Tampere University of Applied Sciences

Character Customization in Video Games

Affecting Experience with Visual Customization

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BACHELOR'S THESIS
May 2019

Degree Programme in Media

ABSTRACT

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Degree Programme in Media

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Character Customization in Video Games
Affecting Experience with Visual Customization

Bachelor's thesis 42s pages, appendices 11 pages
May 2019

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The topic of this thesis is various kinds of character customization options present in video games, mainly in role-playing video games.

The purpose of this thesis was to learn what forms of customization are available for video game characters in games and how they have evolved and changed over time. Possible risks and opportunities of character customization were also researched from both a developer and player perspective. The collected information was used as a base for creating a simple paper prototype of a visual character customization mechanic.

The prototype was used to test how visual parts of character customization could affect the gaming experience. The prototype was tested by three individual testers, all of whom were familiar with video game character customization. Testing provided good ideas and thoughts for further development of the prototype.

In conclusion, it seemed that the testers saw potential in the tested mechanic, but the number of testers was so small that the results cannot be considered significant. The prototype would need more work and more rounds of testing to give solid, reliable results.

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Key words: video games, character customization, visual customization

CONTENTS

GLOSSARY or ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS (choose one or other)

Character creation	Defining a character's basic statistics and, depending on the game's setting, other aspects like race or class; usually done at the beginning of a game.
Character customization	Alteration of a game character either statistically or visually, either at the beginning of a game, during the game, or both.
Gaming experience	A player's overall experience of a game; this can include, for example, their experience of gameplay, user interface, controls, mechanics and story.
Game mechanics	Set rules and codes within a game which create game play; depending on context, can mean simple actions (like rolling dice in board games), hazards, props or puzzles. Usage of the term "game mechanics" is broad and might mean somewhat different things in different situations.
Game play	Result of interaction between game mechanics and player actions – does not include the visual or audio elements of a game.
MMORPG	Massively multiplayer online role-playing game.
NPC	Non-playable character; a character who is not controlled by a player; in video games NPCs are controlled by code, in tabletop games by a Game Master.
Player character, PC	A character controlled by a player; usually there is one PC per player, but in some games there can be a group of playable characters.
Preset	Pre-made settings for a character; can be visual, statistical or both. Might be a customizable base for character creation or used as they are.
RPG	Role-playing game; a game in which a player takes a role as a – usually fictional – character and makes decisions and actions which are interpreted as their character's decisions and actions.

Stats — Short for statistics; values of a character's different attributes, such as strength, defense, dexterity and charm.

1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis is aimed to research what character customization is in video games, heavily basing the point of view in single player role-playing games. The main objective is to learn how visual character customization is present in modern games and how it affects a game's flow and gameplay. Using the research as a base, a prototype will be created. The prototype focuses on a mechanic revolving around visual character customization and how a playable character's visual appearance may affect gameplay. The prototype will be constructed as a simple paper prototype, as the writer of this thesis does not have the required experience and knowledge to make even the simplest digital, programmed prototype. The paper prototype also allows more editing options during and between test runs than a digital prototype.

This topic was chosen due to my interest in video game character customization for several years, and I hope to be able to work in the field after their graduation. I have some background in tabletop role-playing games and years of experience of creating characters for text-based role-playing games.

The goal of this thesis is to learn more about video game character creation from a slightly different perspective than players might have been used to. Some of the main questions are how relevant character customization in general is for players and developers and what possible risks and downsides it has.

Playable characters can be divided into actual characters and player avatars: in this thesis, even avatar-like characters are handled as so-called "actual characters". For example, playable characters in MMORPGs are more avatars than actual characters. Richie Churchill briefly explains the difference between a character and an avatar in their online blog Viral Ninja like this:

"A "character" is a representation of a person whereas an "avatar" is a representation of the player. -- With a character, a great story can be told by the writers and creators of the game. While with an avatar, the player becomes the protagonist and can be invested in a way, quite unlike what other mediums can offer."

This thesis is not taking any sides or giving opinions on which playable characters are avatars and which are actual characters. Their differences are not always clear, as Churchill points in their blog using the *Mass Effect* (Electronic Arts, BioWare, 2007-2012) trilogy's Commander Shepard as an example. Players are able to customize their Shepard visually and stats-wise, but their dialogue is pre-written and players are able to choose only from given options.

For the sake of keeping this thesis to a reasonable size and the subject tight, both actual characters and avatars will be treated in a same way, without separating them from one another.

The use of term "game play" in this thesis is rather flexible: it is used it to discuss a player's experience of a game's mechanics and plot.

When referring to a game for the first time, there will be a mention of the game's publisher, developer, and original year of release in braces after the game's name; for example, *Mass Effect III* (Electronic Arts, BioWare, 2012). All games referenced are listed in References on pages 45-46, in alphabetical order by their publishers.

2 CHARACTER CUSTOMIZATION

In this section of the thesis, there is discussion of what character customization is, how it is present in different games, and what types of customization there are. Though the thesis focuses on the visual aspect of customization and its effect on gaming experience, there will be some covering for statistical customization aspects as well. Also a brief overview of the history and evolution of character customization through the years is made.

Any customization method is not claimed as right, wrong, or any better or worse than another. Each type of game has its own form of customization, if any.

2.1 What Is Customization

This section reviews the basics of character customization; what it is in tabletop role-playing games - from which it has been passed down into video games - and what forms of character customization there are in video games.

2.1.1 Customization In Tabletop Role-Playing Games

Character creation and character customization in games both originate from tabletop role-playing games (frequently abbreviated as RPGs) (Hartup, The evolution of the role-playing game: from table top to video games, and back again, 2014), such as one of the first commercially released tabletop RPGs, *Dungeons and Dragons* (Tactical Studies Rules, Inc. 1974). Most tabletop RPGs start with a character creation process, during which players decide what kinds of characters they want to play as. Depending on the game or setting they are playing, the player may choose their character's gender, species, age, appearance, personality, class and skills, just to name a few possible customization options. Some games or settings do not allow free creation from scratch, but do offer ready-made characters which players might be able to customize in some ways.

IMAGE 1. Part of *Pathfinder RPG*'s character sheet (Paizo Publishing, 2013. *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game: Core Rulebook*, 6th print)

Characters most often have stats, such as Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Wisdom, Intelligence and Charisma, depending on the game. Stats give characters their unique feel and playability, weaknesses and strengths, and work as a basis for their successful or unsuccessful actions. There are several ways for players to distribute their given attribute points, strengths and weaknesses.

For example, stats can be determined completely randomly by rolling dice or using a so-called point-buy system, in which a player has a certain number of points to distribute between their character's stats: the better they make their single stat, the more points it costs.

As there are usually no set visuals for the characters players are playing, they may imagine and describe their characters just as they want the character to be. These visuals are usually treated as "fluff", or information that is irrelevant for the flow of a game. Even if a player describes their character as a very handsome individual or otherwise pleasing appearance-wise, their Charisma stat will be the real baseline for a successful or unsuccessful action to use their appearance, for example, to charm an NPC.

Some visual appearance choices may have effects on a character's statistical performance. If the player chooses their character to be elderly, the character might get stat penalties for some stats (for example, movement speed or dexterity) but also gain some benefits (bonus for wisdom). Things like missing limbs and disabilities (such as blindness) might not give any bonuses, just penalties. In some RPGs, missing limbs are not taken into concern in basic game rules but are only mentioned in advanced rules or as a rule variation; it may be up to the game master's discretion how characters' disabilities are handled in terms of mechanics.

It might seem counter-productive to voluntarily create characters with penalties to their stats, making them possibly harder to play, but it is all part of making an interesting character to play and experience. Players might want to explore different kinds of characteristics and see how they can make a functioning character. Some decisions to take voluntary penalties can be based purely on story elements: maybe a character lost an eye when fighting a bear, now has a never-ending grudge towards ursine animals, and gains bonuses when fighting against bears.

The game master – a person who leads the tabletop game and plays all NPCs – can make NPCs' initial reactions reflect players' characters appearances, as their physical appearances are the first things NPCs usually experience from player characters. The game master can manipulate their game's dialogue and NPC reactions to match player characters' methods of interaction with their surroundings, as well as their appearances. Unlike in programmed video games, tabletop RPGs are highly flexible and scenarios live with players' decisions and actions. The possibilities for reactions in tabletop RPGs can be endless and very creative, while a video game's programming can only allow a player to act in limited ways – and sometimes these limits won't allow players to play their character in the way they would like to. Naturally, video games and their artificial intelligences can get more detailed and complex as game engines and consoles get more powerful.

2.1.2 Customization In Video Games

As role-playing video games have evolved from tabletop games, they do not differ drastically in character creation. Naturally, they do have some differences in various areas, as they are different types of media and gaming forms, but the idea behind it stays the same: to create a meaningful character to play from the perspective of the player.

If a game offers character creation, it is often done in the beginning of the game. It can be done right at the very beginning, before opening the game world or story to a player, or after the introduction to the game world. In *Dragon Age II* (Electronic Arts, BioWare, 2011), the player gets to customize their playable character Hawke after a short tutorial-like segment of play. During this short segment, Hawke uses their preset model based on chosen sex and character class.
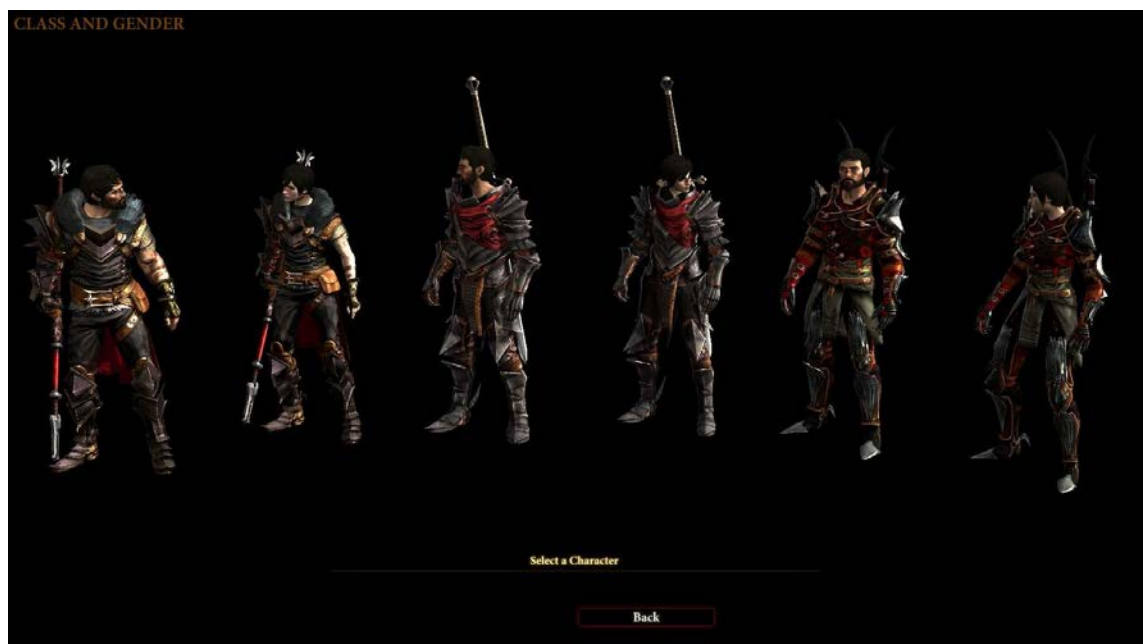
IMAGE 2. Selecting Hawke's class and sex in the beginning of *Dragon Age 2* (Electronic Arts, 2011. Dragon Age II.)

Character creation and customization will be handled more in-depth in later sections of this thesis.

2.2 Types of Customization

This section will go through some different methods of customization in video games. Many customization aspects mentioned and gone through in this part may overlap with each other. A good example of this overlap is character species related classes; some playable classes might be available only for certain species of characters. In the *Dragon Age* series (Electronic Arts, BioWare, 2009-) dwarves cannot be mages, and in *Blade and Soul MMORPG* (NCSoft, Team Bloodlust, 2012), only characters of the Lyn species can be summoners and blade dancers, to name just a couple of examples of species-specific classes.

Perhaps the most basic and simplest thing to see as customization is allowing players to name their characters, whether they be a faceless avatar or a ready-made base with only a customizable first name. As voice acting is quite common in modern non-indie video games, players' options to name their characters might be narrowed. Some games let players give their playable character a name, but the game's dialogue is constructed so that NPCs never use the playable character's custom name in conversation. For example, *Mass Effect* trilogy's playable character is referred as Commander, Shepard or Commander Shepard throughout the trilogy, but the player can replace their default given name with any name they want or stick with their default name (John or Jane). Even if the player ends up in a romantic relationship with one of their crew members, their significant other still refers to the PC as Shepard or uses euphemisms to avoid using their given name.

If a PC doesn't have a set euphemism or alias to use in voice-acted dialogue, custom names can be just left unsaid in voice acting and shown only in possible subtitles (for example in Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft,* 2004-). Even entire sentences with custom names included might be left without voice acting (for example, in Square Enix's *Final Fantasy X,* 2001) – though this can create rather awkward silent moments in otherwise voiced dialogue.

2.2.1 Stats Customization

Commonly, characters' baseline stats are set at the beginning of a game, during class selection or another similar part of the character creation process. Traditionally, each character class has its own weaknesses and strengths to balance them out and make all classes unique and interesting to play. Typically, warrior-like classes have great strength and high hit points but might be quite slow, whereas rogue-like classes may lack strength but are fast and have higher dodging skills.

As characters gain experience, their stats usually get boosted and characters grow stronger. This statistic level-up may be totally automatic and programmed to be a certain type of boost each level – the player might not be able to affect stats at all when their character levels up. There is also an option where the player gets full control of distributing given skill points while levelling up a character; there may even be a mix of the two ways mentioned in which some stats boosts are automatic and others are to be decided by the player.

IMAGE 3. Hawke's Attributes and stats. When Hawke gains a level, the player can distribute a given amount of points to Hawke's stats. (Electronic Arts, 2011. *Dragon Age II*.)

When the game gives their players the option to be in charge of their characters' statistics and skills, the player can make the PC just as they want them to be – within the limits of the game. They can make their Mage class character a battle mage who does high damage and has warrior-like qualities but a very limited

number of spells, or make a pure, maybe even a classic, mage with very high magic stat and many options for spells but poor defense. Or maybe their mage is almost like a Bard; a jack-of-all-trades who gives buffs to and boosts their team but by themselves is rather weak in battle.

Naturally, it depends on the game how different the variations players are able to make from "classic" classes are. Some games may have very linear growth patterns for their characters and players are not given many options to choose from, if any. Other games may give options to create double-class characters, like the battle mage mentioned earlier, by allowing them control over both stat boosts and given skills.

Different classes also tend to have different kinds of skills and abilities. Again, greatly depending on a game, skills and abilities might be tightly class- or species-related and unavailable to other classes or species without special measures. Characters may be automatically granted new skills at certain levels, or there may be a skill tree or trees for players to choose desired skills and abilities from. It is also possible for characters to have set skills which the player powers up to their liking.

IMAGE 4. Fully opened skill trees. (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2017. *Horizon Zero Dawn*.)

Player-chosen statistics and skill power-ups are not always both available in the same game. When a game gives its players total freedom to build their characters' stats and skill choices, it can result in the player making bad decisions; they

might end up creating a very hard-to-play character which is not to the player's liking and does not work as they may have thought it would. These kinds of situations should be fixable by the game by offering an option for players to redistribute all points their character has, not including possible automatic class-related bonuses. By providing this option, the player can experiment with combinations of abilities and stats without having to always start the game from the very beginning. This option can be free or cost in-game currency.

While level-up bonuses might be permanent, characters' gear might change at a rather great pace. Some games have large amounts of different types of armor, garments, trinkets and weapons, while others include just a few which are upgraded throughout the game.

Gear – armors, weapons, clothes, et cetera – itself can be customizable with different kinds of modifiers, giving the gear new qualities or improving pre-existing ones. For example, in *Mass Effect* the player can modify characters' weapons with different mods, which can be both bought from stores or found on the field. These mods may increase a weapon's ammunition capacity or make it more stable, causing the weapon to generate less kickback and making it easier to aim rapid fire.

Characters' appearance may change depending on gear they are using. While some players do not find this an issue, other players can find gear mandatorily changing their character's visuals disturbing. The player may choose not to use gear that offers great bonuses if they find it visually unpleasant. If they must use better gear, such as for a boss battle, they may equip the visually unpleasant stronger gear just for that battle and unequip it once the battle is over.

Gear affecting character's appearance will be discussed further in the next section.

2.2.2 Visual Customization

Deciding the visual appearance of a playable character is a huge thing for some of players – it might take hours for very dedicated players to create a character to their liking, carefully considering their every option. Some of these players even state they spend more time creating characters than actually playing. (Giant Bomb, *How Do You Feel About Character Customization in Games?,* 2010) On the other hand, putting in that amount of work solely on a character's appearance is too much for other players who do not really care about their character's looks and are happy with presets. Both of these groups are extremities and most players fall somewhere in between them. It is also possible for a player to actually enjoy character customization but ending up using only presets if they find a character creator is lacking for their taste.

Characters' visual appearances tend to play a big role especially in modern MMORPGs. Players want to stand out from hundreds and thousands of other players and their characters and modern MMORPGs provide great tools to make your character your own. Korean MMORPG *Black Desert Online's* (Kakao Games, Pearl Abyss, 2014) character creation is greatly praised for its flexibility and versatility. *Black Desert Online*'s character creation tool was even published as a stand-alone download before the game launched for the larger audience to play.

Often, most of the character's physical traits and characteristics are chosen and edited during the character creation at the beginning of a game. These things usually include the character's height, facial structure, body proportions, sex, and color of skin, eyes, and hair. These are often details players are not able to change after they finish character creation and start the game. Hair style and hair color are probably the most common details to be customizable out of these initial bases. *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, Rockstar North, 2004) has a mechanic wherein the character gains weight from food they consume, and this changes the character's appearance – and stats. The *Pokémon* main series games (Nintendo, Game Freak, 1996-) included character customization in their games in *Pokémon X* and *Pokémon Y* (2013). Players choose their Pokémon trainer's sex and skin tone at the beginning of the game and are able to change

their hairstyle, hair color, and eye color in salons found in different towns. Changing hair style and color costs in-game currency, as does buying new apparel to wear.

Sometimes, there are either special items or places where the player can completely change their character's appearance during their game. These changes may or may not include statistical changes such as the character's species or class. Japanese MMORPG *Final Fantasy XIV* (Square Enix, Square Enix Business Division 5, 2010) has items called Fantasia which allow a player to change their character's appearance, including species and sex.

Naturally, all games do not have widely varied means of visual customization. It is possible for a game to have just some premade bases, often referred to as presets, to choose from. It is also possible for players to choose a preset as a base for their own visually customizable character. Having these presets works well for both types of players: those who do not wish to use their time building a character's appearance from scratch, and those who find visual customization an important part of their gaming experience.
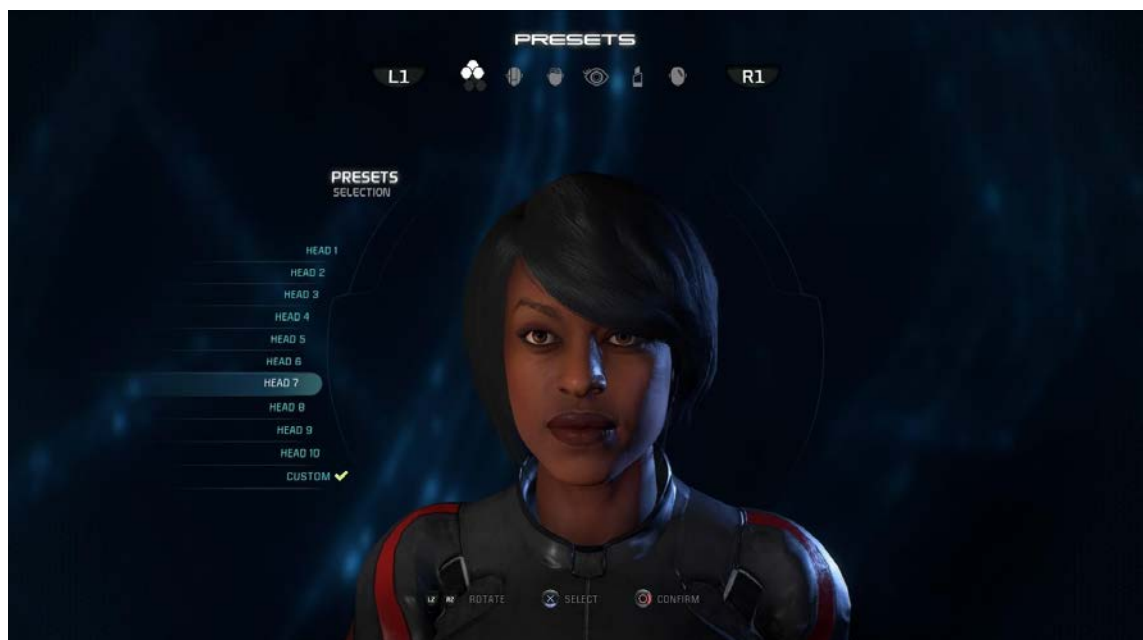

IMAGE 5. There are some facial presets available for the playable character, Ryder, in *Mass Effect: Andromeda*. (Electronic Arts, 2017. Mass Effect: Andromeda.)

Older games often had very limited customization options for a player character's appearance due to limited disk space and engine rendering power. They gave players the option of choosing a premade portrait of a character to represent their character while their in-game model stayed mostly untouched. *Baldur's Gate* (Interplay Entertainment, BioWare & Black Isle Studios, 1998) is a good example of this; players are offered a pool of character portraits to pick from for their character, while their in-game model was customizable only through limited color changes. Though *Baldur's Gate* itself does not provide endless amounts of visual customization for characters, players can add their own custom character portraits via the game files.

Characters' baseline appearance may be set in stone and players are offered modification using various kinds of ready-made appearance packs, referred to as skins, for them. Skins keep the basic appearance of a character recognizable and some key features untouched, but can drastically change the appearance of their gear and outfit. Multiplayer first-person shooter game *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016) currently has 30 playable characters, all of which have multiple selectable skin options for players to choose from. These skins can be unlocked as players open loot boxes obtained from different events, leveling up, or by purchasing them.

IMAGE 6. The default skin and some of the unlockable skins for *Overwatch* character Ana. (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016. *Overwatch*.)

When a game offers more detailed and flexible visual customization, players might be offered a great amount of parts and sliders for creating a character to their liking. Players might be able to adjust their character's nose's length, width,

shape, and curve, just to name some examples. The extremities of these sliders may cause disturbance to a character's model if not used and designed carefully.
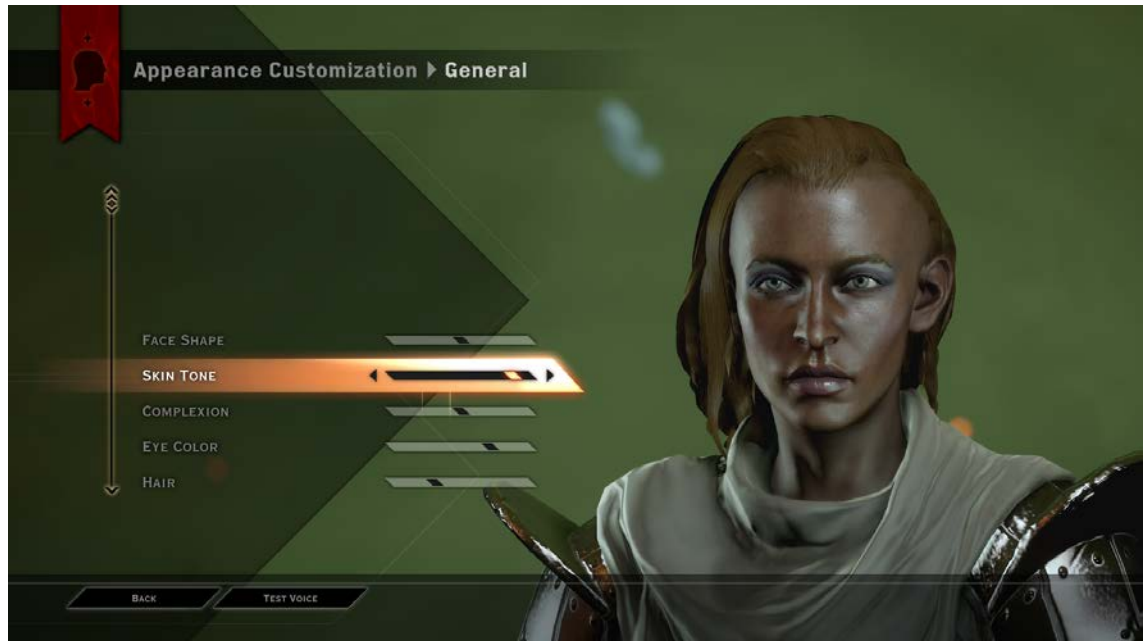

IMAGE 7. Some of the sliders available in character customization in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Electronic Arts, 2014. *Dragon Age: Inquisition.*)

It is possible for a game to offer premade parts to use in character creation, both with or without slider options included. These parts are not likely to disturb the character model as much a pure slider customization might be able to do. Often, at least some sections of slider-heavy customization are fixed as premade parts, hair styles being a common example.

As stated in the previous section, changing gear during the game might change the character's appearance, not just their stats. While visually changing gear is a great way to give players something new to look at and customize their characters, there are risks in this. As mentioned previously, players might end up using visually pleasing but weak gear and, in this way, risk their playability.

This kind of problem can be tackled in couple of ways. Gear can have its own visual customization options to allow players to modify, for example, the colors or materials of their gear. This also provides some new content and playability to a game if acquiring a certain look for gear requires collecting certain items. In the original *Mass Effect* trilogy, players have the option to change Shepard's armor's

materials and/or colors, somewhat depending on which game of the trilogy you are playing. In some *Mass Effect* games, these material and color changes do not require players to collect or purchase in-game items; in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Electronic Arts, BioWare, 2014), players need to collect crafting items to create the desired materials for their armor.

IMAGE 8. Using collected materials to create new equipment (Electronic Arts, 2014. *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.)

Gear can also be a purely cosmetic change without actual changes to a character's stats. *Blade and Soul MMORPG* provides players multiple different apparel and weapon skins for their characters to use: none of these affect their characters' statistic performance. Their stats improve only by leveling up the character and upgrading their weapon, which also does go through visual changes as it is upgraded, but players are also able to change their weapon's appearance with skins.

In *Final Fantasy XIV*, players can modify their equipped gear with Glamours to make them look like other equipment of the same type. In MMOs, allowing players to use any gear as their "cosmetic set" gives players the possibility to make unique-looking characters when every single character in a certain level gap wears same items. (Waypoint, *Clothes should not be tied to stats in videogames,* 2018)

Some games, such as *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (Nintendo, Nintendo EAD, 2012), allow players to create their very own clothes with custom textures. These textures can also be shared with other players by distributing the apparel's QR code.

2.2.3 How Is Customization Present in Current Games

Customization is available in many different game genres and types of games. Players can customize their characters in first and third person shooters, sports games, rhythm games and turn-based strategy games, just to name some. (TVTropes, Character Customization, n.d.)

As every game is different, the aspects of and options for customization are very different depending on the game. Some might only have the option to give the character a name, while others provide wide options for in-depth customization.

The need for visual customization depends massively on the game's composition. In games focusing greatly on a playable character's or the whole game's story without options to make plot-changing choices, visual character customization is often totally absent. It is typical in Japanese RPGs, for example, for playable characters to not really be customizable and the game's plot does not change due to the player's choices. Japanese RPG characters are often prewritten and have their own personalities without a player's input applying to their dialogue. Western RPGs more frequently offer the option for players to customize their character to their liking and offer dialogue trees, giving at least the illusion of choice and customization. (Uusitalo, *Entä jos esineellistäminen ei olekaan väärin?* 2018)

Character customization is not the only possible form of customization in games. If the game focuses more on other things than the playable characters, the player often has options for customizing these objects: for racing games, you can customize your car, and in first person shooters, you can change the appearance of your weapons.

2.3   How Relevant is Customization?

This section reviews the relevance of customization for players and game developers.

2.3.1   For Players

There are as many thoughts on character customization as there are players. For some of them, character visual customization is a totally irrelevant part of their experience; they can even find it annoying if the game doesn't provide at least one preset for a character.

Character customization helps players make playable characters into creations of their own. Even if visual changes do not affect a game in any way and a plot cannot be altered drastically, players can still feel the character is their own, which may help players with immersion and make them more interested in the game. Customizing characters' stats and abilities can have a direct effect on the gameplay experience, as different things might end up being easy or hard depending on players' choices regarding their character's specializations, gear, and skills.

Dialogue trees are not actual character customization, but they can help players give their PC some personality. These choices might be more about a game's plot than character development but in some cases – or at least in some players' eyes – they go hand in hand.

Character customization was clearly a welcome feature in the very popular *Pokémon* games: when Nintendo announced there would not be character customization in the remakes of *Pokémon Ruby* and *Pokémon Sapphire* (original release 2002, remakes *Omega Ruby* and *Alpha Sapphire* 2014), many fans were upset, as Nintendo had just made customization possible in their previous new *Pokémon* main games. (Bailey, *So Does Pokémon Omega Ruby and Alpha Sapphire*

Include Trainer Customization? 2014) Customization made a comeback in *Pokémon Sun* and *Pokémon Moon* (2016), as they were new games in the series; customization was left out of the remakes on purpose, as it was not present in the original versions of *Ruby* and *Sapphire*.

As already stated, some players do not find character customization necessary or meaningful for them at all and are happy to use provided presets when playing. These kinds of players are probably more invested in the game as an achievement, an assortment of mechanics, and might not really care about making their PC their own.

Overall, customization may offer players the illusion of choice. Even if any customization they made had absolutely nothing to do with the actual flow of a game, they can still feel like they have created a unique character in the game.

Statistical customization offers players opportunities to optimize their character's strengths and weaknesses to match a player's own preferences and play style. If a player cannot handle a game's mechanic of dodging incoming attacks, they can choose to give their character greater defense or automatic dodging.

2.3.2 For Developers

For developers, artists, programmers, and pretty much any vocation related to game development, character customization means more work. All alterations must be programmed, modeled, textured, and implemented into a game. Even if a game's visual customization options are rather simple to a player's eyes, they still always require some work during the game making process; the time and effort spent on customization could be spent in many other ways for the game's benefit. It is also a possibility that most of the work and time spent on customization options may end up being wasted if players do not use the available customization as much as developers anticipated.

Then again, developers can use customization as a means for obtaining microtransactions from players and keep them playing their game for a longer time.

Some customization items can be made available only by purchase via currency and require players to either spend hours playing the game or use real life money to purchase items they want. Apparel can be treated as collectables: players can be challenged to obtain all pieces of a set of clothing to unlock an achievement, for example.

In the best case scenario, players find a game with customization worth replaying multiple times as they might want to try playing characters that differ in terms of class, statistics, and visuals.

2.3.3 Risks of Customization

Over the course of this thesis, character customization has been shown in a rather positive light, but some potential problems and risks have been pointed out as well. Some of the risks mentioned are not necessary game-breaking or even considered risks or problems by all developers or players.

Possibly one of the biggest risks is spending countless hours of work on customization options players never end up really using. Players might always choose to use only the default options for visuals and never explore any feature meant solely for visual changes.

Making a considerably conspicuous character is a risk of character creation highly dependent on the individual player. They might want to play around with extremities in customization to make a PC that could even be considered visually deformed. If given too much freedom with visual customization, players might end up finding it hard to immerse themselves in the game if their character does not fit the game's world in terms of appearance. If a game's character customization allows players to mix and match very "extreme characteristics", it might be wise to add some NPCs with some "extreme character features" to the game as well. In this way, all kinds of customized PCs have a chance of fitting the game world. For example, if players can have a character with bright green hair, there is no reason to not also have some NPCs with that same hair color.

Quite many MMOs take place in fantasy worlds with possible historical elements where heavy armor is seen as normal equipment. Giving players options to get more contemporary, modern-styled gear is a great way to provide new, perhaps even funny equipment as well as collect microtransactions, but there is a risk of breaking immersion. Seeing a character in a brightly colored bikini or a modern tuxedo with sunglasses in the middle of high fantasy armored characters can break players' immersion and possibly greatly annoy some.

IMAGE 9. Maybe not the most believable Ryder, but at least very unique (Electronic Arts, 2017. *Mass Effect: Andromeda*.)

As mentioned in earlier sections, customization might impose limits on voice acting. Dialogue can be written so that NPCs do not use a PC's player-given name in voiced lines but instead use only their surname, title, nickname, or other euphemisms which are fixed and cannot be changed by players. If these names and euphemisms are related to a PC's species or class, they can create a need for more alternate voice lines and therefore create more work.

One possible way to tackle a combination of customizable PC names and voice acting is to make voice acting total gibberish. Voice lines can still express the mood of characters with different intonations and tones even when the words used are not actual words in any language. Platforming game *Celeste* (Matt Makes Games, 2018) allows players to name the game's playable character, who

is by default called Madeline. Dialogue in *Celeste* is fully voiced, but characters do not speak English or any other actual language.

If a game allows for heavy visual customization on the player character, it makes creating possible merchandise featuring the player character a bit more challenging. It would not be possible to provide players options to buy, for example, a figurine of their own customized player character, at least for a reasonable price for both parties. In these kinds of situations, games benefit from having other strong and relatable characters to feature on merchandise alongside with possible symbols and logos present in the game.

As 3D printing becomes more common and cheaper, this "problem" with figure making can be dealt with more easily. For example, the crowdfunded Hero Forge Custom Miniatures platform offers options for creating a model of your character using premade features and modifiers. You can order your model either as a tabletop miniature, decoration, or charm, or you can just purchase the model's digital file and print it yourself. In either case, these figures are sold unpainted and would need to be manually painted by the customer to achieve the desired look.

2.4   Effects on Gameplay

Character customization can have effects on gameplay: with stat customization, an effect is pretty much mandatory to make it even meaningful to have statistic customization in a game. Different kinds of stat choices and emphases can allow players to tackle in-game problems and challenges in different ways; a rogue-like character can sneak their way around a horde of enemies while a more warrior-like character can attack them without a carefully thought-out plan and rely on their strength and defense. A character with a sniper rifle can carefully aim headshots at their enemies from the back line, while characters specialized in melee weapons have to be next to their targets to damage them.

As mentioned before, visual choices can have effects on a character's stats and skills – but if these are ignored, visual choices do not usually change gameplay very much. For example, based on the species and personal background of a

character, players might be given a different starting point or receive quests to do in a different order. In *Dragon Age: Origins* (Electronic Arts, BioWare, 2009), when a player creates their character, they do not only select the species and gender of their character but also their background. Their selected background story affects the beginning of the game: the first quests, interactions with characters, and so on. Some of these background choices affect later parts of the game as well. In the right circumstances, a female human with a noble background can become a queen, which is not possible with any other background option. A noble dwarf male can end up having a son whose royal status the player can restore.

Visual choices affecting gameplay is not a rare phenomenon in video games; it is merely not as common as a statistical customization affecting gameplay.

In the life simulation game *Spore* (Electronic Arts, Maxis, 2008), a player is able to evolve their creature character from a sea-dwelling organism to a space-traveling species through various stages in their development. The first two sections of the game's four stages are based on building a species of the player's liking using different parts they are able to find in the game's environment. Different parts give different abilities – some parts give a creature spray weapons, some allow a creature to glide – and they must be included in the creature's design to acquire those skills. All parts applicable to creatures can be changed in size and rotated into a desired position. If a player does not like the part they need, they can try hiding it in the creature somehow – but there is a limit for how many parts a creature can have.

In the Tribal stage, players cannot change their creature's physical traits any longer, but can give them clothing, which in turn give the creatures new bonuses. From the Civilization stage onward, players can no longer change their characters' abilities or stats as the game shifts focus to building and maintaining cities. Players can still edit their vehicles and buildings, though, and improve their performance.

It can be questioned, however, if decision-making in Spore is more based on the visual or statistical aspects of the creatures.

In *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation HD* (Ubisoft, 2012), playable character Aveline has multiple outfits, called Personae, which all give her slightly differing qualities. In her basic Assassin outfit, she has the biggest weapon arsenal, but might draw attention to herself; in her Slave outfit she can easily blend into crowds but has more limited weaponry. Her Lady outfit also has limited weapons and restricts her movement but allows the character to use other methods, such as charm, to achieve her goals. Each of these Personae outfits is also customizable color-wise.

Some visual customization options can have an effect on gameplay experience even though they were not intended to. In Blizzard's *Overwatch*, characters have multiple skins: some players find using some skins non-beneficial because they seem to give the enemy team an advantage. For example, the character Reinhardt has a skin called Coldhardt, in which the character's head glows in an eerie light blue light against much darker grey armor: this makes Reinhardt's head very easy to spot, making it possible a player using this skin might get headshot by enemies more often than players using other skins which don't highlight the character's head. Then again, some skins seem to give some advantages to players using them: Zenyatta's head seems much bigger when using his Nutcracker skin, but in reality his head hitbox stays the same size as in any other skin, which might confuse enemy players trying to headshot this character.

In *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games, Rockstar Studios, 2018) the player character Arthur's appearance changes throughout the game. His beard and hair grow, and he can start smelling bad if he is covered in dirt and neglects to bathe. NPCs in the game react to Arthur's appearance in different ways: if he is dirty and smelly, NPCs might avoid him, and when he looks clean and is freshly shaved, NPCs can comment on his looks in a teasing manner. NPCs might also have something to say about the clothes Arthur chooses to wear.

IMAGE 10. NPC commenting on Arthur's choice of clothing. (Rockstar Games, 2018. *Red Dead Redemption 2*)

3   CREATING A MECHANIC PROTOTYPE

In this section of my thesis, I will be going over my process of creating a simple paper prototype for character creation and customization which can add some new aspects to the gameplay experience. The idea behind the prototype is to let a player make a character whose non-combat related stats are determined by their visual characteristics and style of equipment. These "Appearance stats" can be altered in the game after character creation with new equipment.

I intended to have the prototype tested by players and create further development ideas and notes from feedback I got from my play testers. I was hoping to get the prototype tested with at least five different play testers, but I needed to cut down this number as time did not permit me to reach this goal.

In order to keep this prototype within reasonable limits of time and size, I left it rather small, but still large enough to adequately test my idea.

3.1   Goals of the Prototype

My personal goal is to learn about the amount of work required in the development state of a game when putting a mechanic like this to use. Through making this prototype, I will be able to understand what kinds of possible problems, limitations, and possibilities mechanics like these can have. Before starting the process, I do have some ideas on what might be my biggest issues and stumbling blocks – I am also certain I will come across new ones when working and maybe overcome some of my predicted problems easier than expected.

On a greater scale I hope that this prototype can provide some new thoughts and ideas for visual customization in video games.

I aim to make the mechanic fun and something players would like to explore different ways.

I also hope to be able to make the prototype and its effect on gameplay rather intuitive; to make players feel like by customizing their PC they can get different kinds of experiences and possibilities out of the game without telling them right away that their characters' visual appearance affects interactions they get. I hope to get players to explore their characters' visual aspects and effects beyond possible species and class-provided appearance.

3.1.1 How to Affect the Gameplay

The prototype will be focusing on how NPCs are reacting to PCs and possibly changing small aspects of a game. These include possible party banter, NPC banter, dialogue, and possibly order of quests.

The visual appearance of a PC could also modify the behaviour of some enemies. If the PC is wearing very untidy or light gear, enemies could underestimate the PC and act more recklessly. Respectively, if the PC is well-equipped with powerful-looking gear, enemies could act a bit more cautiously and use skills to strengthen themselves or weaken the PC.

I would like to get character creation and customization options to affect how NPCs react and communicate with a player's character. For example, some NPCs would not easily give quests for the PC if the PC's visual style is too tidy – they maybe cannot believe that the PC is able to fight with a wanted criminal or something similar. Possible loot items and experience point amounts would not be affected by NPCs' reactions.

3.1.2 Risks

In the testing phase, there is a non-prototype-related risk: I have never been a game master in any game, so I do not have experience in leading players in game scenarios. I am hoping to patch this testing problem by creating clear scenarios players and I can follow without too much trouble. As this prototype is planned to

work in video games, there will not be any real opportunities for players to improvise, so testing should not be too difficult for an inexperienced game master, either. Dialogue options will be prewritten, and players will be able to choose only from those options to interact with NPCs.

There is also the risk that test players may not able to really grasp the idea of the mechanic when it is only presented to them in a tabletop RPG -style test. This problem could be tackled with creating some visual examples: the most crucial would probably be a character creation and customization menu. Due to limits in time and resources, only simple visual elements will be made for the prototype, most likely separately drawn pieces of features and characteristics.

The biggest risk of the prototype and the mechanic is that it ends up being frustrating and unnecessary in the players' opinion. There is a chance that the prototype fails in allowing the players to enjoy exploring possibilities with different kinds of equipment and visual styles. Another big risk is that the prototype simply does not work at all. If planned carefully enough, it should be playable no matter what, but it might end up being broken so that the key mechanic tested does not work as intended. There is a chance that the player ends up being stuck in some point of the prototype testing if some of the choice and interaction combinations create unintended situations.

It is clear that the prototype will need a good amount of work even when kept to a small scale. The amount of work might end up being too much compared to variations done – if not planned tightly enough and the branches in the story and interactions are not well combined, game scripts can easily become unnecessary big and complex. For example, the very choice-based, create-your-own-story game *Until Dawn* (Sony Computer Entertainment, Supermassive Games, 2015) originally had 10 000 pages of dialogue (Klepek, *How Until Dawn Ended Up With a 10,000-Page Script,* 2015).

Related to the risk of the prototype not being fun is the risk of the prototype becoming a "phobia simulator". If all NPC types end up not liking the PC and making the player's game harder, the player can get frustrated with the game and feel like that the whole game was against them. Players tend to make their characters

images of their own "better selves" in some way or another (Madigan, *The Psy-chology of Video Game Avatars,* 2013), so it is possible for players to feel personally attacked or offended if the game is against their "better self".

3.2 Introduction of the Prototype

Appearance Meters

In this prototype, there will be three meters tied to the NPC's visual appearance. These meters are:

1. Tidy-Shabby
2. Light-Covering
3. Eccentric-Formal

All of these meters are structured on a basic X-axis from values -3 to +3. The center point (0) of the meter is a neutral value.

Different cosmetic items move the meter in different directions. One item can give +1 to Tidy and +1 to Covering. The same item cannot give values to the different ends of the same meter (+1 Light, +1 Covering). Players are able to see their characters' visual appearance meters in the character stats.

In this prototype, there will not be any meters or values for characters' presentation as feminine or masculine.

One species

In order to keep this prototype small in scale, there will be only one humanoid species for players to choose from. That species will not be described visually to the players – they can imagine the characters as a human or a humanoid creature. NPCs' species will not be stated as any actual species either, only as either the same as or a different species than the PC.

Basic outfits as key items

The players will have one item for each of possible style indicator: Tidy, Shabby, Light, Covering, Eccentric, and Formal. All these items grant +1 to their style.

These items alone might not be able to get the PC to a needed level of a style but serve to offer little boosts; the players also cannot delete these items from their item inventory. This way, they will always have at least something to boost their style and thus make things that little bit easier for them.

NPC types

The NPCs in the prototype will be divided into seven different groups. Each group has their own behaviours towards the PC depending on the PC's visual style. Ideally, each group would have different levels of how strict NPCs in the group are about their preferences. For example, Easy Green would be happy with +1 Shabby style, but Hard Green would need +3 Shabby to be satisfied. For this prototype, most of the NPCs are considered medium in difficulty.

If it seems that an all medium-difficulty NPC cast is too easy or too hard for players to successfully interact with, some changes might be made during testing phase.

The Grey (neutral) NPC group treats the PC in the same way regardless of what the PC is wearing or their species. Most NPCs would be in this group, but in this prototype there are not going to be any "neutral" quest givers.

The Red group favors Tidy style.
The Green group favors Shabby style.
The Blue group favors Light style.
The Orange group favors Covering style.
The Yellow group favors Eccentric style.
The Purple group favors Formal style.

Physical Prototype

Players build their characters from pieces which all have different Appearance properties. The players won't be able to tell which piece give which Appearance stat chances. Once the character is done, its Appearance meters will be calculated and revealed. Players also decide which basic outfit they will start with – other basic outfits will be placed in their inventory and can be used later.

Most of the dialogue and dialogue options are presented to players in written form. Some lines, such as party banter, will only be read out loud to players.

There will be a map for the game's area which players are able to explore. Sections of the map are revealed to players as they explore the town. Quest-giving NPCs will be shown on the map as either black dots or colored dots, depending on whether players are able to get a quest from them.

Players are free to explore the town and speak with NPCs shown on the map. If they seem to be stuck – unable to obtain quests from NPCs – party NPCs will speak and give the players hints on what to do.

Image 11. The prototype.

4 TESTING PROCESS

Playtesting is a common method in game development process to test game's functions and playability and to see what aspects of the game might be flawed, what works and what needs to be iterated. Playtesting can be done by game's developers or testers chosen outside of the developer group. Usually first tests are done by developers to prepare the game for more comprehensive tests done by non-developer testers. (Technopedia, *What is Playtesting?* n.d.)

Following playtest was performed as three separate blind tests. Testers did not know the exact mechanic the prototype was testing for and were not familiar with the subject of my thesis. One of the most interesting and important things was to observe if testers saw their character's visual appearance as a key to unlock quests and ways to communicate with NPCs. All testers had at least some experience of role-playing video games.

The flow and the actual content of the prototype is presented in the Appendix 1 starting from page 44.

4.1 Tester A

Tester A completed three quests, one each for Red, Orange and Yellow NPCs. She did speak with all NPCs and was able to get two quests with her initial, unedited stats. The tester obtained some items to check if she could manage to get other quests and had to test multiple items before getting her third quest.

The testing situation might have been affected by my inexperience and lack of personal notes I had forgotten to write down for myself. Quite a lot of the planned party banter was forgotten, for example.

The tester said she thinks she understood what the mechanic was testing. The appearance stats she was shown and given gave clues towards this. She thought

that NPCs did not really address that it was the player character's visual appearance they were looking at – it felt like they could have been asking for certain skills as well.

When asked about the mechanic, the tester said she did not feel like she had very much power with changing her character's appearance stats; items that gave +1 to statistics felt like they didn't have enough of an effect. (Her character visited the barber shop but did not get a new hairstyle as the tester liked her current one)

The tester said she really enjoy visual character customization in games and would love to be able to create her character from a scratch by herself. She would like to see visual character customization used more in games as a part of stories and skills. The tester mentioned *Red Dead Redemption 2*: she liked some of the character customization in the game but found constant grooming draining.

Changes made after Tester A:
- removed papers covering the map; these ended up being a useless aspect for the test

4.2 Tester B

The tester sought out all of the quests even after they were told they could end after three quests. They took Red's quest but decided to abandon it after speaking with Purple NPC as they thought the quest seemed suspicious. They also declined Purple NPC's own quest.

The tester bought multiple items and actively changed their appearance stats to get all quests available one by one. They were not so interested in completing the quests but wanted to see what they were about. The tester was really interested in the story and the lore in the prototype.

When asked if they had guesses what the prototype was about, they guessed it was for dialogue mechanic and mathematics behind appearance stats, as well

as perhaps the initial reactions of players when they realize their character's appearance actually had something to do what they are able to accomplish.

They liked how they had to get and use items and found the whole prototype very interesting, especially how first impressions affected things, though the tester admitted they thought it was a bit confusing that they did not know how their initial customization choices affected their stats ("How can my nose or face shape be light or tidy?"). NPCs' needs for certain kinds of visual choices could give developers many opportunities to make story and quest possibilities: if the PC has fancy clothes they could get targeted by robbers more likely than when they would wear shabby, simple clothes.

The tester pointed out how they ended up being very conscious of their initial choices. They said they had picked them all purely based on their own sense of aesthetics and said they felt like they could have been punished for their choices.

As for a pure physical prototype-related suggestion, the tester said they would have liked to see the NPCs they were talking with as seeing them could probably prepare them as a player to know what the NPC might want from the player. It also should be stated in the beginning of the game that character customization choices actually matter.

When asked if they like visual customization, the tester said they play MMORPGs greatly due to character customization, naming *Guild Wars 2* (NCSoft, ArenaNet, 2012) as one of their favorites. In single player games, they did not find visual customization as necessary or even as easy as in multiplayer games. If a game has a set personality for a character, it can be tricky for a player to create a matching visual appearance.

The tester thought that visual customization should absolutely affect games and gameplay. According to them, visual character customization is a powerful tool which allows many options for games' lore and world building. As examples, they mentioned *Skyrim*, *Dragon Age* and *Guild Wars 2*. As a negative side, they mentioned possible walls of text - "show, don't tell" should be a guideline there as well.

Changes made after Tester B:

- nothing related to the actual prototype, just details in presenting it to the next tester

4.3   Tester C

The tester finished all quests and seemed to be quite immersed in the prototype, describing how they would see their character reacting when NPCs kept ignoring them for not having the right stats for their quests. They mentioned the Light-Covering slider being a bit confusing: they kept thinking it did not refer to armor but rather being appropriately clothed. (Note that I had troubles naming these sliders: I considered, for example, Bare and Sturdy.)

According to the tester, they got the prototype's point of testing the visual aspect of characters – they said it was quite easy for them to understand what NPCs wanted from them, as the player was familiar with role-playing video games.

They thought the prototype was fairly easy and hoped some quests would have been a bit harder to get and require multiple specific points in appearance stats. Like Tester B, they kept wondering whether their physical choices like body and face shape affect their performance.

As for the physical prototype and its test runs, the tester gave some suggestions on how to make the process smoother and more natural. This included remembering to inform testers about their inventory and giving small tutorial-type suggestions at the very beginning of the test. Overall, they thought the prototype was quite good, perhaps even a little bit too detailed or "fancy".

The tester told me they are a big fan of visual character customization and thought it is always good when players can have some decisions about their character's looks. "It makes immersion better and allows players to play as something else than a white straight cis-man with stubble."

When asked if they think visual choices should affect gameplay, they answered with a "careful yes". The term "should" sounded a bit too harsh but they would enjoy developers adding more ways for visual choices to affect games. A game can be very good without the surrounding world actually noticing character's visual changes but it still could give that something extra to the experience. They mentioned *Horizon Zero Dawn*, where many outfit options are clearly made to reflect different cultures in the game but characters of these cultures do not notice the player character wearing their culture's clothes and trying to blend in.

4.4 Conclusions of Testing and Improvement Plans

Due to time limitations, I ended up testing the prototype with only three players despite originally planning to do testing with more people. I already got some good points from these three players and if I were to continue testing this prototype, I would change some aspects of it based on their feedback before continuing to a second round of testing.

Testers seemed to get the idea of changing their character's appearance and equipment to make more quests available to them. A couple of times, they seemed a little bit frustrated when their equipment changes did not seem to be enough for unlocking quests and they had to spend time playing around with items.

For further testing, I would write even more detailed instructions for the game master to follow to ensure the player gets all necessary information in good order and in sensible situations. NPCs would get small mock-up sketches of their basic appearance and body language, and their dialogue would get a little bit more in-depth and be corrected both grammatically and content-wise. Color coding stats in a similar style for NPCs could also be worth testing, as could letting players see NPCs' group colors even when the player cannot get quests from them and using some other indicator to show when they have the right stats for the NPC's preference.

In the character creation state, the player would see how their choices affect their appearance stats: in the game, they would be given more powerful options to affect their stats. By giving more powerful customization options, there could be more quests with more specific and higher requirements to obtain them.

Asking testers if their physical, unchangeable visual choices (face shape, body, etcetera) should affect the appearance stats or not would also be interesting and give new details to consider.

5 DISCUSSION

While writing this thesis, I had to pause several times to question myself on whether something is visual or statistical customization. Undoubtedly, they overlap in multiple ways, but sometimes they are clearly separate ways of customization. In other cases, it is not clear if some choices are made based on visual or statistical reasons, which also caused some issues.

It is clear that the prototype would need more work and more testing – I would have loved to put more time and care in it, but due to time running out I had to keep my tests small and quick. The group of testers should have been more varied and include people with different kinds of preferences with their character creation and customization. As it stands now, my sample was very limited and cannot be seen to give proper, reliable results.

The prototype's mechanic seems to have potential and I might try developing it further in my free time to practice prototyping and game designing more and perhaps someday use the prototype mechanic as a part of an actual game. Overall, I believe I learned a lot about character customization and mechanic planning while making this thesis.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. The Prototype

PROTOTYPE

Character's visual appearance affecting NPC behaviour

1. FLOW OF THE TESTING PROCESS

1. Tester creates a character by combining pre-created visual parts. These parts include facial features, hairstyle, body type and initial equipment style which can be completely changed with new equipment during the test. Full list of parts and equipment on pages 56-57.

2. Tester will be guided through a test play scenario in a style similar to tabletop role-playing games. Tester can make decisions within the limits of the proto-type, using only pre-created dialogue and action options. Possible combat scenes or puzzle solving will be skipped, as they are not crucial for the proto-type test. Most dialogue will be given to players in written form on separate slips of paper.

3. Test player is asked to give feedback and thoughts about the prototype. All feedback and suggestions are written down to create further development ideas for the mechanic in prototype. Some changes might be done between tests if they can be done effectively.

2. TEST SCENARIO

The PC is arriving in a small town after traveling through a big forest. They are accompanied by two party members; Ragna and Dylat.

The PC has an old, damaged weapon they found during their time living in the forest. The PC and the party members all agree there is something strange with this weapon.

→ The player is shown part of a town map; the player is allowed to wander around the city in any order they want and talk to any NPC as long as there is dialogue written for that interaction. More of the map is revealed as the player wanders around the town. NPCs are marked on the map with different colors, black showing an NPC with dialogue options given but not currently giving the player a quest. If the NPC can give the player a quest, the NPC will be repre-sented by a colored dot.

→ There are six small quests for the player. Each quest's NPC represents a dif-ferent group (Red, Green, Blue, etc.) The player acquires these quests by talk-ing with NPCs.

3. QUESTS

0) The Weapon Smith
Available once the player has finished the other available seven quests. The Weapon Smith quest is just the end of the prototype test; it will not be played.
If the player tries to visit the weapon smith, there will be an NPC there telling the player to come back later as the smith is busy.

1) A Hearty Delivery
Delivering a love letter from one NPC to another. Only requires speaking with two different NPCs.

NPC: A formally and neatly dressed young man (Red Group)
NPC Initiates: +2 Tidy ("Hey you, come over here!")

If player does not have min +1 Tidy:
"Na-ah, you won't do, you would make me look at..."

Dialogue

- First time talking:
RED: "You are new around here, don't remember seeing you here before"
PC options:
-- We just arrived here and are looking for some job to collect some coins
       RED: Then I dare to ask you something!
– Strange, have been here my whole life!
       RED: Ah, a smartass aren't you... But I still could use some help.
RED: I have a letter which should be urgently delivered to Ms Purple. I am stuck here, busy with work… I will pay some coins for your trouble.
PC options:
– Sure, I'll help. (Accept)

       RED: Thank you! Here's the letter – please hurry! Please tell me how she reacts.
         – It must be a really urgent letter.
       RED: Yes, yes – and it would be nice if you told Ms Purple you are delivering the letter for my behalf.
       Ragna: Is that a blush I see on his face?
       → (dialogue options return to previous state)

       – I will find some better job to do. (Decline)

       //Quest continues at Purple NPC

PURPLE: How can I help you?
PC options:

– I have a letter for you.
       PURPLE: Hmm, you do?
       Oh, it's one of those Red's letters. Poor fellow sure doesn't know

when to stop.
DYLAT: This is not the first letter you got from him?
PURPLE: No it isn't and probably won't be the last. *sighs*
Thank you but please tell him I do not have time for his poems.
– Nevermind.
PURPLE: Alright then.

//Quest ends at Red NPC

RED: How did it go?
PC:
– Well, she got the letter.
RED: Yes, that is what I asked you to do?
RAGNA: She said she doesn't have time for your letter.
RED: Oh… Is that so… Thank you, here's what I promised.
-- Very well, she seemed delighted.
RED: She did? That's… I didn't actually expect that. Thank you for your help!
DYLAT: You lied to that poor man, you know that?
– She didn't seem very excited.
RED: Sigh and here I was hoping for nothing… But thank you for helping.

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2) A Lost Cat
Finding a young girl's lost pet cat. Requires some speaking with NPCs and inspecting surroundings.

NPC: A young girl (Green Group)
NPC Initiates: +1 Shabby & +1 Formal ("E-excuse me? Could you help me?")

If player does not have min +1 Shabby:
"...hello."

GREEN: H-hello.
PC:

- Is everything alright?
GREEN: (If PC min +1 Shabby & +1 Formal) I have lost my cat, I can't find it anywhere. I think it went to the market place but guards won't let me there. C-could you look for Mittens? I can give all my pocket money!
PC:
- Sure, I can help.

GREEN: Really? Thank you! Mittens is an orange tabby and he is probably hiding somewhere in the marketplace…

RAGNA: We will keep our eyes open for that pussy cat.

- I need an actual job, sorry.
GREEN: Oh, okay...

GREEN: …
PC:
– If something is troubling you, I could try to help?
(See above)
– Do you happen to know if anybody around here is hiring people for work?
GREEN: T-there are some… But… I could hire you, too
(see +1 Shabby/+1Formal)

- Bye. (leave dialogue)

// There are three clues at the market place which appear one by one, Mittens the cat appears after that

1st clue: There are orange fur and some scratch marks on a fruit basket.
NPC: You looking for that cat? I shoo'ed it away, seemed to go towards fishers' table…

2nd clue: There are some tiny footprints on mud… And one fish seems to have bite marks on it.
NPC: A sneaky bastard, that cat, stole one of my fish… Good luck catching that weasel.
RAGNA: I guess it will try to find a place to enjoy his meal.
DYLAT: If I were you, I would get rid of this bitten fish, sir.

3rd clue: A half-eaten fish near wagons.
RAGNA: Looks like a cat's doing to me. I guess it must be hiding somewhere near.

There's faint meowing – the player can locate the source among the wagons.

RAGNA: There the little fella is – dirty and stuck. Let me get you outta there.
One cat found, lets bring 'im back to his owner.
MITTENS: Meow.

// Quest ends when talking with Green again

GREEN: Mittens! Thank you, I'm so glad he is back. I don't have much but…
PC:
Keep your pocket money, it was my pleasure.
GREEN: No, I insist!
Everything helps.
MITTENS: Meow.
Better than nothing.

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3) Catch the Thief!
Catching a sly, very agile thief who has been stealing items from NPCs.

NPC: Quite well armored city guard (Blue Group)
Initiate: -

If player does not have min +1 Light:
"You don't seem agile enough to help me."

BLUE: What do you want citizen, do you have something to report?
PC:
– I'm looking for a job, I just arrived to the town.
> **BLUE**: There are people in need of help, just keep asking.
> (If min +1 Light) I also could use some help, actually. You look quite capable for the job. There is this thief I just can't catch. They are way too quick for me to catch in this armor I have to wear. If you are able to catch the thief I will gladly pay for your troubles. Here's their description. They have been spotted around the market place often. Good luck.
> **DYLAT**: "Shady, wears a dark hood. Agile." Doesn't really give any proper details – this could be anyone who looks like a thief.
>
> (If no min +1 Light)
> **RAGNA**: Would you happen to need any help?
> **BLUE:** I am afraid you are not able to help me. I need somebody nimble here...

– Nothing, carry on.

//Thief NPC spawns near the market place: when PC approaches them, Ragna will alert the player

RAGNA: Isn't that a shady, hooded figure?
DYLAT: They indeed are but we can't be su-
NPC: THIEF!!!

//Thief NPC runs to an alley – player needs to do some climbing there but they can reach the thief quite easily

RAGNA: This is a dead end, they can't escape now!
//Combat – will be skipped in the demo

RAGNA: Nicely tied and packed, this fellow. Lets go inform the guard, he can pick this thief from here.

//Quest ends when re-talking with **Blue**

BLUE: I heard you managed to catch the thief, good work. Here's your reward.
DYLAT: Brief and to the point, that reply. I like that in people.

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4) Keep the Streets Clean
Getting rid of some thugs who have been causing trouble and scaring people.

NPC: Older lady (Orange Group)
Initiate: +3 Covering ("Could you come here, I think you could do just fine...")

ORANGE: Hmm, new around here, aren't you?
PC:
– Yes, we just arrived here and are looking for some work.

> **ORANGE**:
> (If Covering not +3) – This might not be the biggest town around but people always need help, I'm sure you'll find something to do.
> **PC:** – Do you happen to know anybody offering jobs?
>> **ORANGE**: Well I am in need of some help but I need somebody sturdy and capable of taking couple of hits...

> (If Covering +3) – Oh could you then help our neighbourhood, you look like you don't fall down even if somebody punched you couple of times.
> **RAGNA**: I like how this sounds!
> **ORANGE**: We have had some problems with local thugs… They scare   people and don't know how to behave. Talking has done nothing and most people around this area are elderly so we can't take on those thugs   physically. Could you get rid of them and say our best regards to them?
> **DYLAT**: Wouldn't they just be back when we leave?
> **ORANGE**: We'll figure out something by then.
> **PC**:

> – We'll see what we can do. (Accept the quest)

>> **ORANGE**: Oh bless you. Those thugs shouldn't be very hard to spot. These are their "hoods".
>> **RAGNA**: I think we should try finding their boss, that would probably keep them at bay bit longer.

> – Isn't this a suitable job for city guards? (Decline the quest)
>> **ORANGE**: Sigh, if you say so… ("Young people these days")

– Have a nice day.

// First thug group spawns
RAGNA: 'sup guys, you should probably find some other place to hang out?
THUG: Is that so? What if you go and leave?
> → Combat: if PC is +2 Covering, Thugs will buff themselves

// Second thug group spawns
DYLAT: These fellows seem like trouble.
> → Combat: if PC is +2 Covering, Thugs will buff themselves

// Third thug group spawns
THUG: Boss, it's them!
BOSS: We will show you who gives orders here!!
> → Combat: if PC is +2 Covering, Thugs will buff themselves

// Quest ends when PC talks with Orange NPC again

ORANGE: You are back! And I guess you were victorious, I saw some thugs running away!
PC:
– It was my pleasure to help.
– They had no chance against me!

> **ORANGE**: Good to hear, good to hear! Have this for your troubles, I'll let neighbours know we don't have to be afraid of those thugs anymore.
> **DYLAT**: Please remember to contact city guards, too.

— — —— — — —— — — —— — — —

5) **Cheering them up**
Help to entertain townspeople

NPC: A street artist in colorful clothes (Yellow Group)
Initiate: "Ooh! Hey you there! Yes, you!"

YELLOW: Hello hello! How may I entertain you?
PC:
– Would you happen to know anybody in need of some workers?

> **YELLOW**: (If not +2 Eccentric) Hmm, I personally know just myself but I'm looking for somebody more fun-looking, if you don't me saying that. But I'm sure there is somebody you can help! Just ask people like you asked me!
> **RAGNA**: Fun-looking you say, huh.
> **YELLOW:** Yes, people like seeing something what brings smile on their face.

> **YELLOW**: (If +2 Eccentric) Well, me! I could use some help here. You see, as you probably see, I am a performing artist and I need an assistant. My usual assistant broke her leg, I thought I would be just fine by myself but I don't know…
> **DYLAT**: We are not performers, I think we would also end up broken legs.
> **YELLOW**: Oh no no, that was totally unrelated to our work! You would just need to get me right items at right time so my performance can flow nicely. It's nothing too hard, I'm using my simpler routine.

> **PC**:
> – If you give proper instructions I think we can do it (Accept the quest)
>> **YELLOW**: Excellent! Now, let's get to work!

//Quest will be described to the player: PC simply helps the NPC

> **YELLOW**: You are quick learner! Thank you, here is your share of money we collected!

– I'm afraid that's just something we can't do. (Decline the quest)

> **YELLOW**: Understandable, stage fright can ruin any career...

– Goodbye

If player does not have min +1 Eccentric:
"Sorry but you… Look boring."

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6) Business Partners
Acting as the NPC's loyal and trustworthy business partner and helping the NPC getting new business contacts.

NPC: Neat and tidy looking business woman (same one you deliver a letter in A Hearty Delivery) (Purple Group)

NPC Initiates: +2 Formal ("You! Hey you!")

If completing Red's quest and PC has +2 Formal
PURPLE: But as we are already talking and you do seem quite helpful – would you help me? You will be rewarded, of course.

If completing Red's quest but PC doesn't have +2 Formal
PURPLE: Hm, do you hap-, oh forget it, I don't think you can help me here. I think need someone more...business-like.

> If talking without activating Red's quest:

PURPLE: Hm, can I help you somehow? I am bit busy here.
PC:
– Excuse us, we are just looking for some job.

> **PURPLE**: (If not +2 Formal) Oh I see, I see. I don't know if there is anything to do here, we can't hire just anybody.
> **DYLAT**: Do you need a specific kind of persons to work?
> **PURPLE**: You could say so, we do business here and we have to be presentable. I am afraid you don't quite fit that requirement.
>
> **PURPLE**: (If +2 Formal) You are? What a coincidence, I need somebody to do a little job for me! Just a small thing but requires certain charm you seem to have!
> I am about to make a new business deal and my business-partner-to-be demanded to talk with my previous clients and partners. I just got a word that none of them are able to join me though they told me they would come.
> This is bit sudden but could you act as my business partner?
> **RAGNA**: A what now?
> **PURPLE**: It's nothing big really! Just tell them I have been a good partner and I have delivered all goods in time. I really am a good

business woman, just bit unlucky right now.
PC:
– I think I might be able to do that. (Accept the quest)

> **PURPLE**: Thank you, thank you! Let me tell me more about this…

//actual quest won't be played, just described:
PC and their party members help Purple as well as they can, aswering questions etc, finally getting Purple their deal.

> **PURPLE**: Phew, thank you. Here's something for you! I hope we can make business in future!
> **RAGNA**: That was awkward.

> – Sounds too much trouble. (Decline the quest)

– Sorry for bothering.

4. SHOPS

Player can get new apparel pieces from shops and a new haircut in a barber's shop.

Tidy Jewelry (+1)
Shabby Jewelry (+1)
Light Jewelry (+1)
Covering Jewelry (+1)
Eccentric Jewelry (+1)
Formal Jewelry (+1)

Tidy Scarf (+1)
Shabby Scarf (+1)
Light Scarf (+1)
Covering Scarf (+1)
Eccentric Scarf (+1)
Formal Scarf (+1)

Tidy Hat (+1)
Shabby Hat (+1)
Light Hat (+1)
Covering Hat (+1)
Eccentric Hat (+1)
Formal Hat (+1)

Tidy Hairstyle (+2)
Shabby Hairstyle (+2)
Light Hairstyle (+2)
Covering Hairstyle (+2)
Eccentric Hairstyle (+2)
Formal Hairstyle (+2)

5. CHARACTER CREATION

Each piece gives one point, except for Neutral pieces, which do not give any points.
Pieces numbered 1 are Tidy, 2 Shabby, 3 Light, 4 Sturdy, 5 Eccentric, 6 Formal, and 7 Neutral.
There won't be a Neutral Outfit.

Face base 1-7
Nose 1-7
Eyes 1-7
Hair 1-7
Body type 1-7

Outfit 1-6

Appendix 2. Tester Survey

Here is the list of questions which the play testers will be asked to answer after they have finished testing the prototype. Questions can be asked and answered in English or Finnish.

Question 1
Do you think you understood what this prototype tests?
Uskotko tajunneesi mitä tämä prototyyppi testaa?

Question 2
What do you think about the prototype's mechanic? Do you have suggestions or ideas on how to improve it?
Mitä mieltä olet prototyypin mekaniikasta? Onko sinulla ehdotuksia tai ajatuksia kuinka parantaa sitä?

Question 3
What do you think about visual character customization in video games?
Mitä mieltä olet visuaalisesta hahmokustomisaatiosta videopeleissä?

Question 4
Do you believe visual customization of characters should affect gameplay? Why or why not?
Mikä on mielipiteesi, pitäisikö visuaalisen hahmokustomisaation vaikuttaa peliin? Miksi tai miksi ei?

Question 5
Other thoughts, opinions?
Muita ajatuksia, mielipiteitä