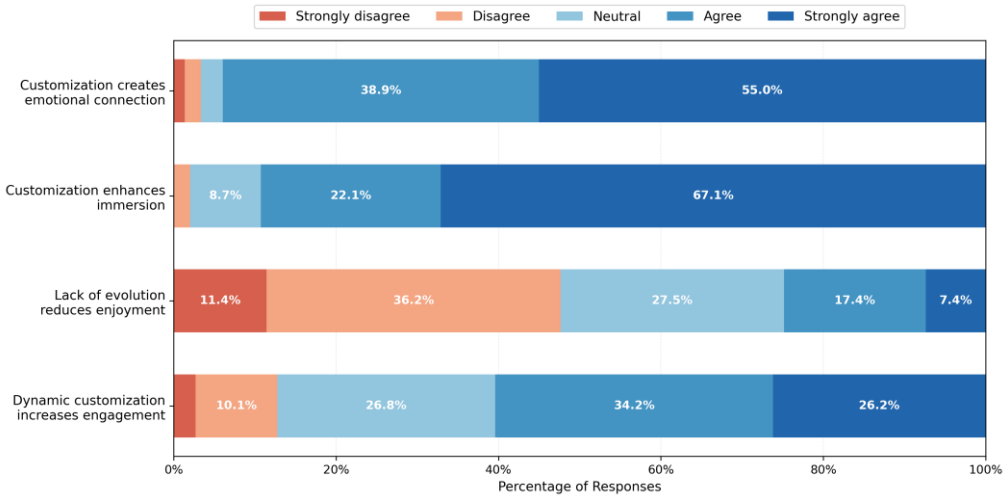

Figure 1: Distribution of responses to the survey items related to Emotional Engagement and Player Experience.

Regarding player experience with dynamic systems, responses were more varied. When asked whether dynamic customization increases engagement over longer periods, 60.4% agreed or strongly agreed, while 26.8% remained neutral. However, participants were notably divided on whether the absence of dynamic customization negatively affects enjoyment: 47.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, 27.5% were neutral, and only 24.8% agreed or strongly agreed. These

mixed responses suggest that while players value dynamic customization when present, its absence may not consistently diminish enjoyment, indicating that dynamic systems function more as an enhancement than a requirement for satisfactory gameplay experience.

Discourse analysis

Community discourse provided insight into how players experienced emotional disruption when visual transformations lacked narrative acknowledgment. Seven of the 23 analysed posts expressed frustration that non-player characters in Baldur's Gate 3 did not react to visible illithid corruption, with this concern recurring across multiple comment threads. As one player noted: "My absolute biggest issue with this entire system – not a single NPC or anyone makes even the SLIGHTEST remark about your now-veiny semi-illithid appearance". This lack of diegetic recognition weakened immersion for players who otherwise valued the transformation mechanic, as visual changes felt narratively disconnected from the game world.

The discourse also revealed a distinct practice: manual dynamic customization. Players reported deliberately altering their characters' appearances between story acts — changing hair length, adding scars after resurrection events, or modifying tattoos to reflect emotional shifts — to maintain visual continuity across their character's narrative journey. This practice demonstrates that players actively seek evolving visual identity even when game systems do not provide it, using available customization tools to sustain narrative coherence and emotional investment.

Interviews

As far as the interviews are concerned, 9 out of 10 participants identified customization as central to emotional engagement and immersion. One participant explained: "I really need to fulfil whatever fantasy I want… when I can actually fulfil that, I'm so excited to play my character". Several participants reported that the character creation process itself was a source of enjoyment, with one describing creating multiple characters in Baldur's Gate 3 purely for the satisfaction of designing them, regardless of whether they completed playthroughs with those characters.

Regarding dynamic customization, all 10 participants emphasized that visual transformations should be narratively coherent to maintain immersion. Participants described effective dynamic customization as gradual, meaningful, and acknowledged within the game world. One participant praised the tactical RPG Wildermyth as a successful example, where visual changes tied directly to story events and influenced both gameplay mechanics and character relationships, creating a sense that the character's journey was written on their body.

These interview findings align with survey and discourse data in demonstrating that emotional engagement with dynamic customization depends on narrative integration. When systems provide coherent visual progression, players experience stronger attachment; when systems are limited or incoherent, players actively intervene through manual customization to maintain narrative continuity.

Player Behaviour

The theme of behavioral responses examines whether and how dynamic customization influences player decision-making during gameplay.

Survey results

Survey responses (n = 149) showed more varied patterns regarding behavioural influence compared to the strong consensus observed for emotional engagement. As shown in Figure 2, 61.7% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that their character's appearance influenced their in-game decisions, while 51.6% reported adjusting their playstyle based on visual design. However, 38-48% of participants remained neutral or disagreed with these statements, indicating that visual customization does not consistently influence decision-making across all players.

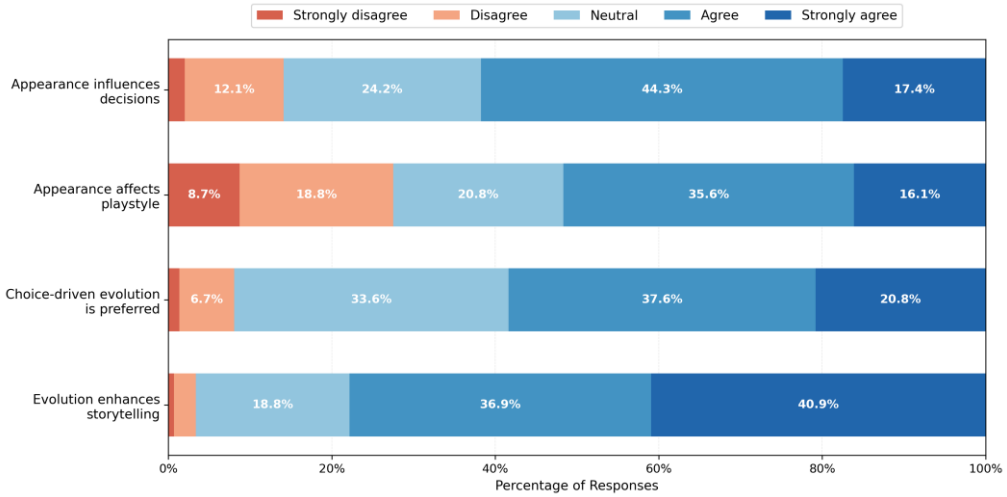

Figure 2: Distribution of responses to the survey items related to Behavioural Changes and Customization Preferences.

Regarding customization preferences, participants expressed stronger consensus about the value of dynamic systems. The majority agreed that they prefer games where character appearances evolve based on choices (58.4%) and that visual evolution enhances storytelling (77.8%). This higher agreement on narrative value contrasts with the more divided responses about behavioural influence, suggesting players appreciate dynamic customization conceptually even when it doesn't directly shape their decisions.

These patterns reveal a discrepancy between conceptual appreciation and behavioural impact: while players broadly value dynamic customization as a narrative feature, its influence on moment-to-moment decision-making varies considerably. For some players, visual changes actively guide roleplay choices; for others, appearance remains secondary to pre-established narrative intentions.

Discourse analysis

The discourse analysis did not reveal clear evidence of behavioural shifts. Players focused predominantly on emotional reactions and immersion concerns rather than changes in decision-making or playstyle. This absence is itself informative: even when

discussing transformations extensively, players did not spontaneously report altering their narrative choices in response to visual changes. Behavioural insights were therefore drawn primarily from surveys and interviews, where direct questions elicited more detailed responses about decision-making processes.

Interviews

Interview findings reinforced the survey pattern showing varied behavioural responses to dynamic customization. Five participants reported deliberately designing characters to experience specific transformations, planning their roleplay around expected visual changes such as illithid corruption. One participant described adjusting their roleplay choices in response to corruption, becoming "less empathetic" and "more logical" as their character's appearance evolved. However, the remaining participants maintained consistent behaviour regardless of visual changes, with one noting: "I kept to how I was playing it" despite significant transformation.

These findings suggest that dynamic customization rarely initiates new behavioural patterns mid-playthrough. Instead, it functions primarily to reinforce existing roleplay frameworks; either by providing visual confirmation of pre-planned character arcs or by serving as an expressive aesthetic layer within already established narrative intentions. The exception — the participant who adapted their behaviour in response to corruption — indicates that visual transformation can influence roleplay choices when players are receptive to emergent narrative shifts, though this appears to be the minority experience.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how dynamic visual customization, specifically the evolution of a character's appearance based on narrative decisions and in-game conditions, affects player emotional engagement and behaviour in RPGs. The mixed-methods findings demonstrate a consistent relationship between visual change and emotional immersion, while revealing that behavioural influence is more variable and context-dependent.

Emotional Engagement and Symbolic Progression

Participants across all methods strongly associated dynamic visual customization with enhanced emotional engagement. When characters' appearances changed in response to story-driven decisions, such as embracing illithid powers in Baldur's Gate 3, players experienced these transformations as carrying emotional weight. Visual consequences served as symbolic confirmations of narrative impact, making abstract decisions feel grounded and permanent.

Players treated customization not as a cosmetic feature but as part of the storytelling itself: an ongoing visual narrative. This aligns with previous research by Turkay and Kinzer (2014), who found that avatar customization supports stronger identification, and with Turkle's (1995) work on identity construction through digital representation. While previous work has largely focused on static customization at the start of a game, the findings here emphasize the importance of customization systems that evolve over time, allowing the character's visual identity to track with their story arc.

Player reactions to system limitations further illustrate this point. Seven of 23 Reddit posts expressed frustration when irreversible transformations occurred without in-world recognition or commentary, suggesting that visual changes alone are insufficient for emotional engagement. Perhaps most notably, players engaged in manual dynamic customization when game systems did not provide adequate visual progression. Interview participants reported deliberately changing features such as scars after resurrection events, adjusting hairstyles between narrative acts, or modifying tattoos to reflect emotional shifts. This emergent practice demonstrates that players conceptualize appearance as a narrative tool, actively maintaining visual coherence even without explicit system support. The prevalence of this behaviour reveals a gap between player expectations and current design: players desire ongoing control over how their character's appearance reflects narrative progression, yet most games confine customization to initial creation or rare modification opportunities.

Behavioural Consistency and Narrative Framing

Although visual transformation heightened emotional investment, dynamic customization showed limited influence on behavioural change compared to its emotional effects. Eight of 10 interview participants did not report shifting their roleplay decisions in response to changing appearance. Instead, many players anticipated transformation arcs from the outset, designing characters to follow specific moral or narrative pathways, whether embracing corruption or resisting it. Visual changes thus confirmed pre-established roleplay intentions rather than prompting new behavioural directions.

These findings contextualize the Proteus Effect (Yee & Bailenson, 2007) within narrative-driven RPGs by identifying boundary conditions for its application. While Yee and Bailenson found that avatar appearance influenced participant behaviour in controlled experimental settings, the current study suggests that in narrative-heavy games, players maintain pre-established character frameworks that override appearance-based behavioural cues. The avatar's appearance may evolve, but the underlying roleplay logic remains stable, with visual transformation serving as symbolic confirmation rather than behavioural catalyst. This does not refute the Proteus Effect but rather demonstrates that its influence is mediated by narrative structure and player agency: when players approach games with predetermined roleplay intentions, appearance changes reinforce rather than redirect those intentions.

However, two participants did describe behavioural adjustments following transformation. Both mentioned becoming more emotionally detached or morally flexible after their characters underwent illithid corruption. While these participants did not articulate what distinguished their experience from others, their responses suggest that dynamic customization may affect behaviour when players remain open to emergent narrative developments rather than following rigidly pre-planned arcs. The predominance of planned playthroughs in the sample (5 of 10 participants explicitly described designing characters around anticipated transformations) suggests that dynamic customization primarily reinforces existing roleplay frameworks, though it retains potential to redirect behaviour for players who approach narrative choices more flexibly.

Implications for Research and Game Design

These findings carry three implications for game studies. First, the research extends work on avatar customization (Turkay & Kinzer, 2014; Hackman, 2016) by demonstrating that visual identity remains significant throughout gameplay. When appearance evolves in response to narrative events, it functions as an ongoing mechanism for emotional engagement rather than a one-time aesthetic choice, suggesting researchers should examine how visual transformation accumulates meaning across extended play. Second, the identification of manual dynamic customization as an emergent player practice reveals that players actively maintain narrative coherence through appearance modification, even without system support, indicating deeper investment in visual continuity than previously recognized. Third, as discussed above, these findings refine application of the Proteus Effect by identifying that narrative structure and pre-established player intentions mediate its influence, demonstrating that appearance-behaviour relationships are context-dependent rather than universal.

For game designers, these findings emphasize three principles. First, dynamic transformations should be narratively acknowledged within the game world. Players expressed frustration when visual changes went unrecognized by non-player characters, indicating that diegetic recognition is essential for transformation to feel meaningful. This need not be constant — even periodic non-player characters' reactions or altered dialogue options would confirm that appearance changes carry narrative weight. Second, systems should balance meaningful consequence with player agency. While irreversible transformations can create stakes, providing options for reversal, disguise, or mitigation respects player investment in appearance. For example, a system might allow illithid corruption to be temporarily masked through magic or disguise, maintaining narrative consequence while preserving aesthetic control. Third, games should provide ongoing customization opportunities beyond character creation. Integrating appearance modification into narrative-appropriate contexts — such as injury recovery, cultural transitions, or character reflection moments — would legitimize and support the manual customization practices players already employ through workarounds.

Finally, dynamic customization strengthens emotional engagement primarily through symbolic confirmation of narrative progression rather than through behavioural redirection. Designers should recognize that visual evolution serves to support and reinforce the roleplay narratives players construct, not to redirect their choices. Systems work most effectively when they provide meaningful visual outcomes across multiple playstyles, allowing appearance to reflect player decisions whether they embrace transformation, resist it, or navigate between extremes.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how dynamic visual customization affects emotional engagement and player behaviour in narrative RPGs through a mixed-methods investigation of Baldur's Gate 3. The findings demonstrate that evolving character appearance functions as an active storytelling mechanism: it deepens emotional immersion by providing symbolic confirmation of narrative progression, yet primarily reinforces rather than redirects player behaviour. By situating dynamic customization within the overlapping domains of identity, immersion, and narrative consequence,

this research demonstrates how visual identity operates as a bridge between systemic design and player-authored expression in character-driven games.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied primarily on self-reported data through interviews and surveys. Although participants provided valuable insight into their intentions and interpretations, this method may not fully capture unconscious or emergent behaviour during gameplay. Second, the research cantered on a single case study, Baldur's Gate 3, which means findings may not generalize to RPGs with different structures, tones, or customization systems. Third, discourse analysis was drawn from online community discussions on Reddit, which may skew toward more vocal or invested players, and survey participants were self-selected, possibly over-representing those with strong opinions on customization. Finally, time constraints limited the number of interviews conducted and prevented longitudinal analysis of player engagement across entire playthroughs.

These findings suggest that dynamic customization functions primarily as symbolic reinforcement rather than behavioural catalyst, raising new questions about context-dependency. The most critical next step involves addressing methodological limitations through observational or longitudinal studies that capture behavioural patterns in real time. Because participants in this study often planned their character arcs in advance, direct observation of spontaneous decision-making could reveal whether visual transformation exerts subtle unconscious influences that self-report methods cannot detect. Equally important is expanding beyond single-player contexts to examine multiplayer and social environments, where avatar appearance serves not only personal narrative expression but also social identity performance. In these settings, dynamic customization may influence behaviour differently, through social perception, group dynamics, or reputation management, suggesting that the limited behavioural effects observed here may be specific to solo narrative experiences. By pursuing these directions, future research can establish boundary conditions for when and how evolving appearance influences player experience, moving beyond the question of whether dynamic customization matters to understanding precisely how its effects vary across different play contexts.

Dynamic customization represents an under-examined dimension of player-avatar relationships in contemporary RPGs. This study demonstrates that visual evolution serves not merely as aesthetic variation but as a narrative mechanism that bridges player intention and systemic consequence. As games increasingly incorporate reactive visual systems, from moral alignment indicators to environmental adaptation, understanding how players interpret these changes becomes essential for both theoretical models of embodiment and practical design of meaningful transformation systems. By establishing that evolving identity strengthens emotional engagement while respecting pre-existing roleplay frameworks, this research offers a foundation for conceptualizing appearance not as static representation but as an active participant in the ongoing negotiation between player, avatar, and narrative world.

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ENDNOTES

[1] https://www.reddit.com/r/rpg_gamers/
[2] https://www.reddit.com/r/DragonAgeVeilguard/
[3] https://otter.ai/