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[New Self Obtained - Level Up!]: The Impact of Ludic Elements
on the Agency and Identity of LitRPG Protagonists

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1. INTRODUCTION

As gamification becomes an increasingly significant process in social and cultural interactivity, a tendency to intertwine different types of media with game-like structures has developed in recent years: social media apps such as TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat use ludic elements like challenges, leaderboards, achievements, and streaks (e.g. Snapchat's Snap Streaks) to incentivise regular use and, thus, increase engagement; interactive films like Netflix's *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018) let viewers “play” through branching narratives, mimicking the experience of role-playing games; even in educational settings has gamification been widely adopted already, with ludic structures such as levelling or gaining badges having been observed to boost student morale by providing tangible goals, promoting sustained effort and perseverance (e.g. Lam and Tse).

Within the realm of literature, such integration of game-like structures has already been present since the 1970s; however, only in this last decade has a manifestation of this phenomenon emerged that merges literary narratives and game elements in an unprecedentedly explicit way: the now immensely popular genre of LitRPGs, i.e. literary role-playing games. LitRPGs constitute novels that employ components of video or tabletop role-playing games to tell their stories. Despite the sustained academic interest in medial convergences, it is surprising that this particular literary genre remains underexplored within English-language scholarship. While Russian academic discourse has engaged with LitRPGs to a marginally greater extent (e.g., Khlebnikov), in English-language research, the genre is often mentioned only briefly, without substantive investigation (e.g., Hayot, Farris). This thesis, therefore, seeks to complement the current research in such intertextualities between the media game and literature with a thorough evaluation of the interconnectedness of the two within this academically neglected genre of LitRPGs.

To what extent aspects of role-playing games are generally featured in these novels is therefore one area of interest of this thesis; however, since one, if not the, key difference between games and LitRPGs is that readers cannot interact with this medium like players do. Distinguishing this genre from previous ludic literatures such as the interactive “gamebooks” (Tresca 100), thereby, the protagonists of LitRPGs fulfil both the roles of the characters *and* the players. Thus, the focus of this study will be answering questions regarding the relationship between ludic elements and the protagonists of LitRPGs: when exactly in these characters’ stories are game components incorporated and what effect does that have on them? What role do they play in their relationships with their respective environments and, consequently, in their choice of (inter)action? Are they portrayed to promote or hinder personal growth? And how are they connected to individual personality? All these issues can be summarised under one umbrella question, the research question my thesis is going to address: *How do ludic elements influence the agency and identity of LitRPG protagonists?*

To establish a robust theoretical foundation for this analysis, this paper begins with an examination of the concept of the ludic and, in relation to its historical development, a comprehensive definition of LitRPGs. With hundreds of LitRPG works being published every year (cf. VincentArcher), the exact corpus of material through which this subject is going to be approached has been selected by using both qualitative and quantitative criteria. The former manifests itself in a categorisation of LitRPG novels into four subgenres:

- **Simulation LitRPGs:** the protagonists are player-avatars in open-world simulation games.
- **Apocalypse LitRPGs:** the protagonists have to survive our world being turned into a game.
- **Portal LitRPGs:** the protagonists are transported to worlds where game mechanics are an integral part of life.
- **Native LitRPGs:** the protagonists are native inhabitants of worlds governed by game-like systems.

Determined via a quantitative method that considers review and ranking numbers of the biggest retail and literature review platforms (Amazon, Audible, and Goodreads), the most popular and influential representatives of these subgenres therefore form the core of my corpus: *Awaken Online: Catharsis* (Travis Bagwell, 2016) for Simulation LitRPGs, *Dungeon Crawler Carl* (Matt Dinniman, 2020) for Apocalypse LitRPGs, *The Wandering Inn* (Pirateaba, 2018) for Portal LitRPGs, and *All the Skills: A Deckbuilding LitRPG* (Honour Rae, 2022) for Native LitRPGs.

In order to examine this corpus, I draw on several concepts within the field of game studies; however, concerning my research question, only those discussing the intertwining of game systems, players and characters will be covered (e.g. Huizinga's "spoilsports", or "false players", or Bosman's properties of violence in games). In what manner these concepts are applicable to and function within the four primary texts is analysed using a methodology which involves identifying a connection between these concepts and overarching themes related to agency and identity distinct to each subgenre. More precisely, which ludic elements already researched within game studies are used and how in order to establish the respective theme is investigated.

The *Simulation LitRPG* subgenre is analysed through the lens of in-game identity creation and transformation, a process closely related to the mechanics of role-playing games. As this subgenre uniquely focuses on virtual game worlds rather than real-world environments adapted to game structures, the analysis will explore the relationship between players, their in-game characters, and their avatars, i.e. the characters' physical representation within these virtual spaces.

In contrast, the *Apocalypse LitRPG* subgenre, while also set in our world, centres on the theme of gamified survival rather than voluntary play. This examination focusses on how ludic elements imposed upon an apocalyptic society influence and transform the identities of

survivors, both in terms of their individual sense of self and their roles within a communal survivor network.

The *Portal LitRPG* subgenre, in which protagonists from the real world are transported to fantasy environments, is analysed through the theme of the subversion of game systems. This subversion will be studied from two perspectives: first, as a form of cheating, where players engage with the game systems in ways that provide them with advantages, and second, as a total rejection of the ludic as a whole. Both approaches will be examined in relation to how the game mechanics inherent to these fantastical worlds enhance or constrain the agency of players originating from the real world.

Finally, *Native LitRPGs* will be explored in terms of how ludic elements function as divine authoritative systems that govern the lives of characters who are born into game-structured worlds. This analysis will focus on how game systems are portrayed as sentient entities that actively guide their inhabitants, shaping their experiences and decisions through specific ludic mechanisms.

Ultimately, the findings of this evaluation suggest that the prominence and mere presence of ludic elements in LitRPGs play a decisive role in shaping the protagonists' behaviours and identities, both by limiting and expanding their agency, often in simultaneous or contradictory ways. With regards to *Simulation LitRPGs*, this has been found to manifest in the protagonist being made to use his in-game identity as a reflection of his out-game self, though with the opportunity to vent his spleen in the most violent manner. A similar pattern emerges in *Apocalypse LitRPGs*, where the imposition of game-like systems forces the protagonists into violent roles, as the game systems imposed onto the protagonists make it impossible to escape assuming killer personas and social tensions within following the motivation to survive. *Portal LitRPGs*, in contrast, exhibit a greater degree of agency, offering protagonists from our world various opportunities to expand their scope of action. This agency is facilitated by the provision

of advantages over local inhabitants, which can allow players to engage in the game system with a level of superiority, while simultaneously enabling non-participation or only partial participation. This results in the creation of false-player personas, on the one hand, and spoilsport identities, on the other.

In *Native LitRPGs*, however, the game systems are far more prescriptive, directly restricting the agency of protagonists. This is achieved through seemingly arbitrary selection and class-assignment of skills, as well as a complex interplay of transparency and opacity in mediating the game's mechanics. Through these mechanisms, the systems have been found to guide characters towards predetermined identities and life trajectories, often in a manner that limits their potential for self-determination.

With the above established narrow focus of this thesis, only a fraction of game aspects integrated in this genre will be analysed. Not only do the narratives themselves feature other components such as fast travel, descriptions of boss battle music and its anxiety-inducing effects, or even direct references to specific role-playing games, but the medial complexity of these novels also becomes apparent on a paratextual level, demonstrated for instance by gamertags being used as author names. There is a plethora of ways LitRPGs serve as intersections of literature and role-playing games, all of which meriting their own evaluation. With this paper, I intend to, at least in part, introduce the specifics of this genre to academia, so that many more scholarly adventurers may join me in this legendary research-quest.

2. THEORY

How do ludic elements influence the agency and identity of LitRPG protagonists?

In the introduction, this research question was presented without providing sufficient clarification of the key concepts it encompasses. The term “ludic elements” comprises a wide range of features and mechanics associated with games and play, requiring a precise definition to avoid ambiguity. Similarly, the genre of LitRPGs, as a relatively recent literary phenomenon, necessitates a clear description to ensure a comprehensive understanding of its characteristics and boundaries. To address these conceptual uncertainties, the next two chapters will systematically define the foundational terms and primary literature upon which this thesis is built.

2.1. The Ludic and its Properties

Constituting the core feature of LitRPGs, their narratives revolve around game elements either being integrated into real life or the protagonists playing life-like simulation games. At first glance, such a merge of the mundane and the ludic seems to clash with the common notion of what a game constitutes, i.e. an activity primarily created for enjoyment (cf. Cambridge Dictionary). However, as many researchers (e.g. McGonigal, Raessens, Fuchs) have pointed out in recent years, gamification is increasingly becoming an integral part of culture and society as whole, enveloping even the most mundane aspects of life in game-related structures: companies use leaderboards to encourage higher performances from their employees, apps and devices allow people to monitor their fitness by tracking steps taken in a day, for example, effectively “quantifying, objectifying, and making [physical health] comparable” (“wird [körperliche Gesundheit] quantifiziert, objektiviert und vergleichbar gemacht”; my trans.; Raczkowski and Schrape 315), and scoring systems and other various gamifying strategies are

constantly shared on social media as a means to generate motivation for chores and similar tedious tasks (e.g. Aulock, *Tiimo* or Lifeactuator 2024). With the lines between real life and games consequently blurred, the question arises what a game actually entails and how its components can still be called “ludic” if used in such non-ludic contexts. In the following, I will, therefore, delve into the definition of the ludic and its core elements.

Launching this investigation on how the ludic fits into mundane situations, Johan Huizinga, often called a pioneer or even the father of ludology (cf. Rautzenberg 268), already researched this relationship in his 1949 book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (originally published in Dutch in 1938). However, already in his introductory chapter, contradictions in his characterisation of the same can be observed: on the one hand, play is defined as a voluntary, temporally and spatially limited activity that is separate from what he calls ordinary or “real life” (8); on the other hand, Huizinga concedes that play “can be very serious indeed” (5), and, in later chapters, goes on to explore forms of play within such serious, and, arguably, real-life situations such as lawsuits (76-88). He even identifies play-qualities in war, opening this particular analysis by stating that people have always been “call[ing] war a game” (89), an analogy which can indeed often be found in popular culture, for instance, in the fittingly titled TV show *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), in which several parties in a fantasy world scramble for power. Based on George R. R. Martin’s book series *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the show even uses a quote from a scene in the first book (1996) in which two characters discuss the dying king’s succession: “When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die” (488), cementing the idea that war is perceived as an activity connected to play, and, simultaneously, that play-infused activities can very well have serious, real-life consequences. How, then, can the characteristic of play being separate from ordinary, real life hold true when elements of it can also clearly be detected in such real situations? In his elaborations on play-forms in law, Huizinga does claim that court cases are inherently extraordinary, i.e. detached from ordinary

life, which could also be argued in the case of war; however, while an argument could, of course, be made for this assertion, it would require a base-definition of what is “ordinary” or even “real”, which Huizinga fails to provide.

Despite criticising the overgeneralisation inherent in Huizinga’s separation of play and the insufficiently defined “ordinary”, another leading voice in ludology, Roger Caillois, still echoes Huizinga’s sentiments in his writings twenty years later (9-10). How Caillois’ ideas do differ from the previous ones is that his approach is far more structural in nature: he methodically classifies play and games into four main types depending on their function – *agôn*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx*, i.e. competition, chance, simulation, or vertigo playing the dominant role (12-26) – and, as already hinted at in this very sentence, dividing play and game as “two opposite poles” (13) on the ludic spectrum. *Paidia*, his conceptual term for merely being playful, hereby embodies “diversion, turbulence, free improvisation and carefree gaiety” (13), whereas *ludus*, i.e. playing an actual game, is tied to conventions that require “an ever greater amount of effort, patience, skill, or ingenuity” (13). This differentiation into rule-based and non-rule-based play proves helpful in the pursuit of understanding possible overlaps of the ludic and the mundane, since *ludus*, as opposed to *paidia*, is far more easily and clearly comparable with aspects of ordinary life such as performance-bound work or maintaining one’s health through certain restrictions. That does not mean that ordinary life cannot be infused with playfulness, nor that any rule-regulated system is automatically ludic; however, the bridge between the ludic and the mundane does seem to lie in certain boundaries being set to the game, for example, via rules.

This notion is also reflected in Gregory Bateson’s often cited psychological approach to game studies: similar to Caillois, Bateson distinguishes between play and game, though, in his analysis, the latter is merely seen as a “more complex form” of the former (188). This owes to the fact that while play constitutes activities that are clearly marked as such by signals carrying

the message “This is play” (185-187), games, on the other hand, are constructed upon no such statement, but, in turn, the question “Is this play?” (188). What the game entails, or, in adjective terms, what is ludic, is therefore a matter of negotiation and, depending on the situation and the communication between players, of *renegotiation*, leading to these exact extensions into the sphere of the mundane. Leaderboards, for example, have been agreed upon to be a vital tool to express the outcome of competition-based games (*agôn*), as they are the most influential factor in the way players play – for example, they might change their strategy according to what position they land on the boards. Constituting a component the game cannot proceed without, thus, makes leaderboards a ludic element, and introducing them to ordinary activities, such as labour, does not change this fact: first, because they have been negotiated as an integral part of a specific type of game beforehand, and, secondly, they still serve the same function they did in the game even within a non-game context.

Whether or not an element is ludic, therefore, hinges on both its established use in game contexts and on it being crucial for said game to function. Circling back to Caillois, game rules, as a limiting factor unique to individual games, definitely fall under the category “crucial”; though, taking into account how, for example, the methods to gamify fitness introduced in the beginning of this chapter revolve around non-convention based elements such as tracking steps taken in a day, it becomes clear that rules cannot be the only fundamental ludic components of games.

This is where elements called “game mechanics” quite literally come into play: even though they have been the subject of many different interpretations over time (cf. Sicart), most researchers’ understanding of game mechanics revolves around them mediating the scope of action within a game to its players (cf. Avedon, Rouse, Cook). As Cook puts it, “game mechanics [...] facilitate and encourage a user to explore and learn the properties of their possibility space”, the “possibility space” being dictated not only by game-external factors like

space and time, as Huizinga already noted (9-10), but, even more significantly, by the game's rules. A game's mechanics, therefore, do have a close relationship with its rules, but are not as static and more directly associated with actual playing. In his attempt to find a definition that incorporates various preceding approaches to game mechanics, Sicart (2008) describes the connection between game mechanics and rules as follows:

Game mechanics are concerned with the actual interaction with the game state, while rules provide the possibility space where that interaction is possible [...]. In this sense, rules are modelled after agency, while mechanics are modelled for agency.

(Sicart 2008)

Mechanics being “modelled for agency” thereby refers to the fact that they exist purely to facilitate certain types of player engagement, while rules, being “modelled after agency”, regulate these engagements in a practical and feasible way (they come into play “after” agency had already been established by the mechanics). Providing more clarity on the matter is the concrete example that follows this definition in the article, a classic from the videogame-world, where a character's “stamina” restricts the extent to which the action “climb” can be used via the explicitly stated or implied cost of “x stamina points per climb”. This condition and the numeric expression of “stamina” in points hereby constitute what Sicart calls an “algorithmic translation of a rule” imposed on to “climb”, which itself represents a mechanic offering a way to interact with the game world.

Extending this logic to other game situations, the game mechanics that comprise the aforementioned fitness apps materialise in the form of monitoring various activities such as walking, more strenuous workouts, or also sleeping, measured in different units like minutes spent with a certain heart rate (cf. Moscaritolo, *Canyon*). In this particular gamified environment, rules typically come into the picture in customised ways, meaning users setting their own goals for these activities, for instance, a certain number of steps taken in a day.

There are also ludic elements, however, where this definition, at first, seems to be too simplistic a way to describe their function: leaderboards, for example, are doubtlessly linked to game rules, as they can display disqualification; and yet they do not indicate how this status came about, leaving the actual properties of the rules in the dark. Neither do they grant players explicit knowledge about courses of actions that can be taken within the game, themselves thereby seemingly disqualified from being game mechanics by Sicart's standards. Other examples of such complex game components include the reward and levelling systems commonly found in role-playing games. Like leaderboards, these systems appear to function arbitrarily, as they demonstrate progress within the game without explicitly connecting it to specific actions or conditions.

In order to gain a better understanding of how such ludic elements integrate into the framework of mechanics and rules, it is necessary to revisit the work of one of the researchers upon whom Sicart based his definition namely Cook (2006); not only does he relate game mechanics to the above mentioned "possibility space", but he also states that they operate "through the use of feedback mechanisms", detailing such "feedback loops" as follows:

- **Player performs an action.**
- **The action causes an effect within the simulated game world.** [...] The player rarely knows all the rules and is highly unlikely to be able to instantly describe the complete possibility space described by the rules. The unknown portion of the simulation is a "black box" that the player must attempt to decipher.
- **The player receives feedback.**
- **With new tools and information in hand, the player performs another action.**

(Cook 2006, bold in original)

Leaderboards, achievement and levelling systems fully match this view on game mechanics, as they reward certain actions with points, tools, or level-ups, all of which potentially broadening players' agency from then on, while penalties might also be imposed (e.g. a decrease in points) for other actions. Thus, players still receive information regarding how to interact with the

game, albeit in a less straightforward and more implicit manner, rendering such elements game mechanics after all, even from Sicart's perspective.

Naturally, other components may be just as crucial to a game and its distinction from other games and non-ludic situations as mechanics and rules, for example, game design elements including objects of play like dice, cards, or boards (cf. *Allcoat* and Evans 60); however, these other ludic elements will be largely disregarded in my thesis, since they are irrelevant in the context of LitRPGs, which becomes apparent in the discussion of the latter's features in the following chapter.

2.2. The DnD of LitRPGs: Development and Definition

Considering the lack of attention LitRPGs (literary role-playing games) have so far received within academic research, any analysis of and within this genre should be prefaced with a clear definition of what it actually constitutes. A concise and unambiguous one proves difficult to come by, however, as there seems to be much divisiveness in this regard: one of the rare academic texts at least briefly discussing LitRPGs characterises the genre as “basic mechanics of tabletop role-playing games [...] return[ing] to novelistic fiction, which then organizes its narratives around the scaling levels and abilities, acquisition of weapons and characteristics, and so on, that define those game modes” (Hayot 181). Immediately following this definition, Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011) is described as one of the 'most successful instances of the LitRPG genre' (181). However, this directly contrasts with its classification as an example of the so-called GameLit genre, rather than LitRPG, in the non-academic but highly elaborate online article by *The Campfire Team*. Aside from these two sources, there are several others circulating in both scholarly and non-scholarly contexts (e.g. Miller or *The Urban Writers*) that provide their own interpretation of the genre.

In order to identify the reason for this dissent, I will relay an incident from my own experience researching this topic: whilst in the process of assessing which LitRPG novels were particularly popular and well known – this part of my research is elaborated on in 3.2 – I stumbled across the subreddit r/litrpg, wherein a highly active community of readers and writers of this genre post about and discuss various issues about it at an hourly rate. One such post titled “Top ten best litrpg of all time” proved especially useful for my purposes; however, scrolling through the replies of people ranking their favourite LitRPG novels, I noticed one particular user named LESPAISDEDAMOCLES, voicing the same complaint, albeit in a paraphrased manner, over and over again: that it was “appalling” that no one in this thread was mentioning the “LitRPG classics” of the 1980s such as Joe Dever’s *Lone Wolf* (1984-current), a book series which commonly falls under the category “gamebook” (Tresca 100). Coupled with the debate about distinguishing LitRPGs from other genres detailed above, this piece of criticism highlights that other types of literature have previously been unofficially referred to as literary role-playing games, further complicating the process of defining what is now considered its own official genre. Hence, in order to arrive at a conclusive definition, let us delve into the history of ludic literatures, determining, in comparison, what LitRPGs are *not*, and, consequently, what their actual features *are*.

Starting this examination with the type of ludic literature so vehemently defended in the reddit comments referenced above, interactive fiction or “gamebooks” might have experienced one of the most lucrative periods of success in the 1980s with pieces such as the aforementioned *Lone Wolf*. The genre entering mainstream media can actually be traced back to the 1960s, though, and, to even greater extent, the 1970s, coincidentally the same time the first video games (cf. Hayot 179) and tabletop role-playing games emerged (cf. Peterson 60). The title of the immensely popular, and still to this day on-going, children’s gamebook line *Choose Your Own Adventure* – the first book was published in 1979 (CYOA-Experience) – already hints at how

If you want to do X, turn to page X.
If you want to do Y instead, turn to page Y.

ACTION CHART

KAI DISCIPLINES

NOTES

1
2
3
4
5

WEAPONS (maximum 2 Weapons)

1
2

If combat entered holding Weapon and appropriate Weaponskill + 2CS.
If combat entered carrying no Weapon — 4CS.

BACKPACK (maximum 8 articles)

ITEMS	MEALS
Can be discarded or changed when not in combat.	— 3 EP if no Meal available when instructed to eat.

SPECIAL ITEMS

BELT POUCH
Containing Gold Crowns
(maximum 50)

COMBAT SKILL

ENDURANCE POINTS

Can never go above initial score.
0 = dead

COMBAT RECORD

ENDURANCE POINTS

ENDURANCE POINTS

LONE WOLF	COMBAT RATIO	ENEMY

LONE WOLF	COMBAT RATIO	ENEMY

LONE WOLF	COMBAT RATIO	ENEMY

LONE WOLF	COMBAT RATIO	ENEMY

LONE WOLF	COMBAT RATIO	ENEMY

LONE WOLF	COMBAT RATIO	ENEMY

CS = COMBAT SKILL EP = ENDURANCE POINTS

14

the gamebooks of the 1980s then incorporated even more game mechanics to encourage reader-player synergy: amongst many other examples (e.g. Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone's *Fighting Fantasy* or J.H. Brennan's *Grailquest*), the already introduced *Lone Wolf* approached this objective by providing a so-called "action chart" (fig. 1), by use of which reader-players track the focaliser's skills, health, and even which items they may have come into possession throughout the novel. Not only do these action charts serve to strengthen the player-avatar bond in general through explicitly and quantifiably illustrating the player's progress in the story, but the novels also treat them as story-influencing factors as well, limiting the options reader-players can choose from to proceed based on the data on their avatar's action chart:

"If you possess and wish to use the Kai Discipline of Healing on this man, **turn to 216.**

If you do not possess the skill, or do not want to use it, then **turn to 31.**"

(Dever 73)

Having established the main features of gamebooks, I will now return to the question of how it compares to today's LitRPGs to gauge the latter's individual properties and begin to formulate a definition that clearly distinguishes them from gamebooks. On the one hand, gamebooks and LitRPGs are indeed similar in that they both incorporate mechanics by which traditional games function. On the other hand, the two genres differ on a fundamental level: gamebooks are essentially interactive, while LitRPGs are not (cf. Webling). Agency does indeed play an integral role in LitRPG novels as well, as I will demonstrate in the main part of this thesis, but not on the part of the readers. Thus, we can so far define the genre of LitRPG in the following simple way:

LitRPGs are non-interactive fictions that incorporate game mechanics.

Proceeding with this historical survey, at roughly the same time as the more elevated forms of gamebooks, another variety of ludic literature entered the market which, much like LitRPGs do today, engaged with role-playing gaming in a non-interactive manner: a specific kind of "portal

fantasy” (Mendlesohn xix), where the fantastic world entered is that of a role-playing game. Early publications in this subgenre include Andre Norton’s *Quag Keep* (1979) and Larry Niven and Steven Barnes’ *Dream Park* (1981); though, none gained such long-lasting popularity like Joel Rosenberg’s *Guardians of the Flame* series (1983-2003). Its first entry, *The Sleeping Dragon* (1983), tells the story of a group of college students coming together to one of their usual fantasy role-playing game sessions, only to suddenly be transformed into their created characters and transported to the game world itself. Unlike in gamebooks, however, the character statistics and, indeed, all game elements, do not play a constant role in the story, as, after their initial explanation in the first chapter, they disappear from the surface once the group enters their fictional realm. Only implicitly are they still present via the characters living in the bodies of their creations, whilst still operating with their real-world minds, rendering the novel, despite its initial clear connection to role-playing games, a classic portal fantasy after all. Holding true for the entirety of this subgenre, the focus, therefore, seems to lie on the textual and literary properties of the novel rather than the ludic ones, even going so far as to spelling all numerical aspects of the game out (e.g. “[T]he point is that he took three points of damage.” 4). Even though the frame of the story is indeed a role-playing game, and the characters are even seen to actively reflect on their experience with it, this covert, almost completely non-ludic approach creates distance to the same.

By stark contrast, LitRPGs, including those employing the same portal-trope – as 3.1 will illustrate, this type of LitRPG is indeed one of the most popular ones – seek to mirror not just the essence, but the full ludic experience both in form, i.e. by making the game elements textually *visible*, for instance, through using square brackets or bold lettering, and in content, with rising numbers making progress *explicit* (e.g. through level-ups). One example of this can be found in the very first chapter of Pirateaba’s *The Wandering Inn* (2018):

Her eyelids lowered. Her breathing grew slower. Erin just had enough consciousness for one last thought.

“Now I’m really, *really* hungry.”

[Innkeeper Class Obtained!]
[Innkeeper Level 1!]
[Skill – Basic Cleaning obtained!]
[Skill – Basic Cooking obtained!]

(Pirateaba 18)

Considering this explicitness, the following addition, therefore, can be made to the earlier formulated definition of the genre:

LitRPGs are non-interactive fictions that incorporate game mechanics in a visually explicit and progress-measuring way.

After the above explored popularity of tabletop role-playing games and their different forms of novelisations in the 1970s and 1980s, the 1990s then saw the rapid rise of role-playing within a different medium: computer games, most notably in the form of MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games), in which thousands, if not millions, of people participate in an online video role-playing game simultaneously. What this development towards intercommunication through the internet also brought about was what Goetz in fact named “literary role-play” (36) in his article on the online cooperative storytelling platform *GarouMUSH*. In essence, this website revolves around the tabletop role-playing game *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* (1992), a setting in which online-players can roam free as their admin-approved characters, though, only in text form, i.e. within a rule-regulated chatroom they can interact with others in (all in-character) and perform their actions using words exclusively. There are no certain quests to embark on or any sort of goal to accomplish, for that matter, no way to actually win in this game – the players seemingly interact with each other and this fictional world purely for the sake of role-playing. In addition to this motivation, Goetz suggests another reason why this written form of role-playing might be appealing, which is illustrated by the excerpts he provides from a *GarouMUSH*-session he himself took part in:

Umbra: Forest

Despite the Realm's limitations on this forest—in the 'real world' it is perhaps a square mile in total area—it extends for dozens of miles in all directions. It's deep and dark, befitting such a spiritual enigma. A single gigantic oak tree dominates the centre of this area, as its physical counterpart does in the Realm. Gnarled and weather-beaten, this tree has seen countless dozens of human generations come and go. Sepdet walks over to the great oak tree and kneels and presses her cheek against it. 'Hey there.'

Rholeen rubs at her arms, and looks around, seeming to reassure herself that all this is real.

Su glances up at Sepdet. 'Would you continue here? There is yet more patrolling to be done, and this night is good for it.'

Sepdet nods serenely. 'I will, sister. Walk well.'

(Goetz 37)

"If you tried such poetic language in a face-to-face game, it would probably fall flat.", he claims in regards to the above chatroom excerpt (37), perfectly summing up his stance towards these co-authored stories compared to tabletop role-playing games: according to Goetz, the use of such expressive language, which would allegedly be "impossible" to incorporate in regular in-person-role-playing (39), causes an unprecedented degree of immersion, allowing for certain "moods" to last uninterrupted (42), and for players/authors to convey substantially more meaning through their descriptions of settings, characters, and their actions than they could through non-written communication (36-42). As another method to achieve and uphold these effects, any explicitly ludic elements are only rarely mentioned in these online writing sessions (even though providing character stats to the admins, for example, is a requirement to be permitted to play; cf. *GarouMUSH*), which stands in alignment with Goetz's concluding prediction that virtual reality might replace this form of interactive literature as a medium for role-playing in the future and that its "flashy graphic interface will kill the world of carefully crafted prose" (43).

However, when observing the LitRPG genre in relation to this literary role-play, such "flashy graphic interface[s]" and other game elements, as noted in the comparison to the role-playing portal fantasies of the 1980s, play a prominent role. These elements not only provide

readers with information about the characters' measurable progress, but also function as a key narrative device, alongside the aforementioned “carefully crafted prose” (Goetz 43). Characters are seen to react to them, reflect on them and, eventually, become so influenced that they act either in accordance with or actively against them, as demonstrated by this excerpt from J.P. Valentine’s *This Quest is Broken!* (2021):

Wes tilted his head. “Quickly is relative. You won’t be getting any faster any time soon unless you actually start levelling up again.”

Or if I start using Jet, Eve thought. She knew from its cost alone the ability must’ve been powerful, but still she hesitated to actually *test* it. A low max Stamina would only be an excuse for so long.

She shook her head, returning herself to the conversation at hand. “I know, I know. I just need to find another quest milestone and I’ll start rocketing up again.”

“Or,” Wes pushed, “we could start taking harder jobs. [...] A more dangerous job means more pay, more exp, and a better chance at hitting a milestone.”

(Valentine 126-127)

The importance of these overtly ludic aspects in LitRPGs, as opposed to their insignificance in cooperative written role-playing games, is undeniable, leading me to expand our definition by yet another dimension:

LitRPGs are non-interactive fictions in which visually explicit and progress-measuring game mechanics are integrated in a narratively impactful way.

Directing the attention to the new millennium, I will reconsider Hayot’s earlier mentioned example of an alleged LitRPG: Ernest Cline’s critically and popularly acclaimed *Ready Player One* tells the story of a teenage boy and his and the whole world’s hunt for an Easter Egg in the most influential virtual reality game of all time, as the finder is promised ownership over the game’s creator’s fortune and the game itself. Packed with direct references to gaming culture and explicitly integrated gaming elements such as scoreboards, Hayot’s categorisation of this novel seems reasonable at first glance; but then this begs the question of why other sources, such as the article by *The Campfire Team* cited at the beginning of this chapter, clearly separate it from the LitRPG genre, placing it under a completely different one altogether, namely

something called “GameLit”. Characterising this other genre, therefore, seems to be the best way to help decide which position to take in this debate: by all appearances, the term “GameLit”, short for gaming literature, is just as recent as LitRPG (cf. Tigner or Almond), hinting at them having been mutually created for the exact purpose of distinguishing one from the other, or, rather to broaden and restrict the scope of non-interactive ludic literature at the same time. After all, *The Campfire Team* calls GameLit “[a]n overarching term encompassing stories set in game worlds or environments”, while LitRPG is defined as “integrat[ing] sci-fi or fantasy with distinct game mechanics”. While it is not explicitly stated in the article, the wording certainly implies that LitRPG is a subgenre of GameLit, with the former just being a more narrow-focused piece within the latter. Dustin Tigner, who also runs the encyclopaedic website *GameLit*, puts the relationship between these two genres into more unambiguous words in an article titled “What is GameLit? The Book Genre for Gamers”: “While all LitRPG books fit within GameLit, not all GameLit books fit within LitRPG.” In this article, he also suggests an even more precise explanation to this genre organisation, stating that, in GameLits, game mechanics are indeed employed, but “from any game genre”, whereas LitRPGs specifically concentrate on “RPG (role-playing game) mechanics”. What these role-playing game mechanics entail will be discussed in detail in 2.2, but, as Jamie Smith (2024) summarises, some key components include character creation, the strategic development and use of skills, and resource management, all of which are not an integral part of *Ready Player One*, for example, but very much so in LitRPGs. A mixture of the first and second component listed here can, for instance, be identified in the following excerpt from *Awaken Online: Catharsis* by Travis Bagwell (2016):

He looked at his *Character Status* and tried to decide how to distribute his points. He had fifty-five points available. Most were clearly going to go towards *Willpower* since he needed to increase his Control Limit and the level cap. Maybe he should put some points in either *Vitality* or *Dexterity*? He assumed he would be relying primarily on his undead to fight for him. In the future, he

wouldn't have much in the way of combat abilities himself. He needed to be able to hide, take a few hits, or dodge and run away.

(Bagwell 189)

Taking this last distinction into account, I finally arrive at a definition for the LitRPG genre that isolates it from other already established forms of ludic literature, demonstrating how young and yet unique it truly is:

LitRPGs are non-interactive fictions in which visually explicit and progress-measuring role-playing game mechanics are integrated in a narratively impactful way.

3. METHODOLOGY

Given that this thesis undertakes the analysis of an entire genre, albeit a subgenre of ludic literature as outlined in Chapter 2.2., it is essential to account for the diversity of narratives within the field. To ensure both clarity and manageability, specific subgenres have been identified as the focus of analysis. This approach narrows the scope while allowing for greater variety in examining the genre's breadth. Furthermore, a quantitative methodology was developed to guide the selection of the corpus used for these subgenre analyses. The outcomes of both the qualitative and quantitative approaches are detailed below.

3.1. *LitRPG Subgenres*

As established in the introduction, the LitRPG genre encompasses a vast and steadily increasing number of works that share common role-playing game elements, as described in section defining the genre (2.2.). Despite these shared characteristics, there is significant variety in the genre when it comes to narratives, themes, and other features. This diversity is reflected in the necessity for many definition-seeking articles to provide subgenre classifications, such as those outlined by *Campfire*. In these contexts, subgenres are often defined on grounds of themes, settings, or the types of protagonists (e.g. human, monster, or even sentient dungeons; *Campfire*).

While the classification based on protagonist types may initially seem useful for the purposes of this paper, the race of a protagonist appears to have minimal impact on their agency in terms of interaction with and reaction to game elements. The manner in which protagonists are able to engage with these elements is more significantly influenced by the setting, a subgenre category proposed by *Campfire*. Among these settings, one stands out for its emphasis on the agency and identity-based relationship between players and game mechanics: the apocalyptic setting. In this subgenre, characters are forced into a ludic environment as a means

of mediating an invading force's expectations of human behaviour, which inherently foregrounds the relationship between players and the game.

In addition to Apocalypse, three other subgenres with a similar focus on the relationship between players and the ludic environments they find themselves in have been identified. These four overarching subgenres include Simulation, Apocalypse, Portal, and Native LitRPGs, each of which being defined by a specific dynamic between the protagonist and the respective game.

Simulation LitRPGs: This subgenre features protagonists from our world who voluntarily choose to play an extreme version of a VR (Virtual Reality) game – extreme because these games do not operate via headsets as they do in the actual current state of technology, but, in these fictions, the player's consciousness is uploaded into a virtual body. These stories, therefore, often explore themes of immersion, identity, and the boundaries between virtual and real-life experiences. Unlike the other subgenres, the protagonists retain full awareness of the game as a constructed environment, where even acts such as dying are possible without any real-life consequences.

Apocalypse LitRPGs: This subgenre centres on the sudden apocalyptic transformation of our world by an external force, be it aliens, deities, or similar invaders, which imposes game systems upon the survivors. This intrusion makes the protagonists' relationship with the game a central focus of the narrative. While they remain familiar with their physical surroundings and, due to the presence of other human survivors, their social environment, the game systems fundamentally alter and redefine their reality.

Portal LitRPGs: In this subgenre, a protagonist from the real world is transported to a more fantastical world where game mechanics are embedded in everyday life. These protagonists are unfamiliar with both the game mechanics and the new environment, including its social

structure, as they are the only ones placed into this alien world. This subgenre emphasises the protagonist's struggles to adjust to the new ludic reality, and the new world as a whole.

Native LitRPGs: Protagonists in this subgenre originate from a world where game mechanics are normalised aspects of mundane life. The story follows their experiences within this setting, blending traditional fantasy with a LitRPG framework. Unlike Apocalypse and Portal LitRPGs, Native LitRPGs do not portray the game as a forced element; instead, it is an inherent part of the protagonists' reality, its existence unchallenged and, for the most part, unquestioned.

For the purposes of this study, the analysis of these four subgenres will be structured based on the extent to which game systems are integrated into the protagonists' world and the characters' awareness of their artificial nature. The examination will begin with Simulation LitRPGs, which feature gamer-protagonists in our world consciously engaging with a constructed game environment they recognize as artificial. Following this, I will investigate Apocalypse LitRPGs, where the setting remains our world but is overlaid with game systems imposed upon humanity. Next, Portal LitRPGs will be explored, focusing on protagonists from our world who must navigate entirely unfamiliar, game-based worlds. Finally, Native LitRPGs will be considered, depicting worlds where the ludic systems are fully normalised and accepted by the protagonists.

This structured approach highlights the spectrum of relationships between protagonists and game mechanics across the LitRPG genre, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding its thematic and narrative diversity.

3.2. Corpus Selection

Despite the relatively recent emergence of the LitRPG genre, it has already generated an extensive output of thousands of works. This claim is supported by six-digit results yielded from simple searches on Google Books and Amazon using the term "LitRPG", as well as over 13.000 entries on Royal Road, a platform where each series is counted as a single result,

contrasting with platforms like Amazon that count individual instalments separately. Furthermore, a meticulous data collection from the active LitRPG Reddit community corroborates these numbers. According to the file posted in this community by the user VincentArcher (2024), which compiles suggestions of new materials from retail sites like Amazon and promotional materials, approximately 700 releases have been recorded annually since 2020. This accumulates to over 2.000 releases within three years. Although the dataset from Reddit is not exhaustive, as clarified by its contributors, it provides a substantial estimate.

Given the abundance of primary material, selecting a representative corpus to analyse and make generalisations about the genre poses significant challenges. This difficulty is amplified by the genre's diversity, as outlined in the previous section (3.1.). However, considering the four subgenres identified in that chapter – Simulation, Apocalypse, Portal, and Native, that is – offers a framework for narrowing the selection. For each subgenre, a primary representative work has been chosen, complemented by other novels from the same category serving as secondary examples. This approach ensures that the analysis remains focused and manageable.

Another characteristic of many LitRPGs that is relevant to the corpus selection is their considerable length, a result of their origins as web serials designed to continuously generate views. For example, *The Wandering Inn* (Pirateaba 2018), which is still being published chapter-by-chapter online, has also been compiled into eBooks comprising 12 instalments of roughly 1.500 pages each. To accommodate the scope of this study, only the first instalment of each selected series will be considered.

While I consider myself well-versed in this genre, the vast volume of material makes it sheer impossible to be familiar with every work, or even a majority of entries. Consequently, it is impossible to make a definitive qualitative judgment about which single book could be considered representative. To address this, I employed a quantitative method for corpus selection instead. Using platforms such as Amazon, the largest retail site for books (cf.

McCarthy), Audible (Amazon’s audiobook counterpart, which caters to a distinct consumer base), and Goodreads, the largest book review platform (cf. Priya), I gathered data on the most popular LitRPG works. Since direct sales figures are inaccessible, reviews and ranking numbers were used as indicators of popularity. The top 70 entries from each platform were collected in a list (see appendix), assigned to a subgenre, and, using an average of the number of reviews and rankings, the top five in each subgenre were identified:

SMIULATION	Amazon	Audible	Goodreads	Ø
Awaken Online	8.791	11.804	15.497	12.031
Compeltionist Chronicles	7.821	13.350	14.364	11.845
Ascend Online	3.869	15.449	8.289	9.202
The Titan Series	6.172	4.602	4.886	5.220
The Good Guys	3.724	4.693	5.223	4.547

APOCALYPSE	Amazon	Audible	Goodreads	Ø
Dungeon Crawler Carl	9.701	18.122	24.476	17.433
Primal Hunter	10.425	8.694	11.723	10.281
Defiance of the Fall	9.573	9.447	11.516	10.179
Jake's Magical Market	5.934	7.239	5.337	6.170
System Universe	8.343	2.262	7.113	5.906

PORTAL	Amazon	Audible	Goodreads	Ø
He Who Fights With Monsters	15.652	36.168	24.202	25.341
The Land	10.121	33.489	24.559	22.723
The Wandering Inn	3.867	10.166	8.711	7.581
The Beginning After the End	6.720	6.108	8.314	7.047
Battlemage Farmer	8.420	2.689	7.254	6.121

NATIVE	Amazon	Audible	Goodreads	Ø
Sufficiently Advanced Magic	7.155	32.415	23.139	20.903
Something: Full Murderhobo	7.837	4.363	6.892	6.364
All the Skills	7.997	2.163	7.421	5.860
Mark of the Fool	4.935	4.468	5.569	4.991
Aether's Revival	7.389	1.504	5.116	4.670

Table 1: Top 5 Most Popular LitRPGs

As can be observed in *Table 1*, this methodology revealed minor differences across platforms in terms of popularity rankings. For example, *Awaken Online* emerges as more reviewed on

Amazon, whereas *Ascend Online* has much stronger numbers on Audible. Such variations are even more pronounced in the Native LitRPG subgenre but did not obscure overarching trends. Through the aggregation of data across platforms, coupled with a qualitative analysis of adherence to subgenre conventions as described in the previous chapter (3.1.), the most widely read and representative works for each subgenre were identified, highlighted with a darker shade in the tables above. The rationale for their selection is outlined below:

Simulation LitRPGs: This selection represents a clear-cut case. *Awaken Online: Catharsis* (Bagwell 2016) was chosen as the primary representative of the Simulation LitRPG subgenre due to its consistently high rankings across platforms, despite a relatively modest review count on Audible. Furthermore, the novel aligns closely with the defining characteristics of the subgenre, as the narrative follows Jason, a protagonist disillusioned with the frustrations of real life, who immerses himself in the fantasy world of the online simulation game *Awaken Online*. Through this immersive experience, Jason explores extreme versions of his own identity, embodying the core themes of the subgenre.

Apocalypse LitRPGs: Just as *Awaken Online: Catharsis* emerged as the definitive representative for Simulation LitRPGs, *Dungeon Crawler Carl* (Dinniman 2020) was identified as the standout work within the Apocalypse LitRPG subgenre. It surpassed its competitors by a substantial margin in both reviews and ratings and closely adheres to the thematic elements characteristic of this subgenre. Specifically, the narrative involves an alien organization invading Earth and transforming it into a game modelled after a classic dungeon crawl, akin to *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), for their own entertainment. Within this imposed ludic environment, the protagonist Carl, alongside the rest of the human race, is forced to participate, navigating the challenges of this violent game to ensure his own survival.

Portal LitRPGs: The selection of a representative work for the Portal LitRPG subgenre proves significantly more challenging, as it is both the most widely read and the most divisive category within LitRPG. Reviewing the table above, this subgenre seems to be dominated by two prominent series: *He Who Fights with Monsters* (Shirtaloon 2021) and *Chaos Seeds* (Kong 2015). While their popularity is undeniable, both series deviate from the core thematic characteristics of the Portal LitRPG subgenre, complicating their candidacy as representative works.

He Who Fights with Monsters initially appears to be an obvious choice based on its review and rating numbers alone. However, a closer examination reveals that it diverges from the subgenre's defining elements. While the protagonist Jason is transported to a new world, his immediate acceptance of this environment eliminates the themes of loss, confusion, and adaptation that are often so prominent in Portal LitRPGs. What is even more divergent from the norm, however, is that the narrative frequently shifts focus away from the transported protagonist, often centring on characters native to the new world. This narrative structure introduces a rather Native LitRPG quality, further distancing the series from the subgenre's conventions. As such, *He Who Fights with Monsters* cannot be considered a representative Portal LitRPG, not due to its lack of alignment with the broader LitRPG genre, but because it only marginally fits within the Portal subgenre.

The second contender, *Chaos Seeds*, penned by the self-proclaimed “father of American LitRPG” (as noted on the first book’s blurb), retains the premise of a protagonist transported to a game-like world; however, the narrative introduces this world as an extension of an actual video game. An imp character (acting as a guide for players transported to this new world from ours) explicitly explains both the mechanics of the ludic system and its connection to the protagonist’s original world upon his arrival. Additionally, the consequences of in-world events, such as death, are inconsistently applied: local inhabitants face permanent outcomes,

while immigrant players from our world regenerate after dying. These elements, reminiscent of Simulation LitRPGs, overshadow the novel's Portal LitRPG identity. Consequently, *Chaos Seeds* also fails to provide a fitting representation of this subgenre.

In contrast, *The Wandering Inn* (Pirateaba 2018) emerges as a suitable representative. While its Amazon review count is comparatively low, this can be attributed to its unique publication model: the series is available exclusively as an eBook and is also released for free online in serialised chapters. These factors likely reduce its sales on Amazon while simultaneously bolstering its popularity on platforms like Audible and Goodreads. Furthermore, it is frequently recommended within the Reddit LitRPG community, surpassing even *Chaos Seeds* in this regard (see “top ten best litrpg of all time”). Qualitatively, *The Wandering Inn* adheres to the subgenre's defining characteristics: its dual protagonists, Erin and Ryoka, provide contrasting perspectives on their adaptation to a game-like fantasy world, highlighting the struggles of navigating and understanding this new environment, ensuring the series' close alignment with the thematic essence of Portal LitRPGs. Thus, despite its lower metrics, *The Wandering Inn* stands out as the most representative work of the Portal LitRPG subgenre, combining both qualitative and quantitative justification.

Native LitRPGs: This subgenre also presented challenges in finding a representative. The most successful entry, *Sufficiently Advanced Magic* (Rowe 2017), barely qualifies as a LitRPG (despite it being named as such both on platforms like Goodreads or Reddit) due to its limited incorporation of game mechanics. The only prominent feature reminiscent of role-playing games is the protagonist Corin's item acquisition and improvement through magical means, implying ludic progression.

Something: Full Murderhobo (Krout 2020) was considered due to its initial alignment with Native LitRPG conventions, as its protagonists originate from a world where ludic elements are inherently integrated. However, the narrative quickly transitions toward Portal

LitRPG characteristics, as the protagonists' understanding of the ludic properties of their world develops primarily through their transportation to another realm.

Ultimately, *All the Skills* (Rae 2022) was selected as the most straightforward and representative example of the subgenre. Exhibiting similar metrics to *Something: Full Murderhobo*, *All the Skills* also meets the criteria for quality by aligning closely with the conventions of the Native LitRPG subgenre on a narrative level: in this work, the protagonist, Arthur, inhabits a world where the possession of magical cards enables individuals to progress within the ludic framework upon which the entire social structure is constructed. Arthur accepts the authority of the cards without question, undergoing identity transformation through their ludic influence – a hallmark characteristic of Native LitRPGs.

The quantitative and qualitative methodology as employed above ensures that the selected corpus captures the diversity of the LitRPG genre while balancing popularity metrics with adherence to the defining characteristics of each subgenre. This approach establishes a comprehensive yet focused framework for analysis. The selected works – *Awaken Online: Catharsis*, *Dungeon Crawler Carl*, *The Wandering Inn*, and *All the Skills* – offer a robust foundation for examining the thematic and narrative elements of LitRPGs, as explored in the subsequent analysis of the genre.

4. SIMULATION LitRPG

— In-Game Identity (Trans)Formation in *Awaken Online: Catharsis* —

As outlined in chapter 3, Simulation LitRPGs represent a unique type within the broader genre of LitRPGs: unlike other forms, they not only incorporate the mechanics and other ludic elements characteristic of RPGs but, due to reflecting the protagonists' experiences in actual games, also require actual role-playing as an integral aspect of the narrative. This includes the creation and operation of an avatar, a feature distinctive to Simulation LitRPGs and, as demonstrated through the structure of this thesis, absent from other subgenres, where protagonists engage via the use of their own bodies. Despite the immersive qualities of virtual reality, where everything is designed to feel as though you are actually inside the game, a clear conceptual distinction can be drawn between the players themselves, their characters, and their avatars: drawing on Bowman and Schrier's definitions, *characters* are thereby to be understood as “consistent persona[s] in a fictional world of a role-playing game”, while *avatars* function as “virtual representation[s] of the player” (395). *Players* themselves constitute the individuals who “inhabit [...] character[s] or avatar[s] as part of their play of an RPG” (395).

How players, their characters, and their physical representations, i.e. avatars, relate to each other has been thoroughly investigated within game studies, with significant contributions from researchers such as Banks (2015) and Bowman (2010). Banks identifies four primary perspectives players are commonly observed to adopt in relation to the other two entities, which he only refers to by “avatar” here, whilst actually meaning both: *avatar-as-object* (perceiving the avatar purely as a functional tool for achieving ludic objectives), *avatar-as-me* (experiencing the avatar as a direct representation of oneself within the game), *avatar-as-symbiote* (utilising the avatar to explore alternate facets of one's own identity), and *avatar-as-other* (viewing the avatar as entirely independent from the player's real-world self). Building

upon such categorizations, Bowman (2010) offers an even more nuanced typology of role-playing characters, classifying them into numerous different archetypes that reflect a decreasing degree of connection between the players' real-life identities and the personas they assume within the game (164-176).

What neither of these approaches address, however, is that the ways players initially choose to approach the game are not static but subject to change due to influences from the design of the game environment itself. In the following analysis of Travis Bagwell's *Awaken Online: Catharsis*, I will demonstrate how the game's mechanics not only create the conditions for players to explore, invent, and express different in-game identities but actively steer them towards adopting specific ones. This often occurs in ways that diverge from players' original intentions, illustrating the profound influence of ludic structures on the formation and evolution of role-playing personas. Encompassing the above detailed aspects related to gaming identity, I will launch my analysis with an exploration of the ludic influences shaping the avatar adopted by the protagonist in *Awaken Online*, followed by an examination of how these influences inform his in-game character, particularly in terms of the extent actual role-playing is integrated into the simulation game portrayed in the novel. Finally, I will address the connection between the protagonist's ludically impacted in-game identity and his out-of-game motivations as a player, with a focus on the role of violence.

4.1. *Altered Avatars: The Character Creation Process and Item Stats*

In 2007, Yee and Bailenson examined how avatar appearance influences player behaviour and attitudes in virtual environments, eventually arriving at a concept they termed the *Proteus Effect*. What this effect describes is the phenomenon that players tend to adapt their in-game actions based on the visual traits of their avatars, often aligning with societal stereotypes. An example of that can be found in Yee et al. (2009), where it has been demonstrated that taller and

more attractive avatars in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) were linked to improved gameplay performance, while Yee et al. (2011) observed that players controlling female avatars were more likely to adopt healing roles, reflecting gendered stereotypes of caregiving. Similarly, Pena and Kim (2014) found that players with obese avatars exhibited reduced physical activity in sports games, reinforcing perceptions tied to body image.

A critical aspect left out of consideration in all of these studies, however, is the fact that players are usually not assigned avatars with pre-determined appearances; quite the opposite, in most role-playing gaming scenarios – whether in tabletop games or MMORPGs – players are actively involved in shaping their avatars’ physical characteristics during the character creation process. Bowman (2010) highlights this in her “four stages of character evolution” (157-164), noting that the foundational features of a character, including physical ones, are already established during the *genesis stage* (157), which precedes the *developmental stage* where formal character sheets are filled out (158). This *genesis stage* may occur in the player’s imagination or through collaborative discussions with other participants, situating character creation as a preparatory phase distinct from the game itself. While this understanding of the process seemingly places the responsibility for defining avatars’ appearances entirely in the players’ hands, it overlooks one crucial fact: the predefined options provided by the game itself inherently constrain and, thus, shape the choices available to players.

Such systematic limitations on avatar creation become evident already from the outset of *Awaken Online: Catharsis*: in the opening moments of the protagonist Jason’s experience within the virtual reality game *Awaken Online (AO)*, he is presented with the opportunity to “create [him]self anew” (47), a verbal representation of the initiation of Bowman’s *developmental stage*. With regards to systematic constraints on player agency in avatar creation, this scene warrants particular attention for three key reasons: what has to be noted first is that the setup of the avatar creation in *Awaken Online* considerably diverges from the norm. After all, in many

traditional MMORPGs or, generally, computer RPGs, such as *The Sims* (Electronic Arts 2000) or *Baldur's Gate* (Larian Studios 2023), this process typically involves an interface that allows players to view their avatars from a 360° perspective while selecting from an array of statistical attributes and physical features. This particular setup has two primary effects: first, by displaying all available options simultaneously, it creates the illusion of nearly boundless agency. The vast number of possible combinations, despite minor constraints, can feel overwhelming yet liberating, often sparking creative ideas for character development beyond those formed during the *genesis stage*. Secondly, the abundance of options and the absence of time constraints during this process foster a sense of temporal suspension, as the act of creation is not counted toward the actual playtime.

Awaken Online, however, is seen to approach avatar creation completely differently: upon entering the VR-game, Jason, now within the body of his avatar, encounters a mysterious figure who simply states: “You may alter your physical body now. Changes are limited, and your body’s appearance will evolve naturally as you gain strength”, before asking, “Do you wish to make any changes?” (47). Notably, there is no interface displaying options or offering any type of reflective view of the avatar, be it the classic third-person view or, more in alignment with the immersive strategy of VR-games, through some sort of mirror-like reflection. Matching the guide’s explicit statement that “changes are limited”, this omission creates an impression of being severely restricted in agency, which is only further reinforced by this interaction with him resembling a lifelike social exchange, compelling Jason to respond quickly, as though under social pressure, rather than leisurely exploring his choices. This dynamic differs greatly from the reflective and exploratory nature typical of traditional character creation, effectively forcing Jason to select by instinct or according to the concepts he may have produced during the *genesis stage*.

The second notable aspect of this scene refers to the fact that before the option to alter his appearance is even introduced, Jason is informed by the guide that “[t]here are currently no race selections available other than human” (47). While Jason responds mildly to this limitation, it



Figure 2: Statistics posted at the 1 Year Anniversary of the Game *Baldur's Gate 3*

is indeed unusual within the context of *AO* constituting a highly popular MMORPG, where multiple race options are typically a major attraction. For example, in *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios 2023), one of the most successful computer RPGs of all time (cf. Shah), developers released graphical statistics on the game's *X*-account (see Baldur's Gate 3) the game's first anniversary which support this assumption:

Constituting just one of these published graphics, figure 2 shows that players overwhelmingly selected non-human races, with elves and half-elves, for instance, ranking above humans, and the total number of non-human characters created being over five times higher than the number of human characters. This emphasis on racial diversity in popular games suggests that the absence of non-human options in *Awaken Online* might feel unexpectedly restrictive to players. From the perspective of Banks' (2015) typology of player-avatar relationships, this limitation appears to encourage an *avatar-as-me* relationship by requiring players to select a race that directly corresponds to their own. While the novel only presents Jason's perspective during the creation process, including his rather unperturbed reaction, it can be inferred that such restrictions may conflict with the expectations or desires of players who had previously, i.e. during the *genesis stage*, anticipated to play more diverse characters.

Finally, the guide's statement that "your body's appearance will evolve naturally as you gain strength" introduces the third systematic limitation, as it implies that players cannot select a more muscular physique during character creation; instead, achieving such a transformation would require in-game actions that increase the character's strength level, the use of the term "naturally" further suggesting that these activities are likely analogous to real-world muscle-building exercises. Given that not all players are properly trained in the execution of the latter, this mechanic automatically disadvantages certain groups of players, including those with non-muscular builds, disabled individuals, or, quite simply, those lacking the time or inclination for such pursuits. Such players who might have envisioned embodying a physically imposing character from the outset are thus constrained, as their desired appearance can only be realized through extended gameplay.

Despite the initial promise that the interaction with the guide would allow Jason to "create [him]self anew" and his expectation that it would resemble the character creation process typical of other RPGs, his eventual decision to retain his real-world physical appearance as his

avatar is unsurprising given the above factors at play. Jason's immediate response, "No changes. I-I'm fine with who I am", accompanied by the reflective thought, "*Am I really?*" (47), underscores the limited agency afforded by the game system. The lack of explicit customization options, coupled with the social pressure of interacting with the guide, renders selecting his real-world likeness the most straightforward choice, albeit one loaded with potential self-doubt.

A lack of options during the avatar creation process appears to be a recurring theme in Simulation LitRPGs, amongst them *Wicked West* (Davenport 2023). This novel follows Sam, an elderly African American woman, whose consciousness is preserved in a virtual world called EveNet and reactivated after her death, so that she may live on in a world of her choosing – the Wild West, for starters – and even make money for her surviving family by gaining followers. At first glance, Sam's character creation process seems more traditional and comprehensive than that of *AO*, with her avatar standing before a mirror surrounded by slide bars that allow detailed physical alterations, such as changing her eye colour. The AI controlling EveNet even asks how old she would like her avatar to be presenting as, prompting Sam to choose her 29-year-old self rather than her actual 90-year-old appearance (9). While this process appears to grant greater agency, it remains limited, as beyond the age question, Sam is not explicitly offered options to alter her gender or race. In fact, her default avatar is presented as her mundane physical self, implicitly steering her towards an *avatar-as-me* relationship just as much as *AO* does with Jason.

Another example of how system designs can significantly influence avatar appearances can be found in *The Ritualist* (Krout 2018). Here, it is a paralysed man, Joe, whose consciousness is uploaded into a virtual game called Eternium, and his default avatar is his former non-disabled physical self, both giving the problematic impression that disabled avatars are not desired or accommodated for in this game and, yet again, that the player's avatar is supposed to correspond to the physical appearance of their mundane self. Indeed, in this

LitRPG, the protagonist is given no explicit options to modify his in-game body at all; the only slight changes permitted arise from the selection of one of the available classes, which automatically adjusts physical attributes based on character statistics (e.g. “strength”). Modifications of that sort remain visually subtle, however, rendering the class-assigned clothing the most noticeable change thereby. Since this attire is designed to reflect the statistics associated with the chosen class, this suggests a systematic prioritisation of character functionality over physical customisation.

While gear in *The Ritualist* thus serves primarily as part of class representation without holding numerical attributes of their own, most equipable items in Simulation LitRPGs have distinct stats, subtly also influencing players’ choices in physical appearance beyond the avatar creation process. In how far this particular type of game mechanics, i.e. the ludification of clothing, influences Jason’s decisions regarding his looks becomes most evident in his reactions to receiving new gear. For instance, upon finding a piece of **Common Leather Armor** – perfectly suited for the path recommended to him by an NPC early in the game and aligned with the body type he was coerced into adopting during the character creation process – Jason only reacts with “Well, this is certainly better than nothing” (111). Prompted by the item’s relatively low stats, this tepid response implies that Jason, like many other players, prioritises functionality over aesthetic or role-playing considerations, which stands in alignment with broader trends in gaming: players often favour equipment with high stats over items that complement their character's narrative or overall style (cf. Individual-Club9086), reflecting a general preference for competitive efficiency over immersive role-playing. A similar stance is evident when, toward the end of the novel, Jason acquires the **Midnight Cloak**, a piece of clothing that perfectly aligns with his character evolving into a dark-natured one throughout the novel (see 4.2 and 4.3). Despite its clear thematic suitability, Jason reacts to it with “Geez, I

hope this is finally a decent piece of gear” (487), again evidently prioritising its functional value over its narrative fit.

What seems to contradict this argument at first glance is the fact that, early on in the game, Jason is also seen to equip himself with a cloak that bears no stats at all (213); however, this choice, too, is rooted in practicality rather than aesthetics: following his initial combat training, Jason reflects that “if he purchased some sort of cloak, it would be almost impossible to tell he was armed” (81), which is directly connected to another influential game mechanic, namely class allocation. Although Jason has not yet been explicitly assigned a class at this stage in the novel, his overall demeanour, the assessments of NPCs, his “Chaotic-Evil” alignment, and his accumulating infamy points (see 4.3) strongly indicate a trajectory toward a rogue or criminal archetype. The cloak, therefore, serves as a functional accessory that supports this alignment, a notion, which is further reinforced when the narrative explicitly notes that upon donning the stat-less cloak, Jason begins “to feel roguelike in his new attire” (213).

The above analysis demonstrates how significantly ludic elements influence players’ physical manifestations as avatars in the respective virtual reality games featured in Simulation LitRPGs, affecting them in both their creation and subsequent development throughout the narratives: while the avatar creation process illustrated in *Awaken Online: Catharsis* offers Jason agency on a surface level, the exact design elements, including a general lack of character-diversifying options and implied time constraints, are seen to subtly, yet efficiently, limit him in his decisions, effectively steering him toward an *avatar-as-me* relationship, rather than allowing for significant divergence or creative experimentation. Likewise are the integration of stats to equipable items, such as clothing, and their alignment with assigned classes shown to be exerting a substantial level of control over Jason’s choices of outward self-representation. Although the latter form of impact operates less through explicit limitation of agency as the

former does and more through implicit manipulation, they both prove to be highly effective in shaping Jason's and, by extension, generally Simulation LitRPG protagonists' physical in-game identity.

Revisiting the earlier established close relationship between avatars and characters, the question arises how similar ludic elements that influenced the creation and operation of the former may be impacting the same processes with regards to the latter. In the following chapter (4.2), I will therefore examine how the game design influences the development of Jason's character, particularly in terms of its capacity to accommodate and facilitate actual role-playing.

4.2. *Role-playing in Action: Character Backgrounds and Framework Agency*

Circling back to their very definition, Simulation LitRPGs are unique within the broader LitRPG genre as their narratives portray characters actually role-playing. While the interpretation of this role-playing varies widely across contexts – spanning mediums such as tabletop or computer-based RPGs, therapeutic applications, and regional styles like Nordic LARPs (cf. Hugaas) – Zagal and Deterding's (2018) detailed evaluation and comparison of the various manifestations concludes that they do all have the following in common: according to their analysis, all RPGs share the characteristic of being “play activities and objects revolving around the rule-structured creation and enactment of characters in a fictional world” (47). This definition underscores the dual pillars of RPGs: character creation and their subsequent enactment. Both have already been delved into in the previous section, though only with regards to physicality; however, just as ludic elements have been shown to exert significant influence on that level, they similarly shape the scope of role-playing available to participants, impacting both the processes of character creation and their subsequent enactment.

Reconsidering the character creation process in *AO* in this context first, a critical omission is revealed, limiting the players' role-playing potential from the very beginning on: the absence

of character-“backgrounds”, an integral feature in most RPGs. In traditional tabletop games like *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), for example, backgrounds provide players with rich narrative details about their characters’ pasts, influencing gameplay through specific equipment or abilities tied to those stories. A “Charlatan” background, for instance, might grant a disguise kit at the outset (cf. *DnD 5th ed. Player’s Handbook* 128), reinforcing the character's thematic identity. Even in simpler RPG formats, such as murder mystery games or crime dinner scenarios, players are typically given character cards detailing personalities, desires, and even flaws that must be enacted according to the rules (cf. Cox). Facilitating the adoption of a character’s mannerisms, feelings and ideologies, this specific feature aligns with what Bowman (2018) identifies as one of the six categories of immersion, namely “immersion into character” (387), which Hugaas (2023) even describes as “the core of the activity itself” (144).

By lacking this systemic feature, i.e. backgrounds, *AO* limits opportunities for character immersion, which becomes most evident immediately after the creation process, when Jason finally enters the game world in Chapter 5 – Infamous. Even though Jason does not explicitly express dissatisfaction with the omission of non-measurable character information, his first interaction within the game reflects a sense of directionlessness as a result of the absence of narrative scaffolding to his character:

Jason greeted the man, mentally crossing his fingers that he wouldn't get turned away instantly. “Hello sir, I was wondering if you could train me to use a weapon?”

The trainer eyed Jason up and down for a moment.

“I suppose so. What type of weapon do you want to learn to use?”

I keep trying to follow MMO stereotypes and then get tripped up by these simple questions. I know I need to learn to use some kind of weapon, but which one? I really didn't give this much thought!

He decided to go with honesty. “I really don't know. I have no idea what type of enemies I'll be fighting, and I don't know what role best suits me. However, I need to have some way to defend myself.”

Unbelievably, the trainer grinned at Jason. “That is the first smart thing I've heard from you tourists today!”

(Bagwell 67-68)

Despite Jason attributing his relatively low level of immersion into character to his own shortcomings in the situation above, it is, in fact, the lack of role-playing features that accounts for this deficiency. This issue is also evident in another Simulation LitRPG, *Ascend Online* (2016), despite character backgrounds being prominently featured here during the creation process (31-43); however, during actual gameplay, they prove largely inconsequential: they do not influence initial gear, quest availability, rewards, or opportunities to role-play in alignment with character traits, resulting in the protagonist embracing an *avatar-as-me* relationship after all – all stemming from the absence of ludic direction to existing backgrounds. This implies that even if character backgrounds were introduced in *Awaken Online*, their mere presence would not necessarily alter the dynamics of role-playing; rather, they would have to be implemented in a ludically purposeful and impactful manner. In the absence of such meaningful character backgrounds to guide him, Jason is compelled to rely almost exclusively on competitive systems, such as levelling up, to advance within the game. This dependence is best exemplified in Chapter 12 – Grisly, where Jason achieves a substantial reward after completing a morally dubious task, namely killing two NPCs at the behest of Morgan, a witch, in exchange for magical education:

x7 Level Up!
You have (45) undistributed stat points.

[...]

Wow. I received a ton of experience for this, even with the penalty for the level difference.

The two kills had immediately allowed him to reach level 10. If it was this easy to gain experience from killing NPCs, why didn't people just start slaughtering the townspeople? He considered this question as he made his way to the stable and hitched a horse to the wagon.

After a moment, the answer seemed obvious, these NPCs would be impossibly difficult to kill in a straight fight. It was only with Jason's unique combination of skills that he was able to pull off the assassination of a higher-level NPC. He was starting to see why someone would prefer to assume the role of an assassin in this game.

(Bagwell 155-156)

Not only does the quoted passage highlight Jason's lack of an assigned class – evidenced by his ignorance of the assassin perks – but it also underscores how the absence of immersion leads him to adopt a purely ludic perspective on moral decision-making. Jason assumes that the only reason players might refrain from becoming murderers in the game is due to systemic barriers, i.e. the difficulty of overcoming level differences without specific game-granted skills. That it might actually be role-playing motivations that dissuade players from such actions, for example, embodying a devout individual for whom killing would be out of character, does not even occur to him. This perspective reflects the game's failure to provide Jason with a meaningful character identity, severely limiting his ability to engage in immersive role-play.

His reliance on ludic pragmatism is further illustrated shortly after the above situation, when he is eventually given the opportunity to select a class, specifically the Necromancer class:

He also debated the other choices. He could see the potential of curses if he chose to become some form of death knight or assassin. The offensive spells also seemed pretty straightforward. Morgan had wielded a basic spell with gruesome efficiency. However, in both roles, he would be limited to small-scale battles. Especially if he was playing solo.

[...]

He enjoyed carefully planning his character to min/max his stats and skills and developing various strategies to tackle dungeons and bosses. At heart, he was more of a strategist than a front-line fighter or damage-dealer. Maybe summoning would be a good change of pace and would fit his playstyle.

"I would like to learn to become a Necromancer," Jason said firmly.

(Bagwell 171-172)

Emphasising Jason's prioritisation of functional progression over narrative depth or character embodiment, this quote illustrates how, in the absence of a foundational framework to build his character on, such as a class and therewith associated backgrounds, mannerisms, and personality traits, the role-playing element within such games becomes peripheral. This notion is further reinforced by the fact that the moment Jason assumes a class and thus gains a clearer basis for his character-building, he finally reflects on how to approach his role and act

accordingly, i.e. he actually role-plays. For example, during his robbing and killing spree in the noble district, he disguises himself as a guard, despite disliking the heavy mail, to avoid arousing suspicion. While doing so, he observes that “[t]he trick to being a Necromancer was not letting anyone notice you” (245), exhibiting a higher level of understanding for his character on grounds of his newly assumed class alone. Furthermore, Jason’s reflections on how to advance through ludic strategies, such as his decision to put all his accumulated points into *Willpower* in order to be able to raise more “high-level corpses” (247), are also the result of him embodying his role, a Necromancer, in more depth now. These behaviours align with Bowman’s *Interaction Stage* (2010, 158), the third phase in the evolution of a role-playing character, where players actively incorporate their character’s traits into their gameplay. Jason’s ability to reach this stage only after being assigned a role, i.e. class and connected features, highlights the extent to which access to such ludic elements dictates his capacity for agency in role-playing.

Paradoxically, while *AO* appears to constrain players’ engagement with their characters by restricting access to these critical features, it simultaneously grants them significant agency over the game’s overarching narrative. This duality is highlighted early in the novel, where the developer emphasises the importance of player choice in an interview (31); however, even more prominently, it is reinforced by the following part of the game’s initial instructions given during the creation process: “Choose your own path and think carefully about your choices. They will impact both your character and the world around you” (45). This phenomenon, wherein players are empowered to shape the game world and its narrative, has been studied by Hammer (2007) and termed *framework agency*. The transformative potential of *framework agency* becomes particularly vivid in Chapter 21 – “Reborn”: here, Jason – armed with newfound understanding of his Necromancer-character (and perhaps nudged by the game’s artificial intelligence) – fully exercises his *framework agency* by using his dark magical powers to annihilate an entire city

and reconstruct it as the sinister Twilight Throne (Bagwell 300-305), which triggers a “Universal System Message” to all players:

Universal System Message
The player, Jason, has conquered the City of Lux and has converted it to the dark. The city of Lux is now known as the Twilight Throne. [...]
All undead creatures, including summoned creatures, within the Twilight Throne's zone of influence will not decay. All players and NPCs with a positive alignment within the zone of influence of the Twilight Throne will receive a penalty to stats and experience gain.
“Undead” is now available as a starting race and players that choose the undead race will start in the Twilight Throne.
As a result of conquering a capital city, the Kingdom of Lusade has been dissolved and the surrounding region is now in dispute. The towns and land that once comprised the Kingdom of Lusade are now fair game.

(Bagwell 305)

This message not only solidifies Jason’s role within the game but also demonstrates how such extreme exercising of framework agency can subvert the game itself, including in relation to other players’ gameplay options. The game’s storylines involving the uncovering of a conspiracy in the City of Lux and its grander consequences of a war between the Kingdom of Lusade and neighbouring realms – key narrative elements established earlier in the novel – are now overturned and, thus, completely redundant. Although it is the system itself that enables Jason to enact such changes, the scale and implications of his actions thereby dismantle the game’s narrative structure completely, thus blurring the lines between the system’s empowerment of him and its subversion itself.

As disruptive as these changes therefore are to all other players, for Jason they merely serve to deepen his immersion into the character, facilitating his transition into Bowman’s *Realization Stage* (158), the final phase of character evolution, characterised by the complete internalisation and embodiment of the character. His behaviours, such as speaking in a “cold, firm voice” (Bagwell 479) or displaying an “evil grin” during acts of cruelty (e.g. 442, 466), exemplify his profound alignment with his character’s identity. This alignment is thereby shown

to be a direct result of his engagement with the *framework agency* afforded by the game, which was only fully realised following the assignment of a specific role in the form of a class. Consequently, this progression underscores the critical influence of the game's systemic design in shaping players' role-playing agency, mediated through access to its ludic elements.

Awaken Online: Catharsis thus exemplifies a central paradox regarding the impact of ludic elements on agency: the dominance of ludic elements simultaneously limits and broadens the protagonist's agency, shaping Jason's behaviours and identity within the game in profound ways. The omission of foundational role-playing features initially hinders his immersion, forcing reliance on the game's competitive systems to progress. However, through the assignment of the Necromancer class, Jason gains both a more defined role and the means to exercise *framework agency*, enabling him to reshape the entire game world in ways that subvert its intended narrative. This duality of embracing the game system to achieve pro-game success while simultaneously dismantling its narrative constraints reflects the paradoxical relationship between empowerment and control demonstrated in Simulation LitRPGs.

While Jason's ability to take his character to the demonstrated extremes is, therefore, significantly influenced by the game itself, it is also important to note that his underlying motivations for engaging with *AO* in the first place play a critical role in shaping the darker aspects of his character as well. The ways in which this enactment is intrinsically linked to Jason's experiences and circumstances outside the game, whilst still being subject to systematic influence, will be explored in greater detail in section 4.3.

4.3. *Unleash the Beast*: Game Mechanics activating the Taboo Self

As previously mentioned, Jason's motivations for playing *AO* are established before he even starts the game: having been expelled from school for classist reasons, bullied by Alex, the

favoured student of the school's board, and abandoned by his neglectful parents, Jason vows that “if he couldn’t vent his anger in this world, he would do it in another” (Bagwell 41). This statement suggests that Jason’s primary intention in playing *AO* is to explore what Bowman (2010) refers to as the “taboo self” (176), i.e. playing a character designed to explore social taboos, including extreme acts of violence or even sexual transgressions. Given the eventual path Jason’s character takes – as described in section 4.2, he ends up causing and revelling in the deaths of hundreds of NPCs and player-characters – it initially appears that embodying this part of self is indeed his primary goal; however, two factors suggest that the extreme nature of his character’s development was not his conscious, premeditated plan after all: first, upon being assigned a “chaotic-evil” alignment (Bagwell 59), Jason is startled, as he had usually preferred to “assume the hero role” in past gaming experiences, using digital violence as an outlet for his real-world anger, though under the guise of helping others (62). Secondly, prior to fully embracing his character’s dark nature, Jason repeatedly debates his actions, rationalising that “this is just a game” (169) and that his victims are “not real... only the product of digital signals in [his] brain. [He] didn’t kill anyone” (52). These rationalisations suggest that Jason struggles to accept fully embodying his taboo self, indicating that the extreme actions he ultimately takes were not part of his original intent.

Considering that, therefore, Jason's character development was not pre-planned after all, the question arises as to how his character then ended up becoming such a violent one. In alignment with my general hypothesis for this paper, I argue that it was the game mechanics of *AO* themselves that subtly encouraged him towards taking this dark and even more violent path. To frame this argument, I draw upon Bosman’s properties of violence in digital games (2023), which, although primarily narrative in focus, can also be embedded within the ludic elements of gameplay. This is especially the case since *AO*, as an open-world MMORPG, does not follow one linear narrative (despite offering some general narrative structures after all, as discussed in

4.2) and gives players the agency to craft their own stories. In this context, the game mechanics themselves serve as the primary narrative device for players, shaping their individual experiences and actions.

Providing five distinct perspectives on how violent behaviour is encouraged in computer games, Bosman's properties include *motivation*, *trivialisation*, *moralisation*, *dehumanisation*, and *problematization*. Due to *AO*'s lack of narrative linearity mentioned above, *problematization* is not a central feature in the novel, neither is *dehumanisation*, as it only plays a role when considering the perspectives of other players attacking Jason's city of the undead, since they are incorrectly perceived as mindless (317). The focus of my analysis will, therefore, be on the other three properties, namely *motivation*, *trivialisation*, and *moralisation*, as they are directly relevant to Jason's experience.

Analysing how the ludic provides *motivation* in *AO* first, it has to be established that by that term Bosman does not refer to the player's personal reasons for playing, but to the narrative incentives embedded in the game that drive the protagonist to engage in violent actions. A classic example of such incentives can be found in the game series *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft 2007-2024), where several instalments begin the protagonists' journey with the murder of a loved one, providing a "morally justifiable and emotionally understandable context" (Bosman 241) for their brutal revenge. As established, *AO* has no singular protagonist or linear plot, but the game does feature the mechanic of quests that serve as narrative as well as ludic devices to motivate in-game violence. For instance, early in the game, Jason encounters a quest titled "Trouble in Lux" (97), which informs him that the nobles of the city of Lux might be covering up the death of their king. Due to a lack of reward, the quest's high difficulty, and, even more prominently, Jason's own disinterest in the politics within the game he had only just entered, he dismisses the quest without much thought. However, after Jason had become familiar with his surroundings, he later receives a quest update revealing that the nobles have indeed conspired

against Lux and have accepted bribes from the neighbouring kingdom in exchange for surrendering the city. This discovery elicits a markedly different reaction from him.:

These nobles had sold out their city. Jason expected that they had also been pocketing the city's taxes for themselves for months. That must have been why the city was in such disrepair. He thought back to the homeless people lying on the street in south-side, sick and hungry.

[...] *I wonder how these nobles would feel to have the tables turned on them.*

He glanced at study around him. The ornate wood and heavy leather furniture reminded him of [his school] with its “Ivy League” atmosphere. He wanted to watch it burn. He wanted to see it all go up in flames.

(Bagwell 242)

In the context of Jason's response to the quest update, this passage highlights how this specific game mechanic, whilst not explicitly promoting violence, indirectly motivates Jason toward such actions through the narrative framework thereby provided. The injustice suffered by the poor at the hands of the nobles, as conveyed through the “Trouble in Lux”-quest, creates the necessary moral impetus for Jason to intervene in a destructive manner: instead of retreating to his usual inn or logging out of the game completely, Jason employs his Necromancer abilities to raise an army of zombies, which he then uses to systematically kill all inhabitants of the city's wealthy neighbourhoods. Jason's personal experiences with classist treatment outside the game naturally fuel this decision, reflecting his embrace of Bowman's “taboo self” as his way of letting out his out-of-game frustrations within the in-game environment.

From a ludic perspective, the quest mechanic in this instance does not appear to provide significant immediate motivation, as the “Reward” connected to the “Trouble in Lux”-quest remains “Unknown”, even after the update (240). However, upon completing the quest and receiving 50.000 XP for it, it is revealed that Jason had anticipated such a reward, even expecting it to be more lucrative (325). That he holds such expectations, shaped by his previous gaming experience, thus extends the motivating function of quests by the factor of counting on ludic gratification. This effect is even more explicit in quests with clearly defined rewards, such as “Showing Conviction”, in which Jason must assassinate an NPC named Marian to be trained

in dark magic by the witch Morgan (117). In addition to this specific benefit, the quest offers a “[p]ossible class change”, which, at this point in the narrative, holds significant appeal for Jason, as he has not yet acquired a class.

Such rewards are not immediately essential for ludic progression within the game, though, meaning that quests do not restrict Jason's agency to the extent of rendering murderous outcomes unavoidable. Nevertheless, the interplay of narrative and ludic *motivation* establishes quests as highly effective mechanisms for guiding players towards engaging in acts of violence.

As influential as quests thereby prove to be in Jason's morally devoid trajectory, Bosman's second property, *trivialisation*, exerts an even more direct impact in the form of *AO*'s combat mechanics. As illustrated early in the novel during an interview with the game's developer (31), combat constitutes a central feature of *AO* and the most essential component for levelling up. By serving as the primary mechanism for progression thereby, the emphasis on combat mechanics inherently trivialises violence, reframing it as a mere tool for achieving ludic success. This desensitising effect is most evident in Jason's first two in-game murders, carried out as part of a quest initiated by the witch Morgan:

Jason's hand clamped down on the stable master's mouth, simultaneously drawing the dagger quickly across the man's throat. [...]

-1247 Damage (CRITICAL) (23 Overkill). Stable master dies.
9200 EXP (-70% EXP due to level difference).

That was a close call.

[...] As he approached Marian, his dagger raised, her eyes fluttered open, and she looked at him in confusion. Before she could scream, Jason's hand was on her mouth, and his dagger tore at her throat. The blade was still covered in her husband's blood, causing his grip to slip slightly.

-986 Damage (CRITICAL) (656 Overkill). Marian dies.
4300 EXP (-70% EXP due to level difference).

Hmm. That blow did far less damage.

He assumed it was due to his haste. Maybe his aim had been slightly off.

His breathing was calm, and his eyes were calculating as he surveyed the bodies.

(Bagwell 153-154, colouring in original)

As is clearly demonstrated by Jason's focus on the ludic rather than any ethical implications of committing murder here, the game is shown to desensitise him toward such violent acts by positioning them as mere mechanisms for rapid EXP gain rather than as meaningful moral or narrative events. That the manner of these NPC's murder is even quantified via "Overkill"-points further reinforces the notion that these game mechanics trivialise death. Similarly, Jason's only penalty being tied to the victims' level rather than to his avoidance of open combat further underscores the game's minimization of the moral consequences of violence.

Another ludic element that supports this *trivialisation* is the respawning system, which, upon dying in the game, allows players to restart with either the same or a different character. While Jason's character does not actually die in the novel, this mechanic likely contributes to his willingness to engage in quests that clearly carry the risk of death, as the consequences of dying are not as permanent as they would be in real life. This lessened risk might explain why Jason proceeds with quests even when they present a clear danger to his life, even casually including dying as a "Failure"-condition (e.g. 69). An even more extreme example of this internalisation of death's in-game triviality can be found in *Wicked West* (Davenport 2023), where the protagonist deliberately kills her own character multiple times as a strategy to inconvenience or temporarily incapacitate her enemies. This approach reflects an even deeper manifestation of *trivialisation*, with death being neither feared nor avoided but instead actively manipulated for strategic gain.

Awaken Online has, therefore, been demonstrated to employ ludic elements, such as quests, combat and respawning mechanics, to encourage the use of violent actions; however, in a seemingly contradictory move, the game also incorporates a system which alludes to the *moralisation* of in-game violence: the fame/infamy point system. Constituting what Bosman terms a "morality system", this mechanic "enabl[es] [the players] to choose between a violent or peaceful solution" to in-game challenges (245), awarding fame-points for selecting the latter

and infamy-points for the former. In Jason's case, this allocation of points already occurs immediately following his character creation process, which involved a "test" in which he came face to face with a simulated version of a person he despises in real life (Bagwell 47-52). By deciding to end this confrontation by bludgeoning her to death, Jason's character is introduced into the world of *Awaken Online* with already +100 infamy points appearing on his character sheet. Consequently, his first interaction in the game is notably hostile in nature, as the NPC city guard he approaches perceives his elevated infamy level and immediately treats him as a criminal (61). This encounter initially prompts Jason to perceive his infamy as deterrent, and he even contemplates ridding himself of it to avoid further consequences (61). Beyond this instance, however, the consequences of high infamy are almost negligible: Jason soon learns to navigate interactions with guards so effectively that they no longer perceive his infamy, for example, feigning fear of zombies he himself created to deflect suspicion from himself (274). As a result, the morality system fails to serve its intended purpose of discouraging violence; on the contrary, it seems designed to be deliberately ineffective, given that its effects can be easily evaded by mere role-playing. There is no certain skill to be learned nor stat to be maximised first to achieve that evasion. In fact, the morality system in *AO* seems barely even integrated into the rest of its ludic structure, rendering its impact on gameplay largely inconsequential.

The ineffectiveness of *AO*'s morality system becomes even more apparent when contrasted with that of *Wicked West*, where a character's reputation, both positive and negative, generates tangible consequences, such as automatic changes in item prices (155). While *Wicked West*'s reputation system therefore offers a more meaningful impact on gameplay, *AO*'s morality system appears weak in comparison, especially when weighed against the game mechanics that actively encourage and reward immoral behaviour.

While Jason's initial motivations for entering the game suggest a conscious exploration of this darker aspect of self, his descent into extreme violence is largely shaped by the game's mechanics rather than deliberate premeditation. The interplay of motivational, trivialising, and moralising systems within the game not only normalises violence but also subtly manipulates Jason's choices, fostering a progressive alignment with his chaotic-evil identity. By positioning violence as a tool for ludic advancement and simultaneously undermining the effectiveness of moral constraints like the infamy system, the game steers Jason toward embracing a morally devoid trajectory. In doing so, *Awaken Online* constructs a space where Jason's "taboo self" is not only expressed but also cultivated, illustrating how game mechanics can actively nurture the exploration of morally transgressive identities. This convergence of ludic design and narrative framing underscores the capacity of game mechanics to both influence player agency and reframe identity, as they mediate the protagonist's internal struggle and external actions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Awaken Online: Catharsis* demonstrates how the ludic elements incorporated in Simulation LitRPGs profoundly influence the protagonist's agency and identity, highlighting their centrality in shaping in-game personas: beginning with the constrained avatar creation and in-game realisation processes, the game's restrictive design subtly steers Jason towards an *avatar-as-me* relationship, reducing opportunities for creative experimentation whilst reinforcing a direct connection between his real-world physical self and his virtual representation. This influence extends into Jason's role-playing experience, where the absence of predefined character traits initially constrains his ability to engage in a structured and immersive manner. By eventually assigning Jason the Necromancer class, the game facilitates his alignment with a darker identity, embedding him more deeply into the narrative world while simultaneously enabling him to reshape and, thus, subvert its inherent composition. Finally, the interplay between Jason's in-game and out-of-game identities underscores the pivotal role of

violence as both a narrative and ludic device. The game's design normalises and encourages violent acts through competitive mechanics and the minimisation of moral constraints, fostering Jason's descent into a transgressive identity. This convergence of motivational, trivialising, and moralising systems not only cultivates Jason's approach to the game using a "taboo self"-method but also further reflects the paradoxical relationship between ludic empowerment and control inherent in Simulation LitRPGs. Ultimately, *Awaken Online* exemplifies how game elements do not merely shape gameplay but also mediate the exploration of identity, revealing the genre's capacity to disclose the boundaries of agency and self-expression in virtual worlds.

In what way such processes manifest in non-digital environments, by contrast, will be explored in the next three chapters, beginning with an analysis of the impact of ludic elements being imposed upon the human population as depicted in Apocalypse LitRPGs.

5. APOCALYPSE LitRPG

— Gamified Survival in *Dungeon Crawler Carl* —

In the previous chapter, the primary motivations driving the protagonist's engagement in the game portrayed in the Simulation LitRPG *Awaken Online: Catharsis* were identified as stemming from a desire to escape real-world frustrations and liberating the therewith connected aggressions within the safety of a virtual environment. While these motivations have been observed to influence the development of his in-game identity, they do not fully account for the initial incentives that prompted ludic participation in the first place. Within the context of the Simulation LitRPGs, the factors that initially drive players to engage with games in general are of minimal analytical importance, as voluntary participation is typically a given in these narratives.

This standard, however, undergoes a fundamental shift in the context of Apocalypse LitRPGs, a subgenre defined by the drastic imposition of game systems upon the global population, or, at least, what remains of it following apocalyptic events that often entail the large-scale decimation of humanity as a whole. In these narratives, the motivations underlying participation become a critical area of inquiry. Unlike the voluntary engagement characteristic of Simulation LitRPGs, Apocalypse LitRPGs present scenarios where individuals are forcibly integrated into game systems, typically through mechanisms such as involuntary and irrepressible mental connections to ludic interfaces. Beyond mere integration, participants are compelled to engage actively, often under life-threatening and highly coercive conditions.

Central to the dark settings depicted in Apocalypse LitRPGs, this enforced participation prompts critical questions regarding the factors that drive survivors to comply with game mechanics. Addressing these questions necessitates a deeper exploration of player motivation in general: forming the base of participation, both intrinsic and extrinsic forms of motivation

have been identified (Deci and Ryan 1987). Intrinsic motivation encompasses personal, internalised reasons for engagement, such as the enjoyment derived from the game's narrative structure. Conversely, extrinsic motivation revolves around being driven by ludic rewards, including acquiring experience points, advancing levels, or expanding inventory (1033-1034). Both forms of motivation undoubtedly influence player behaviour, yet research indicates that intrinsic motivation often holds greater significance in sustaining long-term engagement (e.g. Aydin 2015).

When these motivational frameworks are applied to the context of Apocalypse LitRPGs, it becomes evident that players' intrinsic motivation is predominantly centred on a fundamental and instinctive drive: survival. While these games do not explicitly threaten instant death for non-participation, as seen in media like *Squid Game* (2021), their environments and mechanics make it clear that refusing to engage with the system results in severe ludic disadvantages. This cumulative disadvantage leaves individuals vulnerable to inevitable threats, effectively equating non-participation with a slower, yet certain demise.

The following analysis of the Apocalypse LitRPG *Dungeon Crawler Carl* (Matt Dinniman 2020) examines how specific ludic elements shape the ways this intrinsic motivation of survival can be achieved within this enforced game environment, while at the same time satisfying extrinsic enjoyment. This examination operates on two distinct levels: the individual level, where reward systems facilitate the emergence of “killer” and “entertainer” identities, and the community level, where various game mechanics visibly position players within the social hierarchy of survivors, thereby imposing stigma and responsibilities upon them without regard for context. In this framework, ludic elements significantly constrain survivors' agency, shaping their identities by fostering an environment in which actions are driven by both the intrinsic motivation to survive and the extrinsic motivation to progress in the game. The

interplay between these factors underscores the intricate relationship between participation, motivation, and identity formation within the context of Apocalypse LitRPGs.

5.1. “You’ve received a Golden Murderer’s Box!”: Reward Systems’ Impact on Identity

The plot of *Dungeon Crawler Carl* begins with an intense and immediate inciting incident within the novel’s opening pages: Carl, dressed only in boxer briefs and a winter jacket while chasing after his escaped cat, suddenly witnesses a catastrophic transformation of his surroundings. Everything around him – buildings, cars, trees – collapses as though “massive tin can[s] had been crushed by a giant, cosmic boot” (5), with only the people on the streets being spared. The event is followed by a cryptic, mentally displayed message explaining the cause: the Earth has been repurposed by the “syndicate”, an alien organisation that seeks to mine the planet’s resources while converting the remainder into an “18-level world dungeon” (7). Survivors are informed that they have the opportunity to “reclaim their lost matter”, although the exact meaning of this is left unclear. Confronted with the scale of destruction and its implications for his survival, Carl determines that entering the dungeon is his only viable option. Upon doing so, he is presented with another mental notification, this time delivered in an overtly ludic form, setting the tone for the novel’s LitRPG framework:

**Congratulations! You’ve earned your first achievement: Crazy Cat Lady.
You have entered the World Dungeon accompanied by a cat. Ahh, isn’t that
sweet?
Reward: You’ve received a Bronze Pet Box!**

(Dinniman 16)

Although Carl lacks any prior knowledge of the game system governing the dungeon, the message introduces him to one of its core elements: a reward system. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that this system is a key mechanic within the ludic framework, which aligns with two critical factors: first, the dungeon operates as a televised spectacle that relies on human

survivors' active participation, and second, reward systems are known to effectively encourage such participation by fostering motivation.

The use of rewards to shape behaviour through creating motivational environments has long been established, with behavioural psychology studies from the 1960s and 70s demonstrating their efficiency in “reinforcing” desired actions and “extincting” undesirable ones (Raczkowski and Schrape 321).). For instance, Ayllon and Azrin’s experiment at the Anna State Hospital in Illinois (1968) implemented a token economy where psychiatric patients were rewarded with tokens for “good” behaviour, which could then be exchanged for privileges such as TV time (16). While the desired behaviours were explicitly communicated in such experiments, the scenario in *Dungeon Crawler Carl* presents a stark contrast, as the syndicate’s announcement offers no detailed explanation of the dungeon’s underlying game mechanics. Instead, survivors are directed towards tutorial guilds for guidance on navigating the system and, ultimately, ensuring their survival.

Carl, however, encounters the dungeon’s challenges before reaching such a guild. He is attacked by a mob of goblins, one of them driving an aptly named vehicle with murderous intentions, the “Goblin Murder Dozer” (18). Forced to act in self-defence, Carl hesitantly kills the goblins, earning additional achievements and rewards in the process. This sequence further underscores the reward system’s function in reinforcing behaviours necessary for survival and progression within the dungeon’s perilous environment:

New achievement! You’ve killed a mob!

You’re a murderer! He probably had a family!

Reward: You can now gain experience. Get enough of it, and you might even go up a level.

New achievement! You’ve killed an armed mob with your bare fucking hands!

Holy crap, dude. That’s kinda fucked up.

Reward: You’ve received a Bronze Weapon Box!

New achievement! You’ve killed a mob a higher level than yourself!

You’re getting the hang of this. Don’t let it get to your head.

Reward: You've received a Bronze Adventurer Box!

(Dinniman 50)

The above achievements emphasise the act of killing being framed as a central behaviour the reward system aims to incentivise. The frequency and specificity of these rewards underscore these behaviours' significance in the game mechanics, as killing directly facilitates progress through experience gains, item acquisition, and level advancement.

The centrality of such murderous actions is explicitly confirmed during Carl's subsequent encounter with the tutorial guild master Mordecai, who explains that killing is a fundamental aspect of the game. This is further reinforced by recurring syndicate announcements, which consistently conclude with an exhortation to "kill, kill, kill!" (e.g. 120). This repetition not only highlights the system's intent to condition survivors toward violent behaviour but also situates killing as the primary means of survival and advancement within the dungeon's harsh, gamified environment.

The intrinsic motivation, rooted in the need to stay alive, thus serves as a powerful incentive for these lethal actions. However, similar behaviour modification can also emerge in other narratives or scenarios, such as gladiatorial settings, where survival depends on acts of violence without the presence of gamified mechanics. What distinguishes *Dungeon Crawler Carl*, therefore, is the addition of extrinsic motivation provided by the game's ludic features. These elements, including material and ludic rewards, augment the intrinsic survival incentive by shaping Carl's actions and, eventually, his identity.

The power of this extrinsic motivation becomes evident during Carl's first "boss battle", a confrontation with a particularly challenging creature in a designated "boss room" (96–102). To Carl's horror, the creature is revealed to be a "recycled" human woman – enormously obese, 15 feet tall, spewing venomous cockroaches, and yet visibly sentient, as indicated by her repeated cries for help in Spanish. Despite his initial instinct to assist her, Carl concludes that

his “only choice was to take her out” (100), as she poses a direct threat to his survival. This decision foregrounds the intrinsic motivation of self-preservation; however, the extrinsic motivation provided by the reward system also appears to play a significant role, even if Carl does not explicitly acknowledge it. After all, following the battle, he immediately becomes preoccupied with examining the rewards he earned, such as an upgrade to the skill “Iron Punch” (killing with bare hands) and various items like spiked kneepads, while strategizing how to utilise them for future progress in the game. His lack of reflection on the moral implications of killing the woman suggests that the promise of rewards influenced his decision to a similar degree as his need for survival. Thus, the gamified reward system does more than reinforce survival instincts; it actively shapes Carl’s priorities and behaviours, blending intrinsic and extrinsic motivations into a cohesive mechanism for behavioural modification.

This interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations is further illustrated in a subsequent incident: now able to identify boss rooms, Carl develops a strategy to avoid direct confrontation by constructing a bomb and throwing it into the room, killing all living creatures inside without engaging in an actual boss battle. However, as the achievements he earns reveal, the room contained not only a giant goblin boss but also several goblin infants. Initially, Carl reacts with reluctance to claim his rewards for that action, admitting he did not even “want to click on the [rewarded] box” (140). Nevertheless, the subsequent chapter opens directly with the list of achievements and rewards he gained from the action, indicating that he ultimately accepted them after all. He then ends his mental strategizing on how to use the rewards with a brief reflection on the moral implications of his actions, concluding that he “couldn’t blame [him]self, or feel guilty” (149), as killing these infants both ensured his survival as well as his progression in the game.

In this context, it is worth considering that Carl’s narration, presented in a first-person point of view, might be unreliable. His stated lack of guilt could mask deeper feelings of

remorse or conflict over the many creatures he has killed. However, his consistent focus on the reward system throughout the novel suggests that both survival and extrinsic rewards do indeed drive his behaviour. For instance, Carl later even explicitly refers to going on another killing spree merely as going to “level up [his] skills” (180), and he expresses excitement over rewards such as specific items or levels, calling them “great loot” and “exactly [what he] had been hoping for” (201) after gaining them through yet more murderous actions. These moments indicate that the reward system does more than incentivise survival; it actively shapes Carl’s identity, steering him toward embracing a “killer” role within the game. By intertwining the intrinsic motivation of survival with the extrinsic appeal of ludic rewards, the system fosters a complex interplay of influences that redefine Carl’s behaviour and self-perception.

This type of transformation is occasionally even more explicitly illustrated in the Apocalypse LitRPG novel *Jake’s Magical Market* (Mathews 2021), which portrays a scenario in which our world is transformed into a gamified hunting ground, where monsters hunt humans, and other races, such as elves, pursue these monsters through the use of magical cards. Humans are integrated into this new ludic system as well, including the protagonist Jake, who appears to quickly adapt to the post-apocalyptic environment and the behaviours expected within it. This is, for example, illustrated by his internal debate about killing a group of beavers inhabiting a dungeon for ludic gain:

I wasn’t sure if I could ever bring myself to tackle this dungeon. The little guys just seemed so damn cute. I couldn’t imagine myself ruthlessly slaughtering my way through their dam, their cute little bodies dying dramatically all around me. I already felt like enough of an asshole after looting the town. Killing innocent-looking beavers seemed like too much.

Then again, shiny loot and new cards did beckon . . .

(Mathews 149)

Jake’s awareness of the “shiny loot and new cards” that await him after completing such a task demonstrates that the game’s reward system has effectively conveyed its extrinsic incentives. In his case, the extrinsic motivation appears even more pronounced than in *Dungeon Crawler*

Carl, as Jake is not explicitly instructed that “killing” is essential for survival. The absence of direct commands to “kill, kill, kill” highlights the power of the reward system in conditioning Jake’s behaviour independently, as he is still drawn toward violence to achieve progress.

A closer comparison between the two novels underscores the role of viewership and entertainment in *Dungeon Crawler Carl*. While Jake’s actions are motivated primarily by extrinsic rewards without the explicit pressure of audience expectations, Carl’s decisions are shaped by a reward system embedded within a televised spectacle. This framing emphasises the performative aspect of Carl’s behaviour, as his survival and success are not only incentivised by ludic rewards but also shaped by the entertainment demands of the viewing audience. Thus, *Dungeon Crawler Carl* presents a scenario where the intertwining of reward systems and entertainment further amplifies the conditioning of its protagonist’s actions, distinguishing it from the less overtly performative structure of *Jake’s Magical Market*.

While Jake’s consideration of killing revolves around strategic concerns, such as minimising personal harm, Carl faces a distinct and more performative challenge: the necessity to “kill [...] with style” (Dinniman 39). This requirement, which blends violence with spectacle, is communicated directly through the reward system itself, emphasising its informational function. Repeatedly, Carl receives achievements and corresponding rewards for employing particularly brutal or creative methods of killing. Examples include his skill level in “Iron Punch” or his use of explosives; however, no method is as prominent, heavily rewarded, and behaviour-reinforcing as killing with his feet:

The Foot Soldier skill increased the damage I dealt by kicking.

The Smush skill was... something else.

The voice reading the skill description was deeper, more throaty than usual. I could actually hear him breathing like he was a dude beating himself off while he said it.

Smush: Skill Level 3

Killing with your feet. Your bare, beautiful feet.

Taking your bare foot, placing it on top of a living, conscious life, and then pressing lovingly down until that life ceases to be. Is there a more noble way to kill?

The amount of pressure you can bring to bear upon an enemy with your unshod foot is increased by 10% with each level of this skill.

(Dinniman 78)

Although Carl initially resists modifying his behaviour to align with the skill, particularly due to its sexualised and, thus, unsettling description, the tangible rewards and advantages it offers ultimately prove too compelling for Carl to ignore. This dynamic exemplifies what has been referred to as “ludic seduction” (Hulsey 123), wherein the interplay of intrinsic survival motivation and extrinsic rewards erodes resistance to even repugnant actions. Carl’s behaviour evolves accordingly: he ceases searching for shoes, applies a pedicure kit received as a material reward (with assistance, due to his inexperience), and increasingly relies on his feet for combat. Over time, the number of kills he executes using this method grows significantly, often involving deliberate choices to forego alternative methods.

Despite this progression, it remains evident that Carl does not enjoy the act of killing with his feet (cf. 257) meaning that his actions are driven solely by the system’s rewards. This transformation highlights the potency of gamified reward systems in modifying protagonists’ behaviour and skillsets, even in ways that conflict with their personal comfort or morality. While such entertainment-focused rewards are not universal across Apocalypse LitRPGs, this example demonstrates how the interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations can push protagonists toward actions they might otherwise avoid, reinforcing behaviours that align with the game’s objectives.

In *Dungeon Crawler Carl* and similar Apocalypse LitRPGs, ludic elements therefore impose implicit constraints on survivors’ agency, shaping their decision-making by intertwining intrinsic survival instincts with extrinsic motivations provided by gamified reward systems. Carl’s choices, such as killing goblins or confronting a sentient yet deadly boss creature, reveal the profound influence of these systems, where the achievements celebrating particularly

creative acts of violence demonstrate how the reward framework conditions Carl's actions. Even moments of hesitation, such as his reluctance to accept rewards for killing goblin infants, ultimately give way to the system's pull, blending survival imperatives with the extrinsic lure of progression. The reward system, thus, not only incentivises Carl's behaviour but also reshapes his identity, steering him towards embracing a "killer" and therewith connected "entertainer" role within the game's mechanics.

The interplay between survival and reward-driven motivations thereby transforms individual agency and identity in profound ways. The next chapter, by contrast, will explore how these ludic systems extend beyond individuality, examining their influence on Carl's identity as part of the broader survivor community and the ways in which collective behaviour is shaped by the gamified environment.

5.2. *Human Races*: Ostracising Mechanics and Level-based Hierarchies

A defining feature of Apocalypse LitRPGs is that the protagonist does not experience ludic change in isolation; instead, the transformation affects the entire human population collectively. This communal shift mirrors the inherently social nature of games, particularly role-playing games, which are often characterised as communal practices (cf. Hugaas). The properties of games that foster community dynamics become especially pronounced in the context of Apocalypse LitRPGs. What these properties entail exactly, and how they manifest within these shared experiences will be the focus of the following examination.

One notable characteristic is the quantitative nature of many role-playing game mechanics, such as levels, experience points, and other metrics of progress. These features inherently invite comparison and often lead to competition among players or, in the case of Apocalypse LitRPGs, among survivors. The formation of hierarchies within such settings is almost inevitable, thereby; however, this raises important questions: how are these hierarchies

mediated within the survivor communities? More significantly, what do the ludic elements of these gamified apocalypses communicate within the social networks that emerge among the survivors?

To address these questions, Donath's signalling theory offers a useful framework (2007). This theory concentrates on how certain qualities in individuals can be observed by others and interpreted without being explicitly communicated (233). Signalling theory has already been applied in research on gaming communities (e.g. Cruz et al.), making it particularly appropriate for examining Apocalypse LitRPGs. In this context, both types of signals Donath has observed to be implicitly communicating information about individuals, i.e. conventional signals and assessment signals, are mediated through the ludic elements of these narratives, as seen in the novel *Dungeon Crawler Carl*. Conventional signals, which infer meaning through "laws and social mores" (Donath 234) – for example, sirens on cars signal to others that the people driving them are emergency responders – are exemplified by the skull-mechanic within this story. On the other hand, assessment signals, which are directly tied to observable, quantified qualities (233), are represented by the levelling system, which reflects a character's actual abilities or achievements, providing a reliable measure of their competence or progress. By examining how these signals operate within the ludic framework of Apocalypse LitRPGs, it becomes clear that the gamified elements do more than facilitate survival; they actively shape the social structures and interactions within the survivor communities.

Analysing convention signalling in *Dungeon Crawler Carl* first, the skull-mechanic is introduced shortly after Carl discovers the body of a fellow crawler for the first time. Upon examining the corpse, the game informs him that she was killed by another dungeon crawler, i.e. human survivor of the apocalypse, named "Frank Q." (111), whom Carl, coincidentally, later encounters in a safe zone:

I examined his properties as he did the same to me.
Crawler #324,119. "Frank Q."

Level 8.

Race: Human.

Class: Not yet assigned.

He did not have any stars by his name, which meant he'd never killed a boss. But he had something else.

Three skulls.

I knew exactly what the skulls were going to indicate even before I focused on them.

Crawler Killer X 3.

I suddenly felt very cold.

(Dinniman 151)

As this quote illustrates, the skull-mechanic communicates that Frank has killed other human beings, breaking the implicit social rule of not killing fellow survivors. This mechanic thus functions as an explicit form of a conventional signal within the apocalyptic context, marking individuals as threats to the community.

In contrast, Apocalypse LitRPGs like *Primal Hunter* lack such a feature. In *Primal Hunter*, Jake, the protagonist, kills other humans without any visible marker of his actions. As a result, during an encounter with another group, he gets easily underestimated and even belittle. Believing Jake to be non-threatening, the group actually attempts to kill him, only for Jake to effortlessly overpower and murder many of them instead (99-119). Here, the absence of signalling provides Jake with a tactical advantage, allowing him to manipulate others' perceptions of himself, solidifying a false image of him being harmless.

In *Dungeon Crawler Carl*, however, the skull-mechanic makes such a manipulation impossible and, instead, has profound implications for social dynamics. Initially, before Carl learns of this mechanic, he positions himself in within the survivor community as a kind of protector, resolving to hunt down individuals who killed fellow crawlers, both to revenge the latter and to ensure the community's safety (112-113). However, geared with the knowledge of the skull-mechanic, his motivations evolve: while he first seeks to punish these murderers on moral grounds, he later refrains from killing Frank to avoid earning skulls himself. This hesitation demonstrates Carl's recognition of the skull-mechanic's power to influence his

standing within the community, therefore proving the skulls to function as a conventional signal. After all, they merely convey the message of having killed fellow crawlers, not the circumstances that led to this action, potentially leading to ostracism due to a lack of context.

These limitations of the skull-mechanic become apparent when Carl meets Imani, a part of a group of nurses protecting elderly survivors – the game system shows twelve skulls next to Imani's name (172). Initially alarmed, Carl later learns from Imani's friend that she killed twelve of these elderly individuals with her sword during an attack of a fire-breathing monster, granting them a quick death to spare them from being burned alive (176). This revelation highlights the lack of contextual information provided by the skull-mechanic, which reduces complex moral decisions to simple markers. The deliberate design of this mechanic fosters tension and conflict within the community of survivors, as players are conditioned by the game to view skull-marked individuals with suspicion, which, naturally, provides more dramatic content for the alien audiences to watch.

Carl's evolving understanding of the deliberate limitations of the skull-mechanic is further demonstrated when he observes one of the most successful crawlers, Lucia, in a TV-rerun, now bearing numerous skulls. Instead of immediately judging her as a murderer as he had done with Imani, this time, Carl reflects on the absence of context and refrains from making hasty conclusions (336).

Since not everyone reaches this level of understanding, however, the skull-mechanic thus operates as a conventional signal that fundamentally shapes the social fabric of the survivor community, fostering distrust and complicating moral judgments. By reducing complex actions to a simplistic marker, it not only heightens tensions among players but also forces individuals like Carl to navigate the fine line between survival and social standing through the use of game mechanics. How this effect is also achieved by assessment signalling will be examined in the following section about the levelling system.

As mentioned in the theory chapter introducing LitRPGs, levels have long been a staple of role-playing game mechanics, functioning as a prominent tactic for establishing authority. They not only confer prestige but also grant skills and abilities that lower-level players lack. As a result, levelling systems serve as assessment signals, enabling players to gauge the strength of others and determine their rank within a social hierarchy. This dynamic is evident in *Dungeon Crawler Carl*, even though the levelling system is less prominent than the reward system. Indeed, levels are often tied to specific achievements and serve as a subset of the broader reward structure. Despite this secondary nature, the influence of levelling on social relationships and hierarchies within the narrative remains significant.

When Carl meets the group that includes Imani, most members are low-levelled individuals, such as the aforementioned elderly people and also their nurses themselves, who are not as combat-savvy as Carl and, thus, immediately accept his help due to his higher level, implicitly positioning him as their leader thereby. However, Imani, who has the highest level Carl has seen so far, does not assume a leadership role, nor does Carl view her as an authority figure. This reaction stems from Carl's theory of how Imani achieved her level:

“Did you see that Imani’s level?” I asked, standing to see if I could still read it. “She was level 10. And that was partially because she’d been forced to kill all those people.”

“So? Are you saying if someone else comes, they might kill all the old people? Just to get experience? Oh, Carl darling. Nobody is quite that evil,” Donut paused. “Are they?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “And I don’t want to find out, either.”

(Dinniman 180)

While Carl's above speculation remains unconfirmed, Imani's background does strongly imply that killing other crawlers provides a significant boost in levelling. This is also evident in the crawler killer Frank Q. having reached level 8 without ever having defeated any bosses, and his partner Maggie even having reached level 9 in the same manner. Carl's decision not to fight both of them, despite initially wanting to, reflects his reliance on levels as a measure of an

opponent's strength. He states: "[Frank is] level eight, the same as us, and [Maggie]'s level nine. Getting to nine is hard, so she probably has a lot of skills" (159). This interaction reveals two key aspects of the levelling system: first, Carl's assessment of others is based purely on their level rather than specific knowledge of their abilities, underscoring the system's influence on social dynamics. Second, the ability to level up more quickly through morally dubious means, such as killing fellow survivors, highlights how the game's design creates tension and distrust within the community. However, this dynamic relies on the community's awareness of the experience-boost gained through acts of violence against its members; in the absence of such knowledge, individuals like Frank and Maggie could still be accepted as legitimate authority figures based solely on their high levels.

The impact of levelling on such social roles is even more pronounced in *Apocalypse Parenting* (Ampersand 2022), where survivors of aliens sending monsters to our world for their own entertainment convene at a children's playground to discuss their accumulated points. In this Apocalypse LitRPGs, these points function as levels, as they determine the acquisition of abilities in the exact same manner. During this meeting, a former military colonel attempts to assert authority but is undermined when his point total is revealed:

My son paused at the top of the slide, squinting up at the colonel. [...] "So, did you kill a lot [of alien monsters]? Do you have a lot of points?"

[...]

[The Colonel] made a noble effort to retain his authority. "I judged it important that I take our enemy's measure, so I engaged in combat with one [alien monster]. I have accumulated 16 points."

"Huh," said Gavin. "I have 402." He slid down, apparently no longer interested.

I winced as Gavin effortlessly torpedoed the colonel's authority.

(Ampersand 122-123)

Despite the initial respect shown to the colonel, the group loses faith in his leadership upon learning that a six-year-old has more points than him. This moment clearly illustrates the

levelling system's power to shape social roles based solely on quantitative measures, often at the expense of qualitative considerations.

However, as much as high levels generally suggest expertise, it is unlikely that a low-level adult could not generally overpower a six-year-old child like Gavin, which shows that high levels can also create a false sense of security. In *Dungeon Crawler Carl*, Carl nearly dies attempting to defeat a boss whilst being on the high level of eight (187-194), despite having successfully beaten a similarly levelled boss before when he had only been at level five (98-102). This incident underscores the unreliability of levels as an absolute measure of ability. Nevertheless, levels remain an influential assessment signal with regards to social dynamics, determining social hierarchies and roles within survivor communities. These quantitative metrics therefore leave little room for individuals to define their roles within these communities based on personal qualities or achievements outside the game's framework.

In *Dungeon Crawler Carl*, ludic elements such as the skull-mechanic and levelling system are thereby shown to constrain survivors' agency by embedding rigid frameworks of conventional and assessment signalling within the narrative. These mechanics shape individual identities and social roles, as players are evaluated and hierarchised based on game-determined markers rather than personal qualities or nuanced actions. By reducing complex social processes to simplified metrics, these systems foster tension, distrust, and competition within survivor communities, illustrating the profound impact of gamified structures on personal agency within collective dynamics.

Conclusion

As demonstrated by the above analysis, Apocalypse LitRPGs illustrate how ludic elements fundamentally shape survivors' agency and their identities within the enforced game's

framework. Through a close examination of *Dungeon Crawler Carl*, it becomes evident that, at an individual level, mechanics like reward systems compel protagonists to adopt roles such as that of the “killer” and, secondarily connected through creative methods of killing, of the “entertainer”, demonstrating how intrinsic survival imperatives are fused with extrinsic motivations to align with the system’s objectives. On a community level, elements like the skull-mechanic and levelling system impose hierarchical structures, fostering competition, distrust, and a reliance on gamified markers to evaluate social roles and behaviours. These mechanics reduce complex moral and social processes to simplified signals, reinforcing the pervasive influence of ludic systems on survivors’ identities and agency.

As the enforced gamification of Apocalypse LitRPGs reshapes the very existence of survivors within our transformed world, the next chapter explores Portal LitRPGs, where individuals are transported into worlds where the ludic is inherent. This offers a contrasting perspective on how agency and identity are negotiated compared to those provided by Simulation and Apocalypse LitRPGs, as here game systems neither constitute virtual realities, nor are they imposed onto unwilling participants; instead, they are integral to the very fabric of mundane life itself.

6. PORTAL LitRPG

— Game Subversion in *The Wandering Inn* —

As illustrated in Chapter 5, the sudden imposition of game structures as the foundation of everyday life in Apocalypse LitRPGs profoundly influences protagonists' behaviour, social interactions, and often leads to significant changes in their sense of self. Widely influential in this transformation is the fact that this ludic apocalypse is collectively experienced by all of humanity, fostering solidarity and feelings of self-interest alike. What if, however, only one person encounters this sudden shift? What if they are transported from our world, which, granted, has some play-elements integrated into certain cultural practices (cf. Huizinga), but is essentially non-ludic, to a game-like world, with levels, quests, skill points and other role-playing game components defining everyday-life?

This speculative approach is exactly what constitutes the foundation of Portal LitRPGs, the subgenre of this type of gaming literature where protagonists from our world magically stumble into new fantastic, ludic environments (see chapter 3.1). Since game systems are native to these other worlds, one key difference between Portal LitRPGs from Apocalypse LitRPGs lies in the manner protagonists are introduced to these ludic frameworks: while Carl from *Dungeon Crawler Carl*, for instance, both receives an announcement detailing the goals and general rules of the game (Dinniman 7-9) and gets to be part of a tutorial guild, where he is taught about the individual mechanics (34-47), the two protagonists in *The Wandering Inn* receive no such overt instructions. Instead, Portal LitRPG protagonists usually have to piece together all the information gradually via interpreting the notifications popping up in their minds, alerting them of how whatever action they had just carried out granted them a level up or a similar ludic reward, as well as through conversations with inhabitants of that world. This lack of understanding intensifies the characters' struggles to adapt, making it more necessary

for them to rely on the knowledge they have from our world to navigate these unfamiliar environments. Their styles of existing in these ludic worlds are, thus, naturally unique and utterly different from those of the locals.

This chapter will therefore explore how the respective game systems ingrained in the worlds portrayed in Portal LitRPGs respond to such gameplay rooted in earthly knowledge. After all, since here the ludic structures are not implemented to force its players down a certain path as is often the case in Apocalypse LitRPGs (see chapter 5), but constitute the framework underlying life in general, even “players” from other worlds must somehow be accommodated. Hence, what these ludic worlds should be able to adjust to as well is a mode of playing which uses whatever tool available, including exclusive outsider knowledge, or even, regarding the second of *The Wandering Inn*’s protagonists, Ryoka Griffin, an aversion to playing at all. In actual games with defined boundaries that do not overlap with the mundane, both approaches – playing with an advantage and refusing to play, that is – would typically be considered subversions of the game itself (cf. Huizinga 11); however, within the context of Portal LitRPGs, I argue that it is aspects of the ludic framework itself that allow or even encourage the aforementioned subversive behaviours, which will be analysed drawing on Huizinga’s concept of the false player and the spoilsport respectively.

6.1. [*False Player Class Obtained!*]: Advantageous Ludic Translation of Skills

In contrast to his detailed descriptions of spoilsports and how society as a whole tends to ostracise them (see 6.2), false playing, i.e. cheating, is only marginally discussed in Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens*, essentially only to oppose the former concept and deepen the understanding of the same. As a result, readers are left with the following short definition: “[the false player] pretends to be playing the game and, on the face of it, still acknowledges the magic circle” (11), the “magic circle” referring to the spatial, temporal, illusion-upholding and, most significantly,

rule-based boundaries of a game (10). Given that only “pretend[ing]” to respect these boundaries indicates secret overstepping of the same, this definition is clearly centred around deception, an act that is, however, sheer impossible to implement within the ludic worlds of Portal LitRPGs: as pointed out above, the exact mechanics and rules of the respective game systems are neither explicitly laid out – they are only gradually communicated via “algorithmic translation[s]” (Sicart), e.g. the implied cost of “x stamina points per climb” (see 2.1) – nor are they exhaustive. Quite the contrary, the “magic circle” is rendered obsolete by their integration into life in general and by their consequent high adaptability to each and every one of its “players”, or rather inhabitants, and their individual approaches to the game itself. And, indeed, it is this exact flexibility of the system that evokes false playing, albeit in a different form than Huizinga proposed.

Its undeniable significance to game studies notwithstanding, *Homo Ludens* does not consider many types of games owing to its age, either because, quite simply because they did not exist at the time of writing or because they had only been established to a small, negligible extent. Video games, for instance, fit the first category of games that were only invented later on, in this case, due to technological advancements. As the programmes and the platforms these games are played on wield full control over their players’ manoeuvrability, cheating cannot be directly deceitful here, unless the game itself is changed through reprogramming, amongst others via using cheat codes (Consalvo 91) or upgrades to the physical hardware itself (cf. Huin).

An example of the second category is role-playing games, for instance, which are only considered through the lens of theatre in Huizinga’s work, as they had not yet been commercialised, formalised, and, hence, popularised the way they have been since the mid-20th century (cf. Peterson). Aside from clearly deceptive acts that align with Huizinga’s understanding of false playing, such as falsely claiming to a game master in a Dungeons and

Dragons session that your dice landed on a higher score than they actually did (cf. Martin-TT), other actions might also be considered cheating even when they are not rooted in ill intent: attending a LARP melee event as a martial artist (cf. Kungfudemon 2014), or metagaming, where “a player’s real-life knowledge of the game affects their character’s behaviour” (Andruid 2022). An example of metagaming might be immediately distrusting a character simply because they are played by someone the player dislikes. Closely connected to this is another way of cheating without ill intent, namely the so-called min-maxing strategy, i.e. “maximizing a specific desirable ability, skill, or other power of a character and minimizing everything else, seen as undesirable” (*Giantbomb*).

This brief overview of various forms of cheating omitted in *Homo Ludens* demonstrates that false playing is not exclusively rooted in intentional deception, yet such actions are frequently categorised as cheating. Addressing this phenomenon, Mia Consalvo’s study on differing stances on cheating identifies a common defining feature, more generally describing cheating as “an activity that confers unfair advantage to the player” (103).

Indeed, the advantage that Portal LitRPG protagonists gain through their otherworldly status constitutes a form of false playing, despite the absence of deceit. In the case of Erin Solstice from *The Wandering Inn*, this manifests in the game system enhancing the value of skills that are considered basic life skills in our world, and adapting to activities previously unknown to it, offering foreign players access to a broader base of knowledge in the process. Both of these advantages, conferred by Erin’s outsider knowledge, significantly impact her agency within the ludic world in two ways: first, by immediately translating her pre-existing skills, the system provides her with crucial information about its functionality without her having to guess or search for instructions. Secondly, and more importantly, this ludic translation expands her range of possible actions by granting her proficiency in a variety of activities from the outset.

Beginning with an analysis of the positive revaluation of fundamental life skills, Erin Solstice, one of the two protagonists in *The Wandering Inn*, is immediately confronted with the ludic nature of the world into which she has been transported, as evidenced by messages appearing in her mind:

Her eyelids lowered. Her breathing grew slower. Erin just had enough consciousness for one last thought. “Now I’m really, really hungry.”

[Innkeeper Class Obtained!]

[Innkeeper Level 1!]

[Skill – Basic Cleaning obtained!]

[Skill – Basic Cooking obtained!]

“...What was that?”

(Pirateaba 18)

Prior to this instance, she had already been aware of how fantastical this place was – this fact would be difficult to deny, given that the first thing she encountered was a dragon spitting fire at her (11) – but this particular revelation was even more surprising to her to say the least, especially in light of what prompted the game system to react in the above fashion: Erin had merely entered the abandoned inn in hopes of finding shelter from both dangerous creatures and the pouring rain, briefly thought about how hungry she is and what to do about it, and, to get more comfortable in there after the previous ordeals, she dusted off the areas she intended to sleep in (8-18). Understandably, getting rewarded by the game system for such, by our standards, ordinary behaviour causes Erin much confusion regarding its actual rules and mechanics. This is only cleared up later in the novel, during a conversation with a local:

“[W]hy don’t we get levels for everything? Like...walking. Is there a [Walker] class?”

[...]

“Walking is something we do, not something we live for, yes? Only things that we make our goals and dreams form classes.”

“But that does mean you could get a class for eating, right?”

“You mean a [Gourmet]? I’ve heard some rich merchants and nobility have that class.”

(Pirateaba 457-458)

While this explanation provides some clarity on the matter, it also creates a contradiction in the case of Erin's [Cleaning] skill. For example, cleaning is an activity she neither performs gladly – something she 'lives for' – nor considers herself particularly skilled at, as evidenced by the text: "Of the numerous and varied—of the few skills Erin possessed, cleaning was not one of them" (44).

This rather dismissive attitude towards cleaning and similar tasks, however, reflects our world's norm quite well: often termed "basic life skills", at least a modicum of these activities is deemed essential to possess in order to be considered a mature, fully realised adult (cf. Andaloro). Apart from the fulfilment of such social expectations, performing these "basic life skills" does not commonly produce any other rewards, for instance, a high income – in fact, comparing SalaryExplorer's report on the average salaries of cleaning and housekeeping personnel in Austria in 2024 to the more general Austrian salary report of Stepstone (Schönfellner 2024), cleaners are revealed to earn less than half of what constitutes the average monthly salary. Nor are these skills formerly taught in school and subsequent education (cf. Andaloro), further establishing their general low status in our world.

Having such a skill ludically acknowledged in *The Wandering Inn* signifies an upward revaluation of the same, generating what, with regards to gamification, Raczkowski and Schrape term "motivational environments" (313). And, indeed, Erin almost effortlessly levelling up in these skills, because she had already moderately been proficient in them due to our world's standards, instantly encourages her to apply them even more frequently and enthusiastically, which, consequently, levels up her [Innkeeper]-class and results in her inn becoming more and more popular.

With more experience in these "basic life skills", the protagonist of Samer Rabidi's Portal LitRPG *Eight* (2022), an old man who is transported to another world and into the body of an eight-year-old after his death, this ludic revaluation is even more explicitly expressed by his

“character sheet” being filled up with highly-ranked skills such as “Cooking” or “Relationship” right from the beginning (44). Despite being reborn as a child, he therefore is shown to have virtually no difficulties advancing in this new world, all due to the game treating his sixty-four-year long experience in these “basic life skills” as an immediate ludic boost.

The integration of basic life skills into the game systems of Portal LitRPGs, thus, facilitates their protagonists’ assumption of the role of a false player, as their real-world knowledge provides them with an unfair advantage within the ludic space. In the case of *The Wandering Inn*, Erin’s proficiency in basic tasks such as cleaning and cooking, skills typically undervalued in our world, are immediately recognised and rewarded by the game system, as it offers Erin a direct boost in her [Innkeeper] class, leading to her swift progression within the game world. The early recognition of her mundane abilities, therefore, broadens Erin’s agency, both ludically and with regards to her general professional success, by allowing her to bypass traditional learning curves. Rather than struggling to adapt, at least ludically, or discover new skills from scratch, Erin’s pre-existing knowledge enables her to operate effectively in this new world without much effort. Her experience thereby demonstrates how the immediate translation of real-world skills into the ludic not only enhances her agency but also propels her further into false playing, as she continues to exploit this mechanism for greater success in a world that rewards actions she had previously performed without recognition.

This process raises the question, however, how adaptive the game system is when met with abilities that have never been developed, much less exercised by any of this ludic world’s inhabitants before? After all, as mentioned above, to be considered actually successful in our world, people are expected to have mastered more than just “basic life skills”, commonly through formal training (e.g. college, apprenticeship, work experience). Erin herself might not be an accomplished professional in any craft – at least the first book in the series does not

indicate anything of that sort – but she still has certain knowledge that, through the game’s response to their application, is revealed to be exclusive to our world.

The most significant example of the game system in *The Wandering Inn* seemingly being oblivious to Erin’s foreign knowledge is how it handles her being highly proficient at playing chess. A game, which, within this ludic world, has only been invented a short time ago, chess is not yet established here insofar as to be ludically integrated, i.e. count as an activity in which a class and levels can be obtained (246). In fact, the only person in the entire city Erin now lives near to who really seems to understand how to play chess, is a level 22 [Tactician], a circumstance that, according to Erin’s new friend Relc, renders him practically unbeatable (249). In a shocking turn of events – not for Erin or us readers, but certainly for the onlooking townsfolk – she wins the match with ease, prompting her to get quizzed about the origin of her expertise several times throughout the novel. The most substantial of these conversations, though, is undoubtedly the following:

“How are you so good at that, Erin? Olesm says you’re the best player he’s ever seen or heard of. Are you a high-level [Tactician], then?”

“No.”

“What about some other class? Or is it a rare skill?”

“No, it’s just *skill*. Not the kind you get from leveling up. Just skill in the game.”

(Pirateaba 463)

Not only is this exchange representative of this world’s natives’ deep-rooted dependency on the ludic in general – accomplishing anything without the help of game-granted abilities appears to be an utterly foreign concept to them – but it also further cements the impression that the game considers chess to be too recent an invention to warrant its own [Chess Player]-class. Instead, it connects it to the next best thing, that is, the [Tactician]-class. Ironically in view of the above conversation, Erin did gain the very same exclusively through her playing and teaching chess.

The significance of this outcome becomes especially evident when considering the supernatural effect of acquiring skills through class attainment: not only does this process

reduce the time typically required to complete tasks associated with a given skill, such as Erin finishing her cleaning in a remarkably short time, to the point of surprising herself (44), but it also expands the player's knowledge. For example, upon receiving the [Basic Cooking] skill, Erin suddenly gains the knowledge of what steps baking bread entails, despite having no prior experience with it. In the case of the [Tactician] class, the novel highlights that it encompasses not only knowledge useful for combat (cf. 1093-1095) but also rapid strategic thinking (cf. 1224). This illustrates an additional advantage granted by the game system to players from our world: in its effort to accommodate skills unknown to it, the system not only adapts but also imparts more generalised abilities, along with all their associated properties and information, to foreign players. In the case of Erin gaining the [Tactician] class, this naturally also includes the aforementioned strategic knowledge, which, at the very end of the novel, she successfully applies when she and her friends defend her inn from an attacking mythic creature named Skinner (1182-1183).

Another prime example of game-world external skills being translated by the game environments into the “next best thing” can be found in 2022's *Azarinth Healer* (Rhaegar), where the protagonist Ilea's kickboxing expertise even produces two different ludic effects: a three-point boost on her “Endurance” stat (10), and gaining the “Azarinth Healer” class much more quickly than usual as her previous training proved helpful in learning the Azarinth fighting stances (28-29). A long forgotten yet immensely, powerful class, the latter actually marks the very beginning of Ilea's steep rise through the ranks in the novel.

The translation of skills unknown to the game system into broader knowledge, therefore, significantly expands the agency of Portal LitRPG protagonists. In the case of *The Wandering Inn*, the game system's adaptation of Erin's chess expertise into the [Tactician] class not only broadens her understanding of strategic thinking but also enhances her ability to navigate challenges within the ludic world. This exemplifies how the integration of foreign knowledge

allows characters to bypass conventional learning processes, offering them unique advantages that enhance their success and agency in both the narrative and the game mechanics.

Even though Erin Solstice is not shown to follow any particular ludic ambitions, never prioritising progress in the game structure underlying the world she now lives in, the two elements described above nevertheless steer her towards assuming the role of a false player: from the very beginning of *The Wandering Inn*, she capitalises on the fact that skills, which are elemental to have and, thus, far from exceptional in our world, explicitly reap rewards here. Likewise does she accept the game system overcompensating for proficiencies unfamiliar to it by refunding her with capabilities that extend beyond her original skillset, thereby offering her even broader benefits than those available to characters native to this world.

In its prioritising adaptability and empowerment for individuals, the game system of *The Wandering Inn* thereby generates its own subversion by containing features that disproportionally benefit players from our world. How that focus on ludic flexibility can even result in the rejection of the game as a whole will be demonstrated in the following analysis of the second protagonist of the novel.

6.2. [Spoilsport Class Ob—]: Cancelling mechanics and Partial Participation

Taking another look at the events described in the previous chapter, Erin Solstice's experience in the world depicted in *The Wandering Inn* might have been challenging at times, although, concerning her relationship with its underlying game system, it was a predominantly positive one, characterised by assimilation and, with regards to her new role as an innkeeper, even welcoming the change. This stance, however, is starkly contrasted by that of the second protagonist in the novel, Ryoka Griffin: hers is a stance of resistance, of ignoring and even

actively rejecting the ludic, which, by Huizinga's and many other researchers' definition (cf. Brown, Nissen), renders her a spoilsport.

As disclosed in the opening of the last subchapter (6.1), far more attention is devoted to spoilsports in *Homo Ludens* than it is to false players, which owes to the fact that the former has greater relevance to Huizinga's attempt of determining the boundaries of play. After all, false players are still playing the game, albeit differently than intended, whereas spoilsports "shatter [...] the play-world itself" (11). They do not acknowledge the "magic circle", but disregard or dismiss it altogether, "reveal[ing] the relativity and fragility of the play-world" in the process (11). As a result, the play-community is threatened in their identity, leading to the aforementioned harsh treatment of spoilsports in general. In a world entirely permeated by ludic structures such game-threatening behaviour, thus, has even more severe consequences, in light of which the questions arise as to why Ryoka would choose such a burdensome path and how it is even (ludically) possible for her to do so.

Regularly having arguments with herself in her own mind (e.g. 999), Ryoka evidently struggles to find a definite answer to the first question herself, although she does present as very confident in her decision when directly confronted by locals: in a conversation with the friendly mage Ceria, for example, Ryoka states that to her "classes and levels are a way for the world or some system to control people" (729), and that by refusing to play she is trying to avoid that exact control. Pondering over how foolish her boycott is considering that only levels have so far proven to help defend against the monsters dwelling in this fantasy world, she later even proclaims to her own doubting self that it was "better to die an idiot than a slave" (1000).

Whether or not she chooses to engage with the game system would be immaterial, though, if she were not able to not take part in the ludic and still exist or even excel in this world in the first place. Hence, finding the answer to the second question, i.e. in how far the game itself allows for such a refusal to play, proves to be even more substantial. The following analysis

will, therefore, focus on two game elements that play a vital role in this inclusion of spoilsports: the mechanic to cancel obtaining classes, skills, and levels, and the ludic independence of magic from the rest of the game system.

Focussing on the cancelling mechanic first, it has to be noted that in the middle of the novel, a drastic shift in perspective occurs: over twenty chapters into the story of Erin Solstice, *The Wandering Inn* suddenly introduces a different focalising character, one whose aversion against the game is clearly palpable from the beginning; though, only through the following instance is it revealed that she, Ryoka Griffin, is actually opting not to play it at all:

Damn. I forgot. Before I sleep. Concentrate. Block out the messages—

[Barefoot Runner Class Ob—]

[Barefoot Runner Le—]

[Skill: Runner's—]

[Ski—]

I hate having to do that every night.

(Pirateaba 289-290)

After nearly 300 pages of observing the first protagonist's ready acceptance of the ludic elements presented to her, the system-challenging approach shown above comes as a surprise. This is particularly striking given that the possibility of halting the attainment of classes, skills, and levels, along with their associated automatic enhancements, had not previously been mentioned, let alone explicitly demonstrated.

Adding to the novelty of this cancelling mechanic is the fact that Ryoka is nonetheless excelling in this new world: not only are otherwise dangerous creatures quickly established to be no match for her martial arts (e.g. 271 or 662-664), but, even more prominently with regards to the plot, she almost immediately proves herself to be one of the fastest runners this world has ever hosted. Aside from immediately landing her a job at a Runner's Guild – an association of people delivering goods and messages on foot – this last circumstance quickly renders her its finest member, delivering supplies in record time and even accepting the most dangerous

requests (cf. 636-638). As that causes both the number of requests to decrease considerably and some particularly esteemed customers to eventually only accept deliveries from Ryoka herself (633), her prompt ascent occurs much to the disdain of many of her peers, resulting in them sabotaging and even assaulting her (417-420).

That she achieves this success even though she assumes the role of a spoilsport, meaning she accomplishes all this without ludic support through added skill- or class-proficiencies, makes it even more extraordinary, a circumstance not only affecting the people around her, but Ryoka herself: in classic exceptionalist fashion (cf. McNally), Ryoka, with her independence from the ludic system, quickly develops feelings of superiority over the other inhabitants in this world, culminating in a heated exchange later in the novel that costs her all her until then established friendships (Pirateaba 859-860),

A more thorough understanding of how these three matters – the cancelling mechanic, Ryoka’s success despite applying the former, and her rebellious attitude – are connected can be acquired by examining another example of such cancelling mechanics, albeit a far simpler one and less substantial as it does not revolve around not playing at all: in *Mayor of Noobtown* (Rimmel 2019) the protagonist Jim finds himself in another world together with a disempowered demon which had previously held him captive. Now that the demon, lovingly named “Shart” by Jim, had lost both its colossal stature and most of its magical abilities during the transport, it has to rely on Jim to take it to the demon door through which it could regain its powers. Upon stating as much during their first moments in this new world, Jim receives a mental message in a similar style as the ludic components find expression in *The Wandering Inn*:

- You have been offered a Quest: Take Shart to the Demon Door; this will allow the Elder Demon to reclaim his powers, reward unknown.

(Rimmel 29)

In the course of the novel, Jim is offered several such “quests”, all of which he readily pursues. In contrast, he makes a point of not accepting the one above, actively refusing to grant the wish of the demon who had previously treated him poorly (14-19). Via the mechanic of getting to choose to accept or decline quests, Jim thus exerts power over the creature, which is especially significant given that, even in its current shrunken state, the game still seems to consider it a superior being, showing it to be “worth a trillion XP” (23) – in comparison, a pack of wolves is later revealed to be worth around 400 experience points (49). If, within the context of this fantasy world, Shart is thereby higher in hierarchy and Jim’s declining its quest, consequently, signifies a disobeyed order issued by a higher-up, this game mechanic of being able to refuse a quest, therefore, allows players to subvert the general norms of the world the ludic system is native to, i.e. break what Brown terms the “diegetic rules” of role-playing games (263).

Similar diegetic standards in *The Wandering Inn* constitute, amongst many others, the expectation of refraining from accepting running requests beyond one’s level-determined standing within the social hierarchy of the Runner’s Guild (284). Within this guild, it is an unspoken rule, after all, that high-risk and high-paying quests should be offered to higher-levelled runners first; however, through the application of the cancelling mechanic, Ryoka gains the ability to bypass this such rules, thereby empowering her to transcend beyond the established limitations and become even more successful than the rule-abiding locals. Paradoxically, the game system thereby provides players with the means to subvert not only the system itself, but also the diegetic rules that are inherently shaped by its framework.

As much as the cancelling mechanic thus clearly encourages protagonists of Portal LitRPGs to assume the role of the most extreme form of the spoilsport, i.e. rejecting the game itself, it has to be considered that this is not the only way spoilsporting might occur. To a similar degree of that of false players (see 6.1), the interpretations of what constitutes a spoilsport have become increasingly diverse since the concept’s introduction in *Homo Ludens*: with regards to

genre conventions of video-games, for example, Kat Nissen (2018) already defines specific games that subvert gameplay expectations as spoilsports themselves, “innovat[ing] instead of infuriat[ing]”, which extends Huizinga’s idea of spoilsports bringing about progress (12) to an entire modern medium, rather than just characters within. A far narrower approach that has not been considered in *Homo Ludens* in any shape or form yet perfectly fits into the concept, is that of Ashley Brown (2012), which I will henceforth term “partial spoilsporting”. What this entails is the spoilsport actually playing the game, but “only so far as necessary for their own needs to be met” (270). While Brown applies this notion to a fairly specific situation, namely players leaving erotic role plays within the online game *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2010) as soon as they had reached personal gratification (Brown 268-270), it can, albeit in a different way, also be observed in Ryoka’s story in *The Wandering Inn*.

Refusing to partake in the most prominent aspects of the ludic system in the new world she is transported to – that is classes, skills, and levels – Ryoka does engage with another of its integral parts: magic. On several occasions, Ryoka is shown using magical potions (e.g. 493), she gets her broken leg fixed by a [Necromancer] (550-562), and even learns to cast spells herself (e.g. 777)¹. She engages in all of these actions, and that even though they are clearly part of the ludic, just as visually marked by square brackets as the other game elements discussed before.

In contrast to her explaining in detail why she has such a strong aversion against the levelling system and its related features, Ryoka does not give any reasons as to why she makes this exception. However, it is important to note that there are indeed stark differences between the rejected ludic elements and the ones she accepts: for one, the magical side of the game system does not require messages to pop up in the respective player’s head, invading their privacy in a way Ryoka despises. A second distinct contrast between the two lies in magic not

¹ Ryoka directly performing magic herself is more explicitly shown in the original webseries version of *The Wandering Inn*, most prominently in chapter 1.55 R, where she uses the [Fireball]-spell to defend herself against attacking enemies; however, this section was cut from the ebook-version I am basing my analysis on.

being quantified to the extent skills and classes are through levels. Granted, it is possible to level one's magic-related classes or spells, although, as Ryoka's [Elementalist]-friend explains, it is not necessary to do so; it merely speeds up the learning process (822). What this particular property indicates in terms of Ryoka's mindset is that it is less controlling, due to it not being based on measurability, comparison and subsequent hierarchical structures (cf. Raczkowski and Schrape 315), as well as being more qualitative in nature, additionally reinforcing her feelings of superiority.

The above properties of the magical aspect of this ludic world are not shared by all Portal LitRPGs, however, as magic in *Azarinth Healer*, for instance, is indeed firmly integrated into the rest of the game mechanics and cannot be performed without the acceptance of the ludic system as a whole (cf. 194). Partial spoilsporting is, therefore, not possible in this context, which, by extension, limits the players' agency. As it is indeed a feature of the game system in *The Wandering Inn*, this further suggests that providing full agency over how to approach this new world is the prime directive of its underlying ludic framework, which includes its own subversion, be it complete or only in part.

It has to be noted that it is unclear whether the rest of the game system can be handled just as separately, for example, whether it is possible to still level in a class if an associated skill is being cancelled. However, the separate treatment of magic alone already reflects such a high degree of customisability of the players' respective experiences in this world, that even Ryoka, the spoilsport par excellence, eventually becomes a part of it, albeit without embracing it in its entirety.

For the sake of transparency, it is important to acknowledge that Ryoka's spoilsport approach is notably unique within Portal LitRPG narratives. Most protagonists in the genre, including those in *Azarinth Healer*, *Eight*, and *Mayor of Noobtown*, while facing significant challenges

in adapting to their new environments, ultimately accept and integrate into the ludic structures imposed upon them. However, they are not given any choice in their level of engagement, as the game systems these characters encounter do not appear to be composed of elements designed to provide full agency to their respective players as it is the case in *The Wandering Inn*. Through its mechanics and overall composition, this particular system has been demonstrated to uniquely enable Ryoka to selectively engage with its elements, granting her unparalleled freedom in shaping her participation, and, in the process, fostering an identity fundamentally rooted in self-sufficiency and autonomy.

Conclusion

Although *The Wandering Inn* presents a game system that takes the fusion of the mundane and the ludic to the extreme – granting player-inhabitants complete agency in their engagement with the game structure – it still exemplifies the impact ludic elements of Portal LitRPGs have in allowing for individual participation. In the above analysis, I have illustrated how game systems' mere existence encourages characters transported from our world to this new one to adopt subversive approaches to the system: Erin Solstice's "false player"-strategy leverages her outsider status using the game's revaluation of her basic life skills as components of the levelling system, and its translation of uniquely foreign abilities into more broadly applicable ones. Similarly, Ryoka Griffin's "spoilsport"-behaviour arises from the game system's allowance for selective participation, which enables her to reject ludic components entirely while still operating within its framework through the acceptance of any elements related to magic. While these approaches are fundamentally oppositional, they are inherently contingent on the system's underlying mechanics and its broader ludic structure actively facilitating their existence in the first place.

With reference to my paper's overall hypothesis, the ludic elements in Portal LitRPGs have thus been demonstrated to significantly shape protagonists' agency by constituting flexible systems that allow for individualised engagement with the game worlds protagonists are transported to. Unlike the rigid constraints often seen in Apocalypse LitRPGs, the ludic frameworks in Portal LitRPGs empower characters like Erin and Ryoka to navigate these new realities on their own terms. Erin's "false player" strategy demonstrates how ludic structures reframe outsider knowledge as assets, broadening her agency within the system, while Ryoka's "spoilsport" behaviour underscores the capacity of these frameworks to permit selective participation. These examples illustrate how the ludic elements not only adapt to players from other worlds but also expand their ability to define their roles and identities within these game-like environments.

7. NATIVE LitRPG

— Divine Game Design in *All the Skills* —

As discussed in Chapter 6, the perspectives of locals in ludic worlds are prominently featured in Portal LitRPGs, but primarily to provide a source of exposition regarding the ludic for and a contrast to the foreigner-protagonists. This juxtaposition highlights the protagonists' uniqueness and often positions them as figures of innovation against the ludic backdrop in these narratives. Locals, on the contrary, are frequently depicted as rigid and unwilling to transcend their ingrained perspectives. In *The Wandering Inn* (Pirateaba 2018), for instance, they even go so far as to completely dismiss Ryoka's warning that the game system, deeply embedded in their world, functions not merely as a tool for them to use but as an instrument of control over them. This inflexibility stems from the overwhelming dominance of the ludic system in their society, with no alternative, non-ludic perspective to challenge it. In these worlds, ludic elements are not merely mechanisms for translating mundane processes; they are vital tools for ability gain, combat support, and the structuring of entire societal frameworks.

This reliance on game systems reflects the principles of “existential ludology” (cf. Payne 2009; Möring 2012; Kania 2017), a school of thought that draws parallels between the philosophy of existentialism and players' engagement with game mechanics. According to this approach, players take control of their in-game lives by utilising the mechanics provided, shaping the trajectory of their existence within the game all by themselves. This interpretation aligns well with the portrayal of ludic outcomes as man-made and reliant on the agency of the participants as shown in Portal LitRPGs. However, this theory is challenged by the narratives found in Native LitRPGs, a subgenre focused on the perspectives of these exact individuals that are born into ludic worlds.

Unlike Portal LitRPGs, Native LitRPG narratives typically begin with events entirely beyond the protagonists' control, initiated by the ludic system itself. For example, in *This Quest is Broken!* (Valentine 2021), Evelia's ludic journey starts when the Questing Stones bestow a confusing life quest upon her and an unwanted class (5), marking a departure from her "useless Child class" (2). Similarly, in *Battlefield Reclaimer* (North 2021), Sam is assigned a class automatically by the World Law upon his 18th birthday, launching his progression within the ludic framework he lives in. These narratives centre on protagonists who initially lack agency, positioning Native LitRPGs in opposition to existential ludology's emphasis on general player control.

Instead, Native LitRPGs align more closely with Olli Tapio Leino's critique of existential ludology (2019), which postulates the existence of an "occasionalist designer-god" (2) who pre-programmes players' paths. Even though Leino does not explicitly state so, the designer-god's influence is usually not directly communicated, but rather mediated through game mechanics in ludic environments. This is particularly evident in narratives with less straightforward forms of divine ludic intervention, such as *All the Skills* (Rae 2022). As outlined in the corpus selection chapter (3.2.), Arthur's ludic journey begins not through an explicit act performed by a designer-god, such as the above Questing Stones or the World Law, but through an accidental encounter with a dragon who gifts him a card. This card is essential for participation in the game system, as witnessed, for example, by how Arthur's ludic interface is only activated once he integrates the card into his heart instead of being an automatic component of life, as is the case in many other Native LitRPGs, such as *This Quest is Broken!*. Although Arthur's journey is thereby framed as accidental rather than explicitly predetermined, the belief in a form of designer-god remains pervasive in his society, as it is fundamentally organised around the possession and use of such cards. Applying Leino's religious metaphor to this narrative, it is therefore suggested,

that it is the cards themselves that can be interpreted as vessels of a grand divine design, functioning as ludic mechanisms through which individual lives are guided or controlled.

In the following analysis, I will explore how the functionality of Arthur's card(s) perpetuates the belief in divine game design. Two key features of these cards are central to this perpetuation: the arbitrariness with which skills are selected and assigned to specific classes, and the interplay between transparency and non-transparency regarding mediating game mechanics. These elements ultimately lead Arthur to surrender to the guidance of the game, accepting limited agency and a seemingly predetermined identity.

7.1. Card's mysterious ways: Arbitrary Selection and Assignment of Skills

Master of Skills

Legendary

Utility

This card grants the wielder the ability to immediately gain proficiency in any skill. Skills are automatically organized into categories and broken down into assigned values.

(Rae 22)

Marking the beginning of his ludic journey, the above introduction to Arthur's Master of Skills card occurs as he activates it by merging it with his heart, a process he knows from hearsay but has never experienced personally. After all, as a resident of a so-called borderland village, he has had limited exposure to cards, since these powerful objects are typically owned only by the wealthy or powerful, while individuals in borderland communities, mostly composed of banished criminals and the extremely poor, are excluded from such privileges. Therefore, Arthur's acquisition and activation of the card carry significant weight and emotional value, as it represents an extraordinary opportunity for advancement and personal transformation. At first glance, the card's ability to provide "*proficiency in any skill*" also certainly justifies its "Legendary" status, as, aligning with the conventions introduced in Portal LitRPGs, obtaining a skill in such ludic worlds, especially with proficiency, often signifies an almost magical

acquisition of expertise. This parallels examples like *The Wandering Inn*, where characters' skills manifest as automatic enhancements in ability and understanding. However, unlike in *The Wandering Inn*, where skills are deeply tied to a character's purpose or "something [they] live for" (Pirateaba 457), the Master of Skills card leaves the exact nature of what constitutes a "skill" ambiguous, raising questions about the scope and limitations of its power. Does it truly encompass "any" activity, or is it constrained by implicit rules, excluding mundane actions such as walking?

This ambiguity becomes more evident as Arthur begins to gain skills shortly after merging the card with his heart. His first acquired skill, "Basic Meal Preparation," emerges as he peels carrots, whereupon the card's influence immediately becomes apparent when he instinctively adjusts his grip and angle, improving his efficiency and avoiding injury (Rae 25-26). This transformation underscores the card's promised magical enhancement of skills: Arthur gains instant proficiency, bypassing the trial-and-error process typically required for learning. This tangible demonstration of skill acquisition reinforces the notion of legendary utility but simultaneously introduces new questions about the boundaries of this magical system. While the enhancement reflects a faithful execution of the card's promise, it also opens the door to further inquiries about the underlying mechanics and criteria defining "skills" in Arthur's world.

This becomes especially evident when, in the days following his activation of the Master of Skills card, Arthur begins to accumulate a range of skills, which he can monitor through his "internal chart" (69):

General Skills:

Fire Making - 7
Furniture Repair - 3
Tidying - 3
Wood Chopping - 6

Cooking Class:

Basic Meal Preparation - 9
Knife Work - 5

Scholarship Class:

Basic Reading - 7

Basic Writing - 5

(Rae 69-70)

As the card's activation text declared, this chart shows these abilities being both “*automatically organized into categories*” and “*broken down into assigned values*”, emphasizing the systematic nature of this magical enhancement. However, the assignment of skills to specific classes appears arbitrary. For instance, Furniture Repair and Wood Chopping, both usually associated with woodworking, are categorised as “General Skills” rather than being grouped into some carpenter-specific class. This lack of logical coherence raises questions about the criteria governing this automatic assignment.

Additionally, the omission of other abilities Arthur displayed within the same timeframe complicates this functionality. Examples of such abilities are hiding and whispering – perhaps rather referred to in a combined way, such as the common role-playing game skill Stealth – since Arthur hides with his father in a storage room, speaking in a “low tone” to avoid detection by Treasure Seekers, which are agents hunting for rare cards on behalf of the nobility (51). Despite these actions being essential to their immediate survival, the card does not recognise them as skills. This inconsistency highlights the seemingly arbitrary nature of skill selection and classification within the system, making the system in *All the Skills* appear less reactive and more prescriptive. The lack of transparency in skill assignment underscores a broader critique of how the game operates, prioritising some actions while ignoring others without clear rationale.

Arthur's response to this seemingly arbitrary classification and selection of skills within his chart is characterised by indifference, however, except for his initial annoyance at acquiring the Tidying skill. As demonstrated by his contemplations regarding this particular skill, his frustration with it stems from internalised struggles with masculinity, as he fears being called a “housewife” for possessing such a domestic ability (70). These initial negative feelings

notwithstanding, Arthur continues to level up this skill throughout the narrative. At first, his progression in Tidying appears accidental, but over time, it becomes deliberate, reflecting a growing acceptance and eventual pride in his cleanliness. This shift is most evident when Arthur assists in preparing dormitories for evacuees fleeing a region attacked by monsters. His exceptional tidying skills impress Magda, the team leader, who praises the speed and precision of his work. Arthur's internal monologue underscores his pride as he quips, "Well, it ought to be. He had a level 8 in Tidying" (225). Moreover, Arthur's mastery of the Tidying skill fosters feelings of superiority over the nobility. In one instance, he enters a nobleman's room and is immediately unsettled by its untidiness, contrasting his own meticulousness with their disarray. This moment highlights an unexpected social dynamic: a skill Arthur initially despised becomes a source for personal superiority, elevating him above individuals traditionally higher in the social hierarchy by his opinion. This evolution, however, raises a critical question: why did Arthur choose to level up a skill he originally detested?

Building on previous analyses in this paper, Arthur's motivation to level up all his gained skills, regardless of his feelings towards them, can be understood through the interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. As explored in detail in Chapter 5, extrinsic motivation manifests as the desire to progress within the game system itself. The skills, being "*broken down in assigned values*" are, thus, quantified in a way that makes these values tangible, inherently driving Arthur to seek higher levels simply for the sake of improvement. However, intrinsic motivation, in Arthur's case, is not survival, as earlier examined in the case of *Dungeon Crawler Carl* (Dinniman 2020) but is instead even more specifically narrative-driven. His primary intrinsic goal is namely to gain enough success to help his village and, especially, his father escape poverty through the powers granted to Arthur by progressing in the inherently ludic environment of his society.

Yet, beyond this motivational framework, another significant factor emerges, one tied to the very nature of Arthur's society with regards to its acceptance and even embrace of the ludic. Using Leino's concept of designer-gods, cards here take on the role of divine authorities shaping all individuals' lives that are in possession of the same. This ingrained belief is particularly reflected in Arthur frequently personifying his card, claiming it "agreed" with his actions (Rae 223) or that his success was due to its "wisdom" (89). His assertion that the card "thinks" (234) underscores this belief, positioning the card as a guiding entity that predetermines his path. Consequently, Arthur feels compelled to accept whatever skills the card provides, regardless of their seeming arbitrariness.

Indeed, the arbitrary nature of skill selection and assignment actually strengthens this perception of the card's authority, as it makes the process appear less responsive to Arthur's actions and more prescriptive, presenting skills as preselected paths rather than rewards for his endeavours. For instance, by assigning certain skills to defined classes like the Cooking Class, the card implicitly links them, presenting a cohesive and identifiable life path. In contrast, other skills are designated as "general", implying that they are either insignificant or should remain disconnected from other skillsets. This selective categorisation not only limits Arthur's sense of agency but also subtly steers him toward particular skill combinations, nudging him to adopt predefined roles. As a result, the card's control over his progression transforms it into a designer-god figure, reducing Arthur's autonomy while fostering his belief in its divine guidance.

The concept of limited agency in skill selection and assignment guiding him towards predetermined identities becomes even more pronounced when Arthur encounters the mechanic of equipping classes. Upon acquiring five synergistic skills, the card offers him the option to combine these into the "basic Gambler Class" (158). Without prior knowledge that such combinations were even possible, Arthur immediately equips the class with the thought, "there

could be only one answer. *Yes*” (160). This moment marks a significant shift in Arthur’s self-perception, as he not only accepts the class but also adopts its implied identity, even declaring, “He was a Gambler” (161), as well as quickly assuming behaviours aligned with this identity, such as standing around shuffling cards, lurking for people interested in playing poker with him, despite never initiating such games himself in the past. This seamless identification reflects the card’s ability to redefine Arthur’s sense of self, effectively steering him toward a predetermined identity, in this case the Gambler identity.

The same dynamic unfolds when Arthur gains the Thief Class, albeit with greater initial resistance. His objection – “I’m not a thief” (131) – stems from his deeply held principles, which predate his ludic journey. However, Arthur ultimately surrenders to the card’s authority, trusting its judgment as he had done before. This trust is rooted in the card’s consistent track record of providing him with advantages: skills such as **Stealth** enable him to escape a murderous card-hunter (196), while **Acting** allows him to fool a dragon-rider academy headmaster into granting him free enrolment when he made her believe that he was an orphaned refugee (223). Additionally, his cooking skills eventually secure him rapid promotions in a kitchen job, showcasing the practical benefits of embracing the card’s direction. Consequently, Arthur does not wish to forgo potential advantages, even in cases where the card’s suggestions challenge his moral compass, so, eventually, he equips the Thief class too. Despite vowing that it would not alter his core identity, Arthur quickly begins using its abilities, stealing an apple with ease just moments after having accepted the class (331). This act foreshadows his eventual leading role in a major heist, highlighting how the card’s control over skill acquisition and class assignment can effectively steer him toward specific life paths and identities, such as gambler or thief.

This phenomenon of limited agency shaping characters’ lives is even more explicitly evident in *This Quest is Broken!* (Valentine 2021), where Evelia's entire trajectory is dictated

by the divine Questing Stones. As outlined in the introduction to this chapter, Evelia is not only assigned a life-quest but also a class – *Messenger Girl* that is – and therewith associated skills. In this world, abilities and opportunities are exclusively tied to these divine assignments, making it impossible for individuals to gain skills or pursue roles outside their designated class. For Evelia, this means being confined to a profession she never envisioned for herself, with skills such as her Active Ability – *Heave*, further restricting her options. For instance, when she attempts to join an adventurer’s guild, a path more aligned with her interests, she is rejected because her non-combat class disqualifies her (70-71). Ironically, this act of defiance earns her a Quest Milestone and, with it, “+2000 exp!” (71), which reinforces the authority of the game itself. By rewarding Evelia for adhering to her predetermined path, the system actively steers her away from self-determined agency, emphasising the inescapable influence of this divine framework.

The functionality of Arthur's Master of Skills card highlights the arbitrariness in the selection and assignment of skills, ultimately reinforcing the belief in divine game design and steering Arthur towards predetermined life paths. The card’s systematic yet seemingly inconsistent categorisation of skills creates an illusion of impartial authority, one that Arthur readily accepts. By presenting skills as preordained rather than emergent from personal effort or preference, the card diminishes Arthur’s agency, subtly guiding him into predefined roles such as Gambler or Thief. Arthur’s willingness to align his identity with these roles, despite initial resistance, demonstrates his internalisation of the card’s authority as a designer-god figure. This acceptance mirrors the broader societal dynamics prevalent in Native LitRPGs, in which ludic systems dictate individual trajectories. This is also exemplified by *This Quest is Broken!*, where Evelia’s life and class are similarly determined by divine mechanisms. Both analysed narratives underscore how such systems prioritise compliance with their internal logic, rewarding

adherence while discouraging deviation. In doing so, they perpetuate a worldview in which individual agency is subordinated under divine ludic infallibility, compelling characters like Arthur to accept and even embrace paths that might otherwise contradict their personal inclinations or values.

7.2. *Just Have Faith:* (Non-)Transparent Game Mechanics

Revisiting the moment when Arthur acquires his first class – the Gambler class, that is – there is another aspect to consider in what compelled him to equip it without much deliberation, aside from the pre-selection and assignment of the constituent skills, as discussed in the previous section. This additional aspect involves the fact that, prior to receiving the notification that this new class was available due to his acquisition of “five synergistic skills” (Card Shuffling, Card Counting, Blackjack, Poker, and Circles and Squares) (Rae 158-159), Arthur was unaware of this mechanic of combining them into a fully realised class which offers its own ludic advantages. His reaction upon receiving this notification reflects confusion, as he had previously “raked everything about his card over and over,” yet found “no mention of classes” (159).

This incident underscores a broader theme in *All the Skills*, namely the interplay of transparency and non-transparency. This dynamic appears to be unique to Native LitRPGs and the game designs they portray, as, by contrast, those of Portal LitRPGs are usually much more simplistic. While they do depict worlds where ludic structures are intrinsic to daily life as well, their game systems typically function more directly as ludic translations and enhancements of mundane activities, meaning that overly intricate mechanics that requires players to actively develop a ludic strategy using these mechanics would disrupt this automated dynamic. Consequently, these systems prioritise transparency to facilitate player participation. With few exceptions, such as the cancelling mechanic in *The Wandering Inn*, which is largely overlooked

by the local populace, Portal LitRPGs rarely exhibit the opacity that Native LitRPGs do, limiting player's range of actions in the process to guide their progression.

After all, the fact that Arthur's Master of Skills card had not informed him of this feature, i.e. the possibility to gain an entire class, along with further advantages – in the case of the Gambler Class that encompasses increased luck, for example – does have direct implications regarding his agency in choosing how to spend his life: had Arthur been aware of the requirements underlying class acquisition, he could have prioritised acquiring a broader range of skills specific to a desired class, rather than improving his existing skillset, thereby accelerating the attainment of certain classes by meeting the requisite number of synergistic skills.

Arthur's pursuit of the Cooking Class exemplifies this dynamic. Throughout the novel, he demonstrates a strong passion for this class and actively works to transform his skills associated with it into a full-fledged class. However, his efforts are hindered by a lack of initial knowledge about the specific requirements needed to achieve this transformation. Unlike the Gambler or Thief classes, which are Tier 1 classes, the Cooking Class is Tier 2, which naturally makes the requirements even more demanding, which he only learns after obtaining the class. This delayed understanding underscores how the opacity of the game mechanics prolongs his progression and limits his ability to strategically plan and act accordingly. Consequently, the lengthy nature of this process leads to missed opportunities related to the Cooking Class and illustrates the broader impact of inaccessible gameplay information on player agency and, by extension, on their options regarding identity.

This notion of Arthur's Master of Skills card intentionally withholding information to steer him toward a predetermined life path is further substantiated by the appearance of an additional piece of information after he equips the Gambler Class:

Equipped Classes

Tier 1:

01/03
Tier 2
0/2
Tier 3:
0/1
Non-Equipped Classes: 0

(Rae 160)

This display, which outlines the maximum number of classes he can equip within each tier, would have been highly valuable for Arthur to know prior to choosing the Gambler Class. If he had been aware of these limitations, he might not have perceived an immediate “Yes” as the “only one answer” (159) to whether he wanted to equip the Gambler class. Instead, he could have engaged in a more elaborate decision-making process, weighing the merits of the Gambler class against other potential options he might encounter later. This contrast becomes evident when Arthur is later presented with the opportunity to equip the Thief class. Here, he carefully considers the implications of his decision, noting that equipping the class would leave “room for another active one” (307). Since he anticipated that this remaining slot could be filled by the Cooking Class – at this point he was not yet aware that it is a Tier 2 class – he hesitates, fully aware of the constraints imposed by these systematically set maxima.

This situation raises a critical question: what if, before acquiring the Cooking Class, Arthur were presented with another class he was equally eager to equip? Would filling all Tier 1 slots render his efforts to obtain the Cooking Class futile, given that no further changes to equipped classes can be made?

The suggestion that equipped classes may not be swapped once assigned to a Tier slot is implied in Arthur's interaction with the Master of Skills card following the acquisition of **Sleight of Hand**, the skill that triggers the offer to equip the Thief Class. In this instance, Arthur directly asks, “Can I erase a skill?” but receives no response (196). This silence is notable for two reasons: on the one hand, it stands in opposition to the card's usual behaviour, where Arthur's affirmative responses to its prompts, such as his emphatic “Yes” to equipping the

Gambler class, immediately take effect. On the other hand, Arthur has never posed a direct question to the card before, instead limiting his engagement to exclusively internal deliberations over the limited information it provides regarding his options. The card's failure to respond to Arthur's explicit and relevant query strongly implies that erasing skills is not an option. By extension, it is reasonable to infer that the same restriction applies to classes already equipped in their respective Tier slots. This interpretation is further reinforced by the timing of the card's disclosure of the Tier-slot list, namely it occurring only after Arthur has equipped the Gambler Class.

These non-transparencies regarding game mechanics, i.e. the card's silence to direct questions and the delayed revelation of critical information, contribute to the perception of the card as a "designer-god" (Leino 2), a sentient entity with predetermined intentions for Arthur's development and ultimate identity. After all, by withholding essential gameplay information, the card imposes constraints on Arthur's agency, effectively steering him along a path aligned with these intentions.

In connection to that, the game design mediated by the cards appears to restrict access to a feature widely recognised as fundamental in role-playing games, namely character stats:

His second attempt at assembling an Uncommon had given him his Charming Gentle-person card.

For up to eight hours within a twenty-four-hour period, his Charisma was increased by a full ten points.

Apparently, certain body enhancement cards were able to quantify traits, strengths, and weaknesses using numbers.

Did Arthur know his own Charisma stat? No, he did not. His card was only an Uncommon, and adding ten points was the beginning and end of its powers.

(Rae 403)

While the card Arthur crafted by merging shards provides a quantified boost to his Charisma stat, the lack of transparency regarding the actual value of this stat undermines the significance of the boost itself. Without knowing the baseline value of his Charisma, the impact of adding "a full ten points" is ambiguous. For instance, a boost to a stat as low as 1 would carry a vastly

different implication than the same boost applied to a stat valued at 1.000. Moreover, the broader relational dynamics of these character stats regarding the engagement with other players remain unexplained: does a ten-point increase in Charisma enable Arthur to sway a large crowd with a single sentence, or would achieving such influence require a higher boost? Similarly, how do these stats interact with those of other players? For example, would a heightened Charisma stat be neutralised by an opposing character's elevated Intelligence, granting them the ability to see through Arthur's intentions?

While the card obscures much of the explicit information regarding Arthur's stats thereby, it provides indirect clues about their effects when he applies the boost. For example, the Charisma enhancement is described as making "men seem to trust him, and women smile at him" (403), prompting Arthur to use this card strategically while working as a bartender, instantly causing his "tips [going] through the roof" (Rae 403). Thus, while being non-transparent with the explicit properties of Character stats, Arthur is still able to operate within the ludic system due to observing the outcomes of applying them. More explicit data, such as precise numerical value of his Charisma, might aid him in optimising his actions; however, excessive specificity might also constrain his agency. For example, if the card provided a predefined list of activities that could be enhanced by the Charisma boost, Arthur might feel compelled to adhere strictly to these prescribed uses, avoiding creative or untested applications of the ability. Such over-transparency could inadvertently restrict his engagement with what Leino terms "boundary-seeking activities" (2–3). Equating such activities with religious pursuits, Leino proposes that finding new ways to play the game, i.e. a "new 'way of being' in the game world" (3), constitutes the ludic equivalent of transcendence, which Arthur might miss out on if the effects of his Charisma boosts were clearly defined. Thus, by withholding overly detailed descriptions, Arthur's card actually preserves his opportunity to experiment and

uncover innovative uses for his given boosts, thereby fostering deeper engagement with the game's mechanics after all.

The importance of this balance between transparency and non-transparency becomes particularly evident when compared to another Native LitRPG, *Battlefield Reclaimer* (North 2021). As mentioned in the previous section, the ludic journey of the protagonist of this novel, Sam, is kickstarted when, on his 18th birthday, he finally gains his class. However, it turns out that the class allocated to him, the, as the title hints at, Battlefield Reclaimer class, is the one that has been plaguing his family for several generations now, as it is a so-called “broken class”. This means that no one knows how to activate it, thus, actually participate in progressing in this ludic world, because the requirement to “**Unlock Class Abilities and Gain Class Experience**” revolves around “**Reclaim[ing] an Aura**” (8). The nature of an “Aura,” however, remains entirely unexplained, and the World Law, the governing game system in the novel, withholds this crucial information.

Sam's frustration with this opacity leads him to resent the World Law, as this non-transparency makes it seem like it “treated him as something beneath notice, just indifferently letting him know when he hit certain milestones” (29). This reaction highlights two key dynamics of non-transparency in this case: first, it fosters a personification of the game system, reinforcing the perception of it as an all-powerful “designer-god” (Leino 2) with intentions that supersede the player's autonomy. Secondly, it demonstrates how the degree of transparency in game mechanics directly influences a player's agency and ability to progress. While in *Battlefield Reclaimer*, the complete lack in clarity surrounding class requirements severely limits Sam's capacity to engage with the ludic world, *All the Skills* demonstrates how partial transparency allows for discovery and, in connection to that, adaptive gameplay.

Arthur, therefore, does not encounter the extreme non-transparency that Sam faces in *Battlefield Reclaimer*, but his Master of Skills card still employs strategic opacity to subtly

influence his decisions and, consequently, his development of certain identities. This effect is evident in the context of the card's offer to equip the Thief class. As previously discussed, Arthur initially hesitates to accept this offer, largely due to personal reservations. However, his inability to access his Character stats renders one of the class's primary advantages, a +3 boost in both Dexterity and Perception (Rae 306), effectively meaningless, preventing Arthur from factoring this benefit into his deliberations about whether to equip the class at all (Rae 306–308). Furthermore, the perceived insignificance of such a boost is compounded by Arthur's later discovery regarding the effects of a much larger enhancement – a 10-point Charisma boost, that is – which, while tangible, ultimately results in relatively modest outcomes such as increased tips and marginally more positive social interactions. In comparison, the +3 boost offered by the Thief Class appears even less consequential. The card's deliberate omission of this information at the time of decision-making may thus serve to avoid discouraging Arthur from equipping the class based on the seemingly minor utility of the stat increase.

This calculated use of non-transparency reinforces the interpretation of the card as an entity exercising divine ludic wisdom, deliberately steering Arthur along a predetermined trajectory, one that includes assuming the identity of a thief. By withholding information selectively, the card ensures that Arthur's decisions align with the overarching design of the game, subtly guiding his progression while maintaining the illusion of autonomy. This interplay between transparency and non-transparency underscores the card's role as both a facilitator and a source of constraint within the narrative framework of *All the Skills*, highlighting the complex dynamics between player agency and systemic control in ludic environments.

In *All the Skills*, the deliberate interrelation of transparency and non-transparency in the functionality of the cards serves to reinforce the perception of their divinity and authority, shaping Arthur's understanding of his agency and life trajectory. By selectively withholding

information about game mechanics, the cards foster a belief in their omniscience and intentionality, positioning themselves as “designer-gods” whose plans transcend Arthur’s comprehension. This design not only guides Arthur toward specific paths, such as equipping certain classes like Gambler or Thief, but also conditions him to accept his limited agency within the system. The absence of detailed knowledge about mechanics, like the tier structure of classes or the numerical scale of character stats, encourages Arthur to focus on trial and adaptation rather than strategic optimisation. In doing so, the cards subtly manipulate his choices, creating an illusion of free will while advancing a predetermined narrative. This calculated concealment aligns with broader themes of divine control and human submission, illustrating how game design in *All the Skills* uses non-transparency as a mechanism to limit player agency while reinforcing systemic authority and the inevitability of the protagonist’s path.

Conclusion

Drawing together the insights from both subchapters, it becomes clear that Native LitRPGs employ ludic mechanisms to construct narratives that challenge the existential ludological ideal of player agency and, instead, perpetuate the existence of a “designer-god” (Leino 2). Through devices like Arthur’s Master of Skills card, these stories illustrate how systems of divine design diminish individual control, steering protagonists toward predefined identities and paths. In *All the Skills*, the interplay between arbitrariness and intentionality in skill assignment, coupled with the calculated balance of transparency and non-transparency in game mechanics, reinforces the perception of omniscient authority while subtly restricting agency. This dynamic not only shapes Arthur’s trajectory but also mirrors the entire societal structure within this narrative, where compliance with ludic systems is both expected and rewarded. By framing protagonists’ acceptance of these systems as inevitable, Native LitRPGs offer a poignant

exploration of the tension between human agency and systemic control within worlds to which the ludic is inherent.

8. CONCLUSION

This thesis has provided a detailed exploration of how ludic elements influence the agency and identity of LitRPG protagonists, answering the central research question through the analysis of four subgenres within this particular form of ludic literature: Simulation LitRPGs, Apocalypse LitRPGs, Portal LitRPGs, and Native LitRPGs. By systematically investigating representative works from each subgenre, the thesis has illuminated the complex interplay between game mechanics and narrative structures in shaping the protagonists' experiences and development.

In Simulation LitRPGs, the analysis of *Awaken Online: Catharsis* revealed how game systems shape Jason's in-game identity, constraining initial creativity and fostering an *avatar-as-me* relationship. The assignment of the Necromancer class, coupled with the game's encouragement of transgressive violence, especially with regards to allowing for extreme forms *framework agency* utilisation, demonstrates the paradoxical role ludic systems play in simultaneously empowering and limiting agency and, thus, identity transformation. These systems mediate exploration of self within the virtual realm, reflecting broader themes of expression and control inherent to role-playing games.

For Apocalypse LitRPGs, the examination of *Dungeon Crawler Carl* illustrated how ludic elements impose roles upon survivors, compelling them to adopt identities such as "killer" and "entertainer" through the implementation of reward systems. Hierarchical mechanics also intensify social tensions, promoting competition and reducing moral complexities to gamified markers. The fusion of intrinsic survival imperatives with extrinsic motivations prevalent in this narrative highlights the pervasive influence of game structures on identity formation and agency within these apocalyptic settings.

In the case of Portal LitRPGs, *The Wandering Inn* exhibited two types of subversion of game systems by protagonists transported from our world to the ludic one portrayed here. Erin

Solstice's "false player" strategy and Ryoka Griffin's "spoilsport" approach reveal how ludic structures enable selective engagement, allowing for both participation (with advantage, no less) and rejection of game mechanics in general. These subversive behaviours accentuate the flexibility and adaptability of agency within the portrayed game-governed worlds.

Finally, Native LitRPGs, as exemplified by *All the Skills*, revealed the extent to which ludic systems function as omniscient, prescriptive forces. The functionality of ludic mediators like Arthur's Master of Skills card illustrate how systems of divine design restrict agency by selecting specific skills and classes, assigning predefined identities in the process. The calculated interplay of transparency and opacity in game mechanics reinforces the perception of an authoritative system that shapes societal structures and individual trajectories, offering an insight in the tension between human autonomy and systemic control.

Across these subgenres, the findings demonstrate that ludic elements in LitRPGs are not merely narrative tools but fundamental frameworks that influence character agency and identity. These game systems simultaneously empower and constrain, fostering growth, adaptation, and resistance in ways that reflect the protagonists' engagement with their environments.

This thesis contributes to current research by bridging the gap between literary and game studies, offering a comprehensive analysis of LitRPGs as a genre that exemplifies a form of convergence of these two media. By examining the role of ludic elements in narrative construction and character development, this study highlights the potential of LitRPGs to challenge and expand traditional literary frameworks.

Future research could further investigate the broader implications of LitRPGs on themes such as morality, community dynamics, and the intersection of reader-player experiences. Additionally, exploring paratextual elements like gamertags as author names and direct references to specific games could provide deeper insights into the genre's medial complexity.

By addressing these areas, subsequent studies can continue to uncover the rich intersections between literature and gaming, advancing our understanding of this dynamic and evolving field.

Ultimately, the journey undertaken in this thesis is but one quest in a sprawling narrative of interdisciplinary exploration. As researchers continue to engage with LitRPGs, they may find themselves levelling up in their understanding of how games and literature come together, unlocking new abilities to analyse, critique, and appreciate this exceptionally and wonderfully hybrid genre.

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APPENDIX

a) Top 70 LitRPGs on Amazon, Audible, and Goodreads

Amazon		
Title	Genre	#Reviews
He Who Fights With Monsters	Portal	15.652
The Primal Hunter	Apocalypse	10.425
The Land	Portal	10.121
Dungeon Crawler Carl	Apocalypse	9.701
Defiance of the Fall	Apocalypse	9.573
Awaken Online	Simulation	8.791
Unbound	Portal	8.475
System Universe	Apocalypse	8.343
Battle Mage Farmer	Portal	7.896
Full Murderhobo	Native	7.837
Completionist Chronicles	Simulation	7.821
The Ten Realms	Portal	7.736
All the Skills	Native	7.997
Aether's Revival	Native	7.389
Arcane Ascension	Native	7.155
The Beginning After The End	Portal	6.720
The Grand Game	Portal	6.564
Azarinth Healer	Portal	6.516
Battleborne	Portal	6.514
Unorthodox Farming	Portal	6.181
The Titan Series	Simulation	6.172
Jake's Magical Market	Apocalypse	5.934
The Path of Ascension	Native	5.911
Noobtown	Portal	5.805
Guardian of Aster Fall	Native	5.742
Binding Words	Portal	5.545
Shadow Sun	Apocalypse	5.508
Reborn: Apocalypse	Apocalypse	5.319
The Stitched Worlds	Simulation	5.309
Immortal Great Souls	Portal	4.999
Mark of the Fool	Native	4.935
Ard's Oath	Native	4.829
The Infinite World	Apocalypse	4.737
Natural Laws Apocalypse	Apocalypse	4.723
Portal to Nova Roma	Simulation	4.710
Human Insanity	Portal	4.687
Darkthorn Academy	Native	4.659
The Legend of Randidly Ghosthound	Apocalypse	4.508
Arcane Awakening	Native	4.208

Dungeon Diving	Native	4.199
Unintended Cultivator	Native	4.038
Dungeon Slayer	Apocalypse	4.037
The Rise of the Winter Wolf	Apocalypse	3.995
Luck's Voice	Portal	3.973
Backyard Dungeon	Portal	3.946
Beastborne Chronicles	Portal	3.942
Heavenly Chaos	Native	3.908
Elemental Gatherers	Portal	3.896
Ascend Online	Simulation	3.869
Last Life	Portal	3.866
Limitless Lands	Simulation	3.787
Towers of Heaven	Apocalypse	3.777
Quest Academy: Silvers	Apocalypse	3.767
Rogue Ascension	Apocalypse	3.764
The Dragon Mage	Native	3.752
Eden's Gate	Simulation	3.733
The System Apocalypse	Apocalypse	3.729
The Good Guys	Simulation	3.724
Adventures of a Xeno-Archaeologist	Native	3.602
Magical Fusion	Native	3.585
Alpha Physics!	Apocalypse	3.575
Divine Apostasy	Native	3.563
Jade Phenix	Native	3.557
UnderVerse	Portal	3.540
Road to Mastery	Apocalypse	3.538
Eight	Portal	3.520
Earthen Contenders	Portal	3.511
The Wandering Inn	Portal	3.486

Audible		
Title	Genre	#Ratings
He Who Fights With Monsters	Portal	36.168
The Land	Portal	33.489
Arcane Ascension	Native	32.415
Dungeon Crawler Carl	Apocalypse	18.122
Ascend Online	Simulation	15.449
Completionist Chronicles	Simulation	13.350
Awaken Online	Simulation	11.804
The Wandering Inn	Portal	9.948
Defiance of the Fall	Apocalypse	9.447
Primal Hunter	Apocalypse	8.694
Noobtown	Portal	8.251
Jake's Magical Market	Apocalypse	7.239
The Beginning After The End	Portal	6.108

Unorthodox Farming	Portal	5.282
Eden's Gate	Simulation	5.105
The Good Guys	Simulation	4.693
The Titan Series	Simulation	4.602
The Infinite World	Apocalypse	4.575
Mark of the Fool	Native	4.468
Full Murderhobo	Native	4.363
Unbound	Portal	4.037
Battleborne	Portal	3.815
Azarinth Healer	Portal	3.363
The System Apocalypse	Apocalypse	3.178
Immortal Great Souls	Portal	2.998
Reborn: Apocalypse	Apocalypse	2.876
Legend of Randidly Ghosthound	Apocalypse	2.715
Shadow Sun	Apocalypse	2.701
Beastborne Chronicles	Portal	2.576
Divine Apostasy	Native	2.483
Battle Mage Farmer	Portal	2.460
System Universe	Apocalypse	2.262
Towers of Heaven	Apocalypse	2.085
All the Skills	Native	2.163
Portal to Nova Roma	Simulation	1.898
Human Insanity	Portal	1.796
Binding Words	Portal	1.727
The Dragon Mage	Native	1.562
Aether's Revival	Native	1.504
Ten Realms	Portal	1.465
The Stitched Worlds	Simulation	1.398
The Path of Ascension	Native	1.355
Limitless Lands	Simulation	1.334
Eight	Portal	1.128
The Grand Game	Portal	1.014
This Quest is Broken	Native	952
Dungeon Slayer	Apocalypse	921
Tower	Portal	916
Luck's Voice	Portal	855
Jade Phenix	Native	835
Quest Academy: Silvers	Apocalypse	692
Darkthorn Academy	Native	669
Natural Laws Apocalypse	Apocalypse	668
Dungeon Diving	Native	626
Unintended Cultivator	Native	442
Ard's Oath	Native	429
Alpha Physics!	Apocalypse	427
Last Life	Portal	396
Elemental Gatherers	Portal	332

Road to Mastery	Apocalypse	312
Magical Fusion	Native	306
Rogue Ascension	Apocalypse	293
Earthen Contenders	Portal	258
Guardian of Aster Fall	Native	173
Heavenly Chaos	Native	160
The Rise of the Winter Wolf	Apocalypse	147
Arcane Awakening	Native	145
UnderVerse	Portal	131

Goodreads		
Title	Genre	#Ratings
The Land	Portal	24.559
Dungeon Crawler Carl	Apocalypse	24.476
He Who Fights With Monsters	Portal	24.202
Arcane Ascension	Native	23.139
Awaken Online	Simulation	15.497
Completionist Chronicles	Simulation	14.364
Primal Hunter	Apocalypse	11.723
Defiance of the Fall	Apocalypse	11.516
The Wandering Inn	Portal	8.335
The Beginning After The End	Portal	8.314
Ascend Online	Simulation	8.289
Ten Realms	Portal	7.829
System Universe	Apocalypse	7.113
All the Skills	Native	7.421
Battle Mage Farmer	Portal	6.907
Full Murderhobo	Native	6.892
Unbound	Portal	6.887
Noobtown	Portal	6.595
Guardian of Aster Fall	Native	5.810
Unorthodox Farming	Portal	5.724
Mark of the Fool	Native	5.569
Azarinth Healer	Portal	5.557
The System Apocalypse	Apocalypse	5.344
Jake's Magical Market	Apocalypse	5.337
The Good Guys	Simulation	5.223
The Path of Ascension	Native	5.176
Aether's Revival	Native	5.116
Immortal Great Souls	Portal	5.108
The Titan Series	Simulation	4.886
The Grand Game	Portal	4.880
Reborn: Apocalypse	Apocalypse	4.865
The Infinite World	Apocalypse	4.856
Eden's Gate	Simulation	4.834

Shadow Sun	Apocalypse	4.573
The Dragon Mage	Native	4.437
Battleborne	Portal	4.314
Towers of Heaven	Apocalypse	4.094
Binding Words	Portal	4.052
Legend of Randidly Ghosthound	Apocalypse	3.984
Divine Apostasy	Native	3.776
Portal to Nova Roma	Simulation	3.626
Elemental Gatherers	Portal	3.249
Human Insanity	Portal	3.231
Natural Laws Apocalypse	Apocalypse	3.148
Darkthorn Academy	Native	3.016
Limitless Lands	Simulation	2.980
Adventures of a Xeno-Archaeologist	Native	2.973
Dungeon Slayer	Apocalypse	2.954
Beastborne Chronicles	Portal	2.950
Last Life	Portal	2.857
Quest Academy: Silvers	Apocalypse	2.582
Unintended Cultivator	Native	2.572
Tower	Portal	2.544
Ard's Oath	Native	2.514
UnderVerse	Portal	2.486
Jade Phenix	Native	2.468
Dungeon Diving	Native	2.466
The Rise of the Winter Wolf	Apocalypse	2.463
Eight	Portal	2.458
Arcane Awakening	Native	2.429
Luck's Voice	Portal	2.383
This Quest is Broken	Native	2.323
Road to Mastery	Apocalypse	2.257
Alpha Physics!	Apocalypse	2.256
Rogue Ascension	Apocalypse	2.215
Magical Fusion	Native	2.148
Backyard Dungeon	Portal	2.139
Heavenly Chaos	Native	2.089

b) English Abstract

The genre of LitRPGs (literary role-playing games) represents a unique convergence of literature and gaming, employing ludic elements to narrate immersive stories. In an era where gamification has become pervasive across media and social interactions, from the challenge-based mechanics of social media platforms to gamified education, LitRPGs emerge as a significant cultural phenomenon that merges narrative storytelling with explicit game-like structures. Despite this, the genre remains underexplored within academia. This thesis seeks to address this gap by examining how ludic elements influence the agency and identity of LitRPG protagonists, analysing representative works from four distinct subgenres: Simulation LitRPGs (*Awaken Online: Catharsis*), Apocalypse LitRPGs (*Dungeon Crawler Carl*), Portal LitRPGs (*The Wandering Inn*), and Native LitRPGs (*All the Skills: A Deckbuilding LitRPG*).

Through a methodological framework informed by game studies and literary analysis, the research identifies how game mechanics mediate character development, thematic exploration, and the interplay between empowerment and constraint. The findings reveal that ludic systems in Simulation LitRPGs foster in-game exploration of identity within virtual spaces, often emphasising transgressive behaviours. In Apocalypse LitRPGs, game structures impose survivalist identities, heightening moral dilemmas and social tensions. Portal LitRPGs enable subversion of the game systems themselves, granting protagonists who are transported from our world to a ludic one unique agency to manipulate or reject constraints imposed by game mechanics. Conversely, Native LitRPGs portray game systems as omniscient, prescriptive forces that restrict autonomy and, thus, shape the protagonists' trajectories.

This thesis not only situates LitRPGs within broader discussions of medial convergence but also highlights their uniqueness in narrative progression. By unveiling the intricate interplay of ludic and narrative elements, the research lays the groundwork for further scholarly exploration of this evolving genre and its implications for literature, gaming, and culture.

c) German Abstract

Das LitRPG-Genre (literary role-playing games) stellt eine einzigartige Verbindung von Literatur und Gaming dar, indem ludische Elemente genutzt werden, um immersive Geschichten zu erzählen. In einer Zeit, in der Gamification allgegenwärtig in Medien und sozialen Interaktionen ist, von challengebasierten Mechaniken auf Social-Media-Plattformen bis hin zu gamifizierter Bildung, treten LitRPGs als bedeutendes kulturelles Phänomen hervor, das narrative Erzählkunst mit expliziten spielähnlichen Strukturen vereint. Dennoch bleibt dieses Genre in der akademischen Forschung weitgehend unerforscht. Diese Arbeit zielt darauf ab, diese Lücke zu schließen, indem untersucht wird, wie ludische Elemente die Handlungsfähigkeit und Identität von LitRPG-Protagonist:innen beeinflussen. Dabei werden repräsentative Werke aus vier unterschiedlichen Subgenres analysiert: Simulation LitRPGs (*Awaken Online: Catharsis*), Apocalypse LitRPGs (*Dungeon Crawler Carl*), Portal LitRPGs (*The Wandering Inn*) und Native LitRPGs (*All the Skills: A Deckbuilding LitRPG*).

Mithilfe eines methodischen Ansatzes, der auf Theorien aus den Game Studies und der Literaturwissenschaft basiert, zeigt die Untersuchung auf, wie Spielmechaniken die Charakterentwicklung, thematische Erkundungen und das Zusammenspiel von Ermächtigung und Einschränkung beeinflussen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass ludische Systeme in Simulation LitRPGs die Erforschung von Identität innerhalb virtueller Welten fördern, wobei hier oft transgressives Verhalten betont wird. In Apocalypse LitRPGs zwingen Spielstrukturen den Protagonist:innen Überlebensidentitäten auf, was moralische Dilemmata und soziale Spannungen verschärft. Portal LitRPGs ermöglichen eine Subversion der Spielsysteme, indem Protagonist:innen, die aus unserer Welt in eine ludische transportiert werden, eine einzigartige Handlungsfreiheit erhalten, um Spielmechaniken zu manipulieren oder abzulehnen. Im Gegensatz dazu stellen Native LitRPGs Spielsysteme als allwissende, vorschreibende Kräfte dar, die die Autonomie einschränken und somit die Lebenswege der Protagonist:innen formen.

Diese Arbeit verortet LitRPGs nicht nur in einem größeren Diskurs über mediale Konvergenz, sondern hebt auch ihre Einzigartigkeit in der narrativen Entwicklung hervor. Durch die Aufdeckung des komplexen Zusammenspiels von ludischen und narrativen Elementen schafft die Untersuchung eine Grundlage für weitere wissenschaftliche Erforschung dieses sich entwickelnden Genres und seiner Auswirkungen auf Literatur, Gaming und Kultur.