

The act of impersonation: empathically engaging with the player character in Dragon Age: Inquisition

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Abstract

This thesis focusses on how impersonation, with which I mean taking on the assumption of a character, can function as form of empathic engagement in CRPGs, with as focus the relation between the player character and the player. I hereby use the specific case of Dragon Age: Inquisition. A roleplaying game in which the player has the ability to shape both the outside as the personality of their player character. I will argue how impersonation is afforded within the game design of Dragon Age: Inquisition and how playing a game by impersonating the player character influences the empathic engagement a player experiences with their character. To be able to show this I will make use of a couple of theories and concepts, which will be: *impersonation, character engagement, the operator and machine, the player character as actor, diegetic elements, nondiegetic elements*. Character engagement will function as an overarching concept that offers a certain way of looking at the relation between the player and their character. This concept, used by Petri Lankoski, contains two categories of character engagement, of which *empathic engagement* will be linked to impersonation in order to be able to look at and compare the emotional connection a player experiences when playing a character. In this regard it is important to realize that there is something between the player and their character that separates them, which will be described in the terms of operator and machine and diegetic and nondiegetic interaction. The analysis will show that impersonation creates a distance between player and character, which limits the empathic engagement a player experiences.

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Introduction

You just spent at least one hour creating a design and background story for your character. The game starts and the first cutscene begins. You find your character has been captured and that someone has died, for which you get the blame. Now you get to choose how to respond in the next moment. Do you show grief? Or anger for being taken prisoner? Instantly you feel misjudged by the other characters in the room. Standing up for your character and thinking “I haven’t done anything wrong?!”. This is more or less the start of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. A computer role-playing game or CRPG in which you get to decide what kind of hero you are going to be. In the first minutes of the game the player already establishes a bond with its character. But what exactly is this bond? Do you feel like it is you who is sitting in the cell? Or do you just feel strong sympathy towards your character? Are you, in this instance, acting?

CRPGs contain the word role-playing, which instantly asks for questions about this role the game makes the player play. On stage playing a role is often described as acting. This role can then be portrayed in many different ways. There is nothing that stands between the actor and their character. In CRPGs the role the player gets to play is a little bit different, because the player also has to interact with the computer itself. Would it still be possible to define this as acting, even though the interaction between the player and their character is mediated by a computer?

Acting is a concept that evokes a lot of different meanings. Theater scholar Helen Treno mentions in her book: “‘Acting’ invokes many synonyms: ‘playing’, ‘pretending’, ‘impersonating’, ‘imitating’, ‘performing’, ‘representing’—to cite just a few.”¹ This is why I would like to narrow it down to the one concept Treno calls the “irreducible factor”: the concept of *impersonation*. To describe impersonation she uses Cole and Chinoy from *Actors on Acting* who say that “‘impersonation or the assumption of dramatic personality’ is a prerequisite of all acting”.² Treno also argue that “as there are many acting styles, there are also multiple types of impersonation in Western theatre traditions.”³

Impersonation thus is a prerequisite of acting, which means it is necessary in order to act, but it does not cover the entire load of acting. Acting, however, is extremely diverse and when choosing just one form of acting, you automatically rule out all the other forms of acting.

¹Helen Treno, *Creativity: The Actor in Performance* (Warschau/Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 19.

² T. Cole, & H.K. Chinoy,, *Actors on Acting*, (New York: Crown Publishers, 1970) as cited in Treno, *Creativity: The Actor in Performance*.

³ Ibid.

Impersonation is easier to divide into types and can therefore both be more inclusive and exclusive at the same time. This is why I have chosen to work with impersonation instead of acting.

In this thesis the concept of impersonation will be used to gain a deeper understanding of the way the player and the player character engage with each other. In his paper *Character Engagement in Computer Games* Petri Lankoski proposes to use the concept of *character engagement* as a way to analyze the relation between the player and their character.⁴ Lankoski divides this concept into *goal-related engagement* and *empathic engagement*. I want to argue that impersonation can be seen as a form of empathic engagement. Lankoski uses empathy “to refer to mechanisms that put a player’s affective state in relation the state of another agent.” Meaning that this concept can be used as a way to analyze the emotional relation between a character in a game and the player. Impersonation is a concept which requires the player to stand in the shoes of their character and in order to understand and act through a character empathy is a necessity.

To be able to investigate how impersonation can influence the relation between the player and their character, I am going to play the game by impersonating the player character. The player character is, as the name suggests, the character the player plays in a game. From here on this character will be referred to as the PC.

CRPGs often encourage the player to be their own hero, thus suggesting that the player is this hero within a game. In theater, impersonation is something that can be seen as way of engagement with a character. By taking this concept and looking at the way it functions within a game that evokes the suggestion that the player is playing a role, I want create new insights regarding the relation between the player and their character. These findings can influence the way the relation between player and character is viewed, in seeing if impersonation is able to create a similar engagement with the character as the one it can create on a stage and if how this form of engagement changes the way the game is experienced by the player. It is important to note that I will be focusing on single-player CRPGs, so there will be no connection to other real-life people in any way. In order to play a game through a perspective of impersonation, I have chosen a specific case, which is the role-playing game *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, from here on referred to as DAI.⁵ I have chosen this game specifically, because of it being a good example for a CRPG, with the possibility to

⁴ P. Lankoski, “Player Character Engagement in Computer Games,” *Games and Culture* 6, no. 4 (2011): 293,

⁵ Bioware, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (EA Games (PC), 2014).

influence the outcome of both the main story, the PC's story and the story of the non-player characters aka the NPC's (which are characters played by the computer).

Main and Sub Questions

This leads me to my main question:

How can impersonation as a way of empathically engaging with the player character be used to gain a new way of understanding the relation between the player and its player character in DAI?

In order to answer this question I will divide my paper into three sub questions:

- *How can impersonation be seen as a form of empathic engagement?*
- *How does DAI afford impersonation within its game design?*
- *How does impersonating the PC influence the empathic engagement?*

Structure of the paper

After which I will set up my method, in which I will explain how I plan to play this game by impersonating my character using the impersonation as type theory from Helen Trens. Next I will divide my paper into the three sub-questions I have formulated. I will link the relevant literature to each question. The first question will consist of explaining how impersonation is a psychological process that can be linked with the empathic engagement Petri Lankoski describes. For the second question I will first delve into the theories and concepts that Alexander Galloway and Toby Gard introduce, after which my findings will be supported by an analysis of the game. The last question will consist of a comparison between my impersonation playthrough and normal playthrough and will come up with a definite statement about impersonation in CRPGs. No new literature will be used here, I will draw from the theories that were already explained. I will close this paper off with a conclusion, in which I will summarize and reflect on my findings and then introducing some suggestions containing ideas for future research in regard to this thesis.

After the method I will start off by delving further into the literature Helen Trens has provided me with. The statement I made in the introduction of this paper, about impersonation being a psychological process will be further explained and supported and later be brought into relation with Lankoski's character engagement.

When using the concept of character engagement I cannot ignore the ongoing discussion that sees *immersion* as a way of engaging with a character. Especially since

immersion is something that is also used in describing the role-playing experience in live action role-playing aka LARP games.⁶ This is why I will introduce two definitions of immersion, one that focuses on LARP games and one that focuses on immersion within game theory. These will then be reflected upon in order to explain why I character engagement offers a more inclusive perspective than immersion does. Following this explanation I will move on to the two categories of character engagement Lankoski introduces and I will reflect on these categories in respect to impersonation. Here I argue that because of these psychological aspect, impersonation can be seen as a form of empathic engagement. This will be done by making a short analysis of the three concepts Lankoski uses to illustrate empathic engagement, which are *recognition*, *alignment* and *allegiance*. He also mentions how goal-related engagement can potentially block empathic engagement, even though they also depend upon each other.

To add to this idea of engaging with the game on a more substantial level Galloway will be introduced with his concept of the player as *the operator* and the computer as the *machine*.⁷ He argues that the computer is an actor of itself and that the relation between player and computer is one that consists of an intercommunion. Aside from the relation between player and computer as something that functions in itself, Galloway also introduces the concepts of *diegetic* and *nondiegetic* elements within a game.⁸ When looking at how DAI affords impersonation I will also subdivide this question in the diegetic and nondiegetic elements in order to get a clear vision as to what extent impersonation can engage the player.

Aside from Galloway, Toby Gard will also briefly be mentioned with his regard to the player character as something that is distinct from the player.⁹ His vision on the player character as an *Actor* will be used both to support the differences between the PC and player in DAI, as to show how this description within a role-playing game might need a slight alteration.

Method

My method will consist of a textual analysis supplemented by an autoethnographic approach.

⁶ Morten Gade, Line Thorup, and Mikkel Sander, eds., *As LARP Grows up – Theory and Methods in LARP*, 1st ed. (Frederiksberg: Projektgruppen KP03, 2003).

⁷ Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 2.

⁸ Ibid, 6-8.

⁹ Toby Gard, "Building Character," *Gamasutra*, 2000, http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20000720/gard_01.htm%0A.

In order to gain a proper understanding of how the game does or does not afford character engagement through impersonation, I am going to play the game by trying to impersonate my character. This means I will follow the general story and questline, but along the way I will try to make the choices I think my character would make in that situation. This way of playing the game provides me with a way of analyzing the game design, while playing the game from a certain perspective.¹⁰ The PC will be played with a certain impersonation type in mind. Helen Trens divides impersonation into a couple of different types, as mentioned in the introduction. To be able to make a proper selection of which type I am going to use for my analysis I will shortly introduce the types Trens mentions.

Trens constructed an heuristic continuum that coordinates along an axis with *actor-as-abstract*, which defines as the “actor is ‘objectified’ or represents ‘one of the formal elements of a production’” at one extreme and *actor-as-self*, which defines as “the actor ‘never behaves if he were anyone other than himself. He never represents elements of character. He merely carries out certain actions’”, at the other.¹¹ Between these extremes she puts, in chronological order, *actor-as-type*: “actor impersonates a conventional type or stock character”; *actor-as-individuated type*: “actor takes as basis for impersonation a social, historical, cultural or theatrical type and incorporates individual traits”; *actor-as-highly-individuated character*: “actor’s impersonation (re)presents a psychologically complex and motivated character” and *actor-as-multiple-personae*: “actor’s impersonation is comprised of multiple identities, a bricolage of personae.”¹² This makes the axis look like this “*Abstract—Type—Individuated Type—Highly Individuated Character—Multiple Personae—Self*”.¹³ In order to make an analysis by impersonating the PC or player character, it is best to first position myself along this axis in order to be able to play the game in a more specific way.

I argue that DAI has most affordance for the actor-as-individuated type approach, which will therefore be the way I am going to play the game. When playing a game like DAI, the game pushes the player into a certain role. How the player fills this role depends for a great part upon themselves. The easiest way of playing the game is by choosing a certain type that you want your character to be, like evil or righteous. According to this type the player can then make the choices they feel that best fit within this type. Another way a type is afforded by the game is through the icons or symbols that often show up next to the decision options

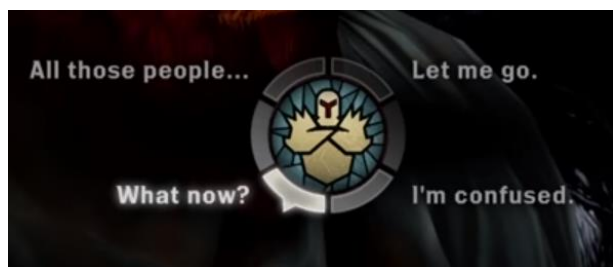
¹⁰ van Vught Jasper and Glas René, “Considering Play: From Method to Analysis,” *DiGRA '17 - Proceedings of the 2017 DiGRA International Conference* 14, no. 1 (2017).

¹¹ Trens, *Creativity: The Actor in Performance*, 19-20.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

that are displayed in the game at a moment of choice. This can be seen in the options the game offers the player (see figure 1). These icons display a certain attitude. However, it is important to note that the different attitudes do not necessarily have to reflect a type, they can also afford a more individuated approach to the PC. This can be done by deliberately choosing different icons every time you enter a moment of choice to be able to give more depth to your character. This means that actor-as-individuated type is the most afforded way of playing the game, where you choose a certain type as a general aim within the game, but within this type you individuate your character by choosing different responses each time. For example, I will play the game as a righteous character, who makes considerate choices and is tough, but compassionate towards her people. She always wants to make the morally best choice, which may not always work out the way she planned. This means that sometimes I will be compassionate and choose the tear icon and at other times the angry fist icon will be more applicable to the situation. I therefore play the game through a general type, which is righteous, but within this type I try to individuate my character and give her more specific character traits.



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Figure 1

Example of the type that shows up when you select an option in DAI. Every option you see here has its own symbol. These symbols repeat themselves at certain moments of choice.

¹⁴ Bioware, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

How can impersonation be seen as a form of character engagement?

This question will be answered by explaining why impersonation within a game becomes a psychological concept, which then can be linked to the definition of empathic engagement. Before bringing it in connection to empathic engagement however, I will position myself within the debate surrounding immersion as a form of engaging with a character and explain why I have chosen character engagement over immersion in this thesis.

Why character engagement

The relation between the player and its player character, is something that has often been analyzed from a film or game studies perspective in which the notion of *immersion* has frequently been used to describe the experience in which the player finds themselves present inside the game world.¹⁵ This is a concept not only used within the study of games, but it has also very frequently been used to study and analyze the role-playing experience in so called LARP games aka live action role-playing games.^{16,17,18} In LARP games, which have their origin in the tabletop games like *Dungeons and Dragons*, people meet up in real life and play a game inside of an, often, self-created storyline, where the players create their characters themselves, or get them assigned by the game master.^{19,20} Because the players are mostly free in the actions and dialog as long as they adhere to the rules of the game, they have to really act out their characters. LARPing can therefore be considered a kind of theatre, in which mainly improvisation plays an important role. In such role-playing games immersion is often described as “becoming a character” or “pretending to believe to be a character”.^{21,22} Role-playing game designer Pohjola gives as definition that “immersion is the player assuming the identity of the character by pretending to believe her identity only consists of the diegetic

¹⁵ Gordon Calleja, *In-Game. From Immersion to Incorporation* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2011).

¹⁶ Mike Pohjola, “Autonomous Identities: Immersion as a Tool for Exploring, Empowering and Emancipating Identities,” in *Beyond Role and Play. Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination*, ed. Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros (Helsinki: Ropecon ry, 2004), 81–96.

¹⁷ Myriel Balzer, “Immersion as a Prerequisite of the Didactical Potential of Role-Playing,” *International Journal of Role-Playing* 2, no. 2 (2011).

¹⁸ J. Tuomas Harviainen, “The Multi-Tier Game Immersion Theory,” in *As LARP Grows up - Theory and Method in LARP*, ed. Morten Gade, Line Thorup, and Mikkel Sander (Frederiksberg: Projektgruppen KPO3, 2003).

¹⁹ Gade, Thorup, and Sander, *As LARP Grows up – Theory and Methods in LARP*.

²⁰ *Dungeons and Dragons*, 1st ed. (TSR, Inc., 1974).

²¹ Harviainen, “The Multi-Tier Game Immersion Theory.”

²² Pohjola, “Autonomous Identities: Immersion as a Tool for Exploring, Empowering and Emancipating Identities.”

roles”, which comes quite close to the definition of impersonation, that is defined as taking on the assumption of a dramatic personality.²³

However, this definition of immersion may work within LARP games, but cannot compete with the mechanics of a computer game, in which your freedom of choice is limited and there is always something between the player and its character: the computer. Therefore in computer games immersion has been seen more as a form of presence, which is defined by Nitsche in *Video Game Spaces: image, play and structure in 3D worlds* as “presence, in the context of this investigation, is understood as the mental state where a user subjectively feels present within a video game space as the result of an immersion into the content of the fictional world”.²⁴ Thus in video games immersion loses its initial link to the engagement with a character. It becomes more about a total state of being than about a specific connection with a character. It could be possible to use the definition that Pohjola provides, but he very distinctively mentions “believe her identity only consists of the diegetic roles”, whereas in a computer game nondiegetic aspects also play an important role in engaging with the PC.²⁵ To which I also want to add that impersonating a character doesn’t mean you have to pretend to believe to be a character, you just have to pretend. In order to be able to look at all those aspects immersion excludes, like the game mechanics, I want to revert to Lankoski’s theory of character engagement. His version stems from aesthetics and was first introduced by Berleant. Lankoski quotes Berleant with “engagement “stresses the active nature of aesthetic experience and its essential participatory quality.”²⁶ The character engagement Lankoski describes is more about participation than about presence and can therefore better reflect upon the way a player sometimes has to distance themselves from their character in order to understand certain references or achieve certain goals.

Character engagement and impersonation

In the introduction I stated that impersonation in games was a psychological process. By taking impersonation and translating it to a new medium, some of the aspects that it can incorporate in onstage acting are lost in translation. One of the biggest transitions is the loss of physicality. The body is a subject in theatre that has been discussed in many different theories

²³ Ibid, 84-85.

²⁴ Michael Nitsche, *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play and Structure in 3D Game Worlds* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2008) 203.

²⁵ Pohjola, “Autonomous Identities: Immersion as a Tool for Exploring, Empowering and Emancipating Identities.”

²⁶ Berleant in “Player Character Engagement in Computer Games,” *Games and Culture* 6, no. 4 (2011): , 293.

about acting. There are theories that suggest the body is something that is just as important as the mind in making an emotional connection with the character, but since CRPGs like DAI do not give the player the possibility to act out movement, the process of impersonation within a game has to be a psychological one.²⁷ Since the character is the one that acts out the emotion, impersonation only consists of the player mentally placing themselves into the shoes of their character and being able to emphasize their decisions. This does not necessarily mean that the player experiences these emotions, but they must be able to at least imagine their character experiencing them in order to properly impersonate their PC. This way of empathizing with the character appears very similar to the concept of *simulation*, which Lankoski uses from Smith.²⁸ This is something I will get back to below.

Before moving on with this line of thought it is important to define the two categories of engagement Lankoski uses in which,

Goal-related engagement, looks at goals, affects, and their relations to game system, focusing on aspects that relate to PCs. In the section on *Empathic Engagement*, I present the concepts of recognition, alignment, and allegiance to explain the connection between the game and engagement.²⁹

Both categories look from a different perspective at the way a player can become engaged with a game through the PC. Therefore his focus does not only lie with how the player engages with the PC, but also on how the PC helps the player engage with the game. In his conclusion he states: “Goal-related engagement is fundamentally an ‘I’ experience: It is about the players acting to reach their goals. Empathic engagement, on the other hand, is essentially about reacting to the character’s actions.”³⁰ This is something that could prove very interesting in regard to impersonation. Goal-related engagement is referred to as an “I” experience, meaning that this experience does not afford impersonation, since impersonation requires the player to stand in the shoes of their character. This concurs with what he says in the last part about empathic engagement, where he mentions that “goal-related engagement

²⁷ Philip B. Zarrilli, “Introduction,” in *Acting (Re)considered*, ed. Philip B. Zarrilli, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 7–22.

²⁸ Lankoski, “Player Character Engagement in Computer Games,” 295.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 294.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 305.

can block empathic engagement.”³¹ He also states that empathic engagement is about **reacting** to the character’s actions. Is this the same thing the player does when they are impersonating their character? Are they reacting to the PC’s actions or are they creating the PC’s actions. Lankoski’s paper was written with games in mind like *Silent Hill 3*, where indeed the player’s only options of engagement are to react to the PC’s actions, since the player has no influence over the narrative actions of their character.^{32,33} This is different in role-playing games however, since the player is able to shape their character, leading to the question: does empathic engagement not just consist of reacting, but also of acting? To answer this question lets return to the concept of simulation.

According to Smith, *empathy* can be divided into *affective* (and motor) *mimicry* and *simulation*. Following Smith, *affective mimicry* is used to refer to the phenomenon where a person involuntarily and automatically mimics another person’s expressed affects. This means, for example, that people tend to smile and feel pleasure when they see another person smiling (or, conversely, experience affects relating to pain if they see someone getting hurt). *Simulation* relates to hypothetical reasoning where one engages in *as-if reasoning*. This means that when people simulate other people, they do not become them but they process certain predicates in as-if mode, imagining how they themselves would feel in that situation.³⁴

Thus simulation is part of what makes up empathy. When impersonating a character, it is possible to just think through the character, without making it your own experience. For example, the PC just lost a very dear friend of theirs with whom no empathic engagement was initiated throughout the game. The player gets the option to choose a response, knowing that this character was very close to their PC they choose an option which displays the PC’s sadness. Making this decision by impersonating their character was not, however, the same as simulating that character. The simulation part only takes place after seeing the character express this sadness instead of in the moment of decision, which consists of a reaction towards the sadness of that character. During the decision making part, the player just chooses

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid 300.

³³ Team Silent, *Silent Hill 3* (Tokyo, Japan: Konami, 2003).

³⁴ M. Smith, *Engaging characters: Fiction, emotion, and cinema*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995) as cited in Lankoski, “Player Character Engagement in Computer Games.”

the option that is most logical for the situation. This is something we will come back to in the last sub question.

Aside from the mimicry and simulation theory on which Lankoski builds his empathic engagement, he also borrows three other concepts introduced by Smith, which are *recognition*, *alignment* and *allegiance*. Where “recognition describes aspects of character interpretation. Alignment describes what kind of access players have to a character’s actions, knowledge, and affects” and “allegiance describes how characters elicit sympathy or antipathy through positive or negative evaluation of the character.”³⁵ In order to see how impersonation relates to these things that make up empathic engagement, I will engage into a short analysis of DAI.

How does empathic engagement occur within DAI

When playing DAI recognition is something the player always engages in with their PC. This is because a very big part of the character’s interpretation is shaped by the player. In the beginning of the game you get the ability to choose the PC’s gender, their race and their class. Already determining a lot of the PC’s background. The player is also able to shape how their character is going to look.

The way the player is able to shape their character also has a big influence on the alignment with that character. Alignment is about the access to the character’s action and when playing DAI, or any CRPG, the player is able to make a lot of the big decisions that their character makes within a game.

Both alignment and recognition are essential to impersonation. To be able to impersonate a character it is crucial to have access to a character’s actions and knowledge, otherwise the player would never be able to think from their character’s perspective. The same goes for the interpretation of the character. When impersonating a character, the player has to be able to make a proper construction of that character.

The last category Lankoski introduces is the concept of allegiance, which is essentially about the moral evaluation of a character. I argue that both recognition and alignment are necessary in order to impersonate a character, but it is not necessary to have a positive evaluation of a character in order to impersonate them. It is also possible to play and evil character in DAI, because this is the type the player chose for themselves. The player make their character really corruptive and unkind towards others. This character will not elicit a

³⁵ Ibid., 291.

positive evaluation. This would be a good example of how the game “can make the playing engaging without positive evaluation of the PC.”³⁶ Thus impersonation can be seen as a form of empathic engagement, because in order to understand a character good enough to be able to impersonate that character, empathic engagement is a prerequisite.

How does DAI afford impersonation within its game design

In this sub question I will first introduce the theories and concepts from Alexander Galloway and Toby Gard. Who will be brought in relation to each other. Then I will move on to an analysis of DAI, in which I will divide the analysis in a diegetic section and a nondiegetic section. What these concepts define as will be explained below.

Before starting the analysis of DAI, I would first like to delve a little bit deeper in Galloway’s theory about the player as *operator* and the computer as a *machine*. In *Gaming Essays on Algorithmic Culture* Alexander Galloway describes how computers are also actors in themselves: “People move their hands, bodies, eyes, and mouths when they play video games. But machines also act. They act in response to player actions as well as independently of them.”³⁷ When looking at computer games he distinguishes between two types of actions: the operator actions and the machine actions.³⁸ In which “machine actions are acts performed by the software and hardware of the game computer, while operator actions are acts performed by players.”³⁹ What Galloway tries to show with these two distinctions is that the player is not the only one who is in control. The machine reacts to the operators commands, but it also controls the characters, surroundings and the flow of the game. Both the player and the machine are actors. The player functions as an actor by, for example, pushing the w button on their keyboard to which the machine responds by making the PC move. The machine, or the computer/game also controls the players actions to a certain extent. Machine and operator play the game together. You cannot have one without the other. These game mechanics also influence the way the PC acts within the game, since it is driven by the machine. This means that a PC also has agency of its own as opposed to real-life characters that are played by actors. This will be something that strongly influences the way you can impersonate your character in DAI.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 4.

³⁸ Ibid., 5.

³⁹ Ibid., 5.

It also connects to something that Toby Gard says in his paper *Building Character* where he explains the different kind of PCs there are. He distinguishes two kinds of PCs, the *Avatar* and the *Actor*. The *Avatar* is often viewed from a first-person perspective and is therefore equal with the player and the *Actor* is often seen from a third-person point of view and has its own personality. Since the latter is the case for most role-playing games I will focus on Gard's definition of the *Actor*: "the *Actor* is a character distinct from the player, with its own personality, characteristics, and, to some extent, mind."⁴⁰ In his article Gard aims for games in which there is a specific PC that has its own story and background, like Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider*.⁴¹ This also indicates that the player and PC are two different entities and the PC has a mind of its own. In CRPGs the player does have a great influence on the way its PC's personality develops, but as argued with Galloway, there is still a certain form of agency that lies with the character. During the analysis we will get back to this phenomenon. There is one more aspect that plays an important role in the interaction between the player and the game.

Aside from the interaction between the machine and operator, Galloway also makes another two-division within games. This is between a diegetic and nondiegetic level.

In video games there are actions that occur in diegetic space and actions that occur in nondiegetic space [...] The diegesis of a video game is the game's total world of narrative action. As with cinema, video game diegesis includes both onscreen and offscreen elements. It includes characters and events that are shown, but also those that are merely made reference to or are presumed to exist within the game situation.[...] By contrast, nondiegetic play elements are those elements of the gaming apparatus that are external to the world of narrative action. [...] gamic elements that are inside the total gamic apparatus yet outside the portion of the apparatus that constitutes a pretend world of character and story.⁴²

Since impersonation is something that specifically refers to a dramatic personality, thus something that occurs within the narrative of the game and is therefore diegetic, it would be interesting to see how this concept functions when focusing on the nondiegetic elements of

⁴⁰ Gard, "Building Character."

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Galloway, *Gaming Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, 6-8.

the game, because these also make up a very big part of the engagement with a character. This is why I want to divide the analysis into a diegetic and nondiegetic part.

How does impersonation occur within the diegetic of the game

In the introduction I already explained the way *Dragon Age: Inquisition* starts. This example is something I want to delve into a little further. DAI is a game that is different, especially in controls, than its predecessors. The beginning of the game consists mostly out of cutscenes, in which find yourself in the middle of a kind of sandstorm. The only thing you can do is walk towards a bright white figure. When climbing up the hill to get to the figure, enormous spiders start chasing you and your character starts to run. Since these are all in the form of a cutscene, it is not possible to move yourself. Your character almost reaches the white figure when the screen fades to black. S/he collapses and the next thing you know is that your character has been taken captive and is accused of a crime they did not commit. You have to choose what you are going to respond to the accusations made against your character. Once you have reached the end of the interrogation you go, together with Cassandra an NPC from the game, towards a big rift that has opened itself in the sky, to investigate it. On the way you encounter some foes and get an introduction to the fighting system. Once the rift is closed and the boss is killed the first part of the game is over.

When looking at this example while trying to impersonate my character, the first thing that stands out is the fact that you do not always have full control over what your character does. In moments like a cutscene (which is more or less the same as a short movie, in which there is no interaction possible) you have no influence whatsoever about where your character is going or what your character does. This means that moments like these could hinder the player's impersonation of their character, since the character may perform an action, which the player did not want the character to perform.

Moving on within this example, the PC has been taken captive and is offered a moment in which they can respond to a certain question/statement (see figure 1). The player has four different options to choose from, which are "let me go", "all those people...", "What now?" and "I'm confused." This is a moment in which the player can really impersonate their character. Since it is the very first moment in the game where the player has the option to make a decision, this is also the moment in the game where the player decides for themselves what kind of character they are going to be. Because I decided I wanted a character that was compassionate towards others, I chose the "all those people..." option, which also displayed a tear icon next to it, showing a sign of compassion. Then something interesting happens.

Instead of saying the exact words I just chose, my character started saying “I can’t believe it. All those people...dead?”, which adds something extra to the option that just was chosen. This shows that there is something in between the character and the player. They do not act as one, which is the case when acting out a character in a LARP game or on a stage. As said when discussing Gard and Galloway, in DAI the PC has agency of its own, which hinders the process of impersonation, seeing as the character responds differently than the player has intended.

After the discussion with the captors is finished, the PC sets off with Cassandra, which is one of the NPCs that interrogated you. At this moment the player first obtains the ability to walk and use the other controls. The goal you need to reach is marked on a map and the environment generally steers you towards that point. The PC is not able to wonder off, which is in accordance with the narrative, since she is still a prisoner. When walking towards your goal, the PC and Cassandra are making conversation. This means that the PC is saying things the player has no control over. The machine, in this case the PC, acts whereas the operator or the player cannot influence these actions.⁴³ In these moments within the game, when the player is exploring new areas or engages in a fight, the focus of engagement shifts from empathic, to more goal-related like Lankoski describes.⁴⁴ This means that the actions that the player performs while walking do not influence the narrative. Since impersonation is all about taking on the assumption of a *dramatic personality*, it is quite difficult to keep impersonating a character when the emphasis is on the goal-related engagement, in which the narrative is of less importance.⁴⁵ When fighting and exploring areas after the inquisition has been founded, the player can even switch between the characters in their party, losing the link to their character altogether. This exemplifies the idea that these moments are more about achieving goals, like certain quests, than that they are about empathic engagement with the PC.

This means that the main moments in which impersonation is really afforded by the game design are within the moments of choice, where the player really has to engage with their character on an empathic level in order to make a decision.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Lankoski, “Player Character Engagement in Computer Games.”

⁴⁵ Trenos, *Creativity: The Actor in Performance*.

How did the nondiegetic aspects of the game influence impersonation

Within a game you always have, aside from the diegetic elements, also the nondiegetic elements that Galloway mentions.⁴⁶ In DAI these elements are also present. For example when engaging in a fight you can pause the game in order to strategically position the characters. As mentioned before, the player also has the opportunity to switch character when exploring areas or engaging in fights, this does not mean however that you have any influence on what these characters say or if they approve or disapprove any actions you perform. You keep making the main decisions with your main character, therefore these switches are nondiegetic. Because impersonation is something that has to occur within the narrative of the game, since it is intrinsically linked to the dramatic personality that you are playing, it is not possible to interact with the nondiegetic elements of the game when impersonating a character. When you pause the game, your character pauses as well, making it impossible to impersonate that character. Additionally when switching to another character, the player still does not have any real influence over how that character behaves, except the general moving direction or fighting skills, which do not add anything to the narrative. Thus I argue that it is impossible to properly impersonate a character that behaves or appears in a nondiegetic setting. Just as it becoming increasingly difficult to impersonate a character, when the goal-related engagement is the main focus at certain points in the game.

When playing the game it was interesting to see that nondiegetic actions, like pausing the game, actually happened most often in relation to the game-oriented moments in the game. Which is, when thinking about it, quite logical, since the game-oriented moments are less about the narrative of the game and therefore also less concerned with the diegetic aspects of the game. This gives the nondiegetic elements more room to occur. At these moments in the game you distance yourself from your character. The engagement mainly consists in the form of something that more or less represents a kind of directing, where the player does control the character to some extent, but also keeps a certain distance in moving it around the map and engaging in fights. This way of interaction is not hindered by the agency of the PC or the nondiegetic aspects, because the narrative is not the main focus in these instances.

In conclusion, the game design of DAI does not give a lot of room for impersonation. Nondiegetic elements and goal-related engagement, prevent a player from impersonating their character. The only real moments in which it becomes possible to impersonate the PC is in the

⁴⁶ Galloway, *Gaming Essays on Algorithmic Culture*.

moments where the player is able to decide in what way their character is going to respond, because these moments enable the player to really stand in the shoes of their character.

How does impersonating the PC influence the empathic engagement

In this sub question I want to compare my impersonation playthrough, with a normal playthrough of the game, to show the way impersonation impacts the relationship between the player and their character.

The engagement that is created with a character within a CRPG is very different from the way an actor engages with their character in a theatrical setting, or even in a LARP game. Here the actor and the character are not separated by something external, like a computer. Still there are moments where it feels like the player and character are on the same level, which are the moments where the player gets the ability to make a decision or respond to a situation. As soon as that decision has been made however, the agency of the character can change the way the player wanted their actions to be interpreted. By, for example, making them more heroic, or making them sound sarcastic while the player wanted that response to be honest. When comparing this experience with my normal playthrough of the game, I found that it offered me a different, less personal way of engaging with my character. Strangely by deliberately impersonating my character I felt more distanced than in a normal playthrough. Because of playing the character with a certain type in mind, I had to put my personal preferences aside in order to be able to think through my character. Then, after making a decision, I would not even be the one acting out the response and emotion, but my character would. The sympathy towards all the people that died (see figure 1) is acted out and felt by your character. Although the player can also experience this sympathy, as Lankoski argues, this sympathy was caused by the reaction of the PC.⁴⁷ Not in the moment of choosing an option, but after the character acted out this option. The player in this instant simulates their character. Impersonation within a game is therefore limited to a logical evaluation of the character's response within the type that the player has chosen for their character. As said before, this approach can distance the player from the character by ignoring their own personal feelings when making a choice through their character.

I would like to illustrate this with an example that takes place near the end of DAI. With this example it is important to understand how Dragon Age creates links to their other

⁴⁷ Lankoski, "Player Character Engagement in Computer Games."

game. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is the latest in a series of three games. Starting with *Dragon Age: Origins* which is then followed by *Dragon Age II*.^{48,49} The choices the player made in *Dragon Age: Origins* influence the events that happen in *Dragon Age II*. The same goes for DAI, the choices of both previous games influence the events that happen in DAI. In this example a character had to be sacrificed. My PC had the choice between Alistair, a character I romanced in *Dragon Age: Origins* and Hawke, my player character from *Dragon Age II*. Because of my engagement with these characters in previous games, I had developed a very strong allegiance towards both characters. If I would play this scene by just impersonating my PC in DAI, that would mean I had to let go of all the previous ties I had with both characters, seeing as my PC in DAI did not really know them. The fact that I had already build a very strong empathic connection with them in my previous playthroughs, is exactly what made this moment so very painful for me. This means that by letting go of your personal ties and really impersonating a character, the empathic engagement, instead becoming stronger, is weakened. This is because you have to distance yourself from your personal feelings, in order to make a decision through you character.

Conclusion

The first sub question was to position impersonation within the theory provided by Lankoski. Here I argued why impersonation could be seen as a way of empathically engaging with the PC, by analyzing the notions that made up empathic engagement according to Lankoski. I found that for a player to be able to impersonate their character, at the very least recognition and alignment should occur. Allegiance could occur, but was not strictly necessary. Essentially the way one would experience empathic engagement with a character when using impersonation would depend upon the simulation and affective mimicry following the reaction of the character. This is therefore comparable to the way a player empathically engages with their character in a ‘normal’ situation.

In moving on to the next sub question it became clear that a player engages with more than just their character within a game. They also engage with the mechanisms of the computer or the machine as Galloway calls it. This, in combination with Toby Gard’s vision on the player character as a distinct mind from the player, lead me to the conclusion that a PC has agency of itself. This also became clear within the analysis, where I discussed how the PC

⁴⁸ BioWare, *Dragon Age: Origins* (Electronic Arts (PC), 2009).

⁴⁹ BioWare, *Dragon Age II* (Electronic Arts (PC), 2011).

interprets the choices and commands of the operator aka the player in its own way. In addition I showed that when the focus would be on goal-related engagement, this interfered with the capability to properly impersonate a character. This was not only true for goal-related engagement, but also for nondiegetic actions/elements within the game. In accordance I had to conclude that impersonation would only be afforded by the game in those moments where the player was able to make decisions with their character, because these were the only moments in which it was really possible to think through their character.

The last sub question looked at how the player's impersonation of their character could influence the way the player would empathically engage with their character. As said before the reaction to the PC appeared similar to the reaction that occurred within a 'normal' playthrough of the game, only by impersonating their character the player had to distance themselves from their own emotions in order to make decisions based on the feelings of their character. Thus even though sympathy would still occur, the player's own feelings and connection towards the choices provided by the game apparently had more influence on the way the player experiences the relation with their character, than initially thought. My premise was that impersonation would increase the degree of empathic engagement instead of decreasing it. This could be the next step in answering a question Lankoski asked within his own paper: can the PC be seen as an extension of the self?⁵⁰

It is important to note that this result may also be depended upon the type of impersonation I have chosen to use within this thesis. By impersonating a character as an individuated type, the type becomes something that is central for every decision the player makes. This does require the player to put aside their own emotions, whereas this could be different if the impersonation was more an impersonation of the self. Impersonating a character as type also requires the player to know what kind of type you are going to be beforehand. This actually limits the player in discovering their character along the way of playing. This could be useful in a theatrical setting where the actor has a fixed character, but within a game like DAI precisely the discovery of the many aspects of the game by experimenting with the different options that the player is given, make the game exciting to play. Thus for future research it could be interesting to try out different types of impersonation, to see if this effects the outcome of this research.

Also in this thesis I chose a righteous character, which for me caused a positive evaluation of the character. It would be interesting to see if, when the player plays a character

⁵⁰ Ibid, 299.

that is not evaluated in a positive way, the player would automatically distance themselves from this character and impersonate them in the manner that I just performed. This could lead to interesting results regarding the way player distances or engages with a character.

This thesis showed that translating a concept from one medium to another has certain consequences on how this concept functions. It also showed that trying to impersonate your character does not necessarily improve the gaming experience in a role-playing game. Hopefully this research has brought us one step closer to understanding the way the player and their character interact with each other within a game and what this interaction makes so special in regard to other media.

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