

Fat adventurers not included?

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Abstract

How is fatness afforded within character creator interfaces? This is the central question I seek to outline and address in this analysis. Previous work towards this goal has relied on value judgements and on what fatness within the interface is and the Avatar Affordance Framework, this focus leaves the analysis unable to uncover nuanced player-oriented readings of the interface. Other work on fatness within games has focused on NPC and non-customisable character representations. By introducing the affordance framework of Jenny L. Davis, which invites us to consider a cultural & critical dimension when analysing affordances. It opens for a too-close playing of game interfaces. This is especially useful when fatness is considered as a floating signifier. I analyse *how* Dragon Age Origins, Pillars of Eternity & Baldur's Gate 3 come to afford the creation of fat characters in their respective character creation interfaces, considering fatness to always be afforded. I found that they all share a commonality in *refusing* characters that could be read as both fat and tall, and *demanding* players to read the Dwarf racial option as fat, except for in the case of BG3 where the masculine Halfling becomes the main option for a fat player character. These races come to perform fatness through their negative relation with the other options, and this is most evident in BG3, as the existence of the Halfling changes the affordance of the Dwarf to that of a strongman when the halfling presents more fat. By expanding our perception of what fat could be in a game interface, we are able to find it represented in a myriad of ways. And we can find the ways in which games come to afford fat embodiment, start work on the archival of fat experiences, and finally, hopefully, transform the players perspective.

Keywords

Affordances, Character creator interfaces, Baldur's Gate 3, fat studies, Body type, Computer Roleplaying games

Introduction

"I love the strong bodies we got with the final release! However, I don't really play muscular characters, I prefer playing soft, comfy ones, and that includes playing gentle giants. And even if I do play strong characters, I prefer they have a bit of pudge, I'll leave the washboard abs to other beautiful people." (Margerard, 2023)

Computer Role Playing Games (CRPGs) (Zagal and Deterding, 2018) have long been played for their ability to fill the imagination of players' minds. Whether that is fighting dragons or exploring new worlds, there are games within the vague umbrella genre of CRPG that can scratch the urge of the wanting player. However, the CRPG is especially constricted by the developer's imagination and the modders' intervention; its analog version, the tabletop RPG (TTRPG), has more freedom afforded from the co-creation of game by players and game masters.

One aspect which is shared across the material divide, however, is the character creation process. For both forms of play this is highly operationalized when it comes to how a character takes shape within the rules. This instrumental shape has previously been a source of critique within game studies (Iantorno and Consalvo, 2023), as the specific way that fantasy races are tied to attributes plays into racially deterministic ideals. The way gender is represented, and thus reproduced, has been another point of critique within Character Creators (McArthur and Jenson, 2014). But an aspect of identity which neither Iantorno and Consalvo or McArthur et al touch on is how Character Creators reproduce

body type ideals, and in turn represent fatness in their Character Creators (and playable characters). This gap is particularly interesting because it has become a point of interest within game studies within recent time (Harper, 2020, 2023; Waszkiewicz, 2021) and has yet to be fully analysed when it comes to CRPGs, as both older and newer versions have few or no options which afford (Davis and Chouinard, 2016) fat characters, at least on the surface.

Therefore, I want to go into this with an assumption which is that fat is afforded within these Character Creators it is simply a matter of *how*. I will analyze three CRPGs, *Pillars Of Eternity* (POE) (Obsidian Entertainment, 2015), *Dragon Age Origins* (DAO) (BioWare, 2009) and *Baldur's Gate 3* (BG3) (Larian Studios, 2023), in order to try and answer: how each game affords (from request to refuse) the creation of fat characters? What does each game represent as fat? and finally discuss how a too-close reading of these affordances could lead to a more player centric approach in future work.

Theory and method

Character Creator analysis

Work from games studies on Character Creators (CCs) has focused on the ways CCs reproduce gender and ethnicity (McArthur, Teather and Jenson, 2015), economic class and race (Iantorno and Consalvo, 2023), and fat bodies (Harper, 2020). What all the analysis has in common is the focus on Character Creators as a space for co-creation between the game and the player. The player is given a set of options which they are "free" to pick from, but these are rarely (if ever) presented equally, or as this analysis will heavily focus on, presented at all. Building on the logic of *situated action* (Suchman, 2003), the Character Creator becomes a space with implicit assumptions and obfuscations, or in other words, politics (Winner, 1980).

Iantorno & Consalvo differ from both McArthur et al and Harper in their methodological approach to analysing Character Creators. Iantorno & Consalvo use the framework of the *interface study* (Dutton and Consalvo, 2006), which focuses on helping the researcher "(...) see what information is privileged (is a running "score" always present onscreen-indicating its importance? How is "life" or "health" represented?) and what information is absent or difficult to find" (Dutton and Consalvo, 2006). In their analysis they also include material from outside the Character Creation Interface (CCI) itself, examining other aspects of the game as well as its paratexts (Genette, 1997). These additional sites of investigation can enable important insights in the analysis of the Character Creator Interface, especially considering the multiple levels which character creation happens at. When it comes to fatness, very few games make the body type of the character directly influence the ludic player character.¹ However, fat is deeply entangled with the fantasy races which many CRPGs rely upon. This specific relationship between using fantasy races to both give the player certain ludic bonuses, and visual representation.

My method of investigating fatness in these interfaces is inspired by McArthur et al. Avatar Affordance Framework (AAF), which both focuses more on the interfaces themselves compared to the interface study (Dutton and Consalvo, 2006), and uses the theory of affordances from Donald Norman (2013), as well as situated action to describe how interfaces work. While McArthur's focus is on the politics of the interface, Donald Normans affordance theory is ill suited for that type of analysis as it leaves out the player/users social allowance for choosing certain options over others. Here the mechanism and conditions framework of Davis and Chouinard is a better fit as it captures the socially embedded aspects of any potential interaction (Davis and Chouinard, 2016: 245).

The mechanisms of affordances are *request, demand, encourage, allow, discourage* and *refuse*.

¹ The only roleplaying game which I have found to have a simulation of character body type is Dragons Dogma which simulates the players carry weight and stamina based on weight and height (eerily similar to the variables needed to calculate ones BMI)

These can be divided by their interrelation with the subject and the artifact: “Requests and demands refer to bids that the artifact places upon the subject. Encouragement, discouragement, and refusal refer to how the artifact responds to a subject’s desired actions. Allow pertains to both bids placed upon on the subject and bids placed upon the artifact” (Davis and Chouinard, 2016: 242).

The different categories describe the degrees to which interfaces or features afford, importantly, this framework is not meant to categorize features but rather to create a language from which designers can discuss (Davis, 2020: 57). Thus, one feature can exhibit multiple affordances or none clearly, depending on the analysts or the subject’s perspective and *conditions*. *Conditions* within this framework describe the ways that the subject or environmental factors can change and reflect the mechanisms of affordances. Davis and Chouinard denote three types: *Perception*, *Dexterity* and *Cultural and institutional legitimacy*. Davis & Chouinard describe the three as: “Perception refers to what a subject knows about the artifact, and dexterity refers to what a subject can do with that artifact. In addition, we capture the social and structural embeddedness of the affordance relationship through a third factor: cultural and institutional legitimacy” (Davis and Chouinard, 2016: 245). With the conditions in mind when analysing any interface it becomes important to take a critical perspective, since any analysis of an interface requires the attention of a political element (Davis, 2020: 89).

The goal of this analysis then is to problematize and critique rather than catalogue and compare. To do this the avatar affordance framework functions as a baseline, which when combined with the work of Davis and Chouinard and a critical perspective from Fat Studies, allows the analysis to give a non-exhaustive answer as to *how* fatness is afforded.

Fat studies and fat performance

The field of fat studies has in recent years gotten intermingled with the field of game studies, through the works of Todd Harper (2020, 2023) and Agata Waszkiewicz (2021), both of which do a great job at introducing the two fields more broadly to each other. Of particular importance is the understanding of fat as a floating signifier (Hall, 2021), removing it from a biological understanding and putting it into a social one, which can in theory signify *anything*. This puts any interface analysis into a position of judgment, whatever is deemed “fat” is equally valid as anything else, therefore putting the focus on *how* something comes to be read as fat is more productive. I take the approach of Bo Ruberg which is *too-close-playing* “(...) the too-close player rejects the hegemonic rules that dictate the boundaries around how “acceptable” meaning is supposed to be made from video games. Instead, the too-close player insists on the right of queer subjects and others who are commonly underrepresented in video games to see themselves in games through connotation (Ruberg, 2020: 58). By assuming that fatness is always *allowed* it can be further scrutinized as to exactly *how* it is afforded, but what exactly *is* afforded still needs to be squared, as the goal of making a character, after the interaction is done, is to embody one.

The games in the corpus rely on *prosthetic marionette* (Klevjer, 2012) embodiment, as all games rely primarily on a camera which is situated outside the player character. While an analysis of what could simply be called *proxy fatness* through a lens of queer phenomenology (Longhurst, 2014) could be interesting, for the sake of this analysis, I take to the understanding of embodiment as in accordance to Jonas Linderöth’s three metaphors, as *social roles*, *settings* and as *tools* (2005) here fatness is then understood through the lens of primarily being performative (Longhurst, 2014) under those three categories. In this understanding what is afforded then is the performance of fat and questions of *how*, will focus on how this is bodily (visually) presented and ludically (settings, tools) simulated by the interface’s features.

Analysis

In this analysis I use the AAF as a starting point for what to read in the interfaces themselves, followed by an analysis of the affordances of the interface. In each game I look at each race option and the difference in body type between them; this is the main feature with which the player has control over their character's fatness. Categorizing affordances of fat in this way reveals the depth of fatness in these Character Creators.

Rules of Fatness

Harper notes in both of his analyses of games that fatness isn't simulated within the rules of the game (Harper, 2020: 16, 2023: 7), and while this might be true for fighting, and most other popular games, CRPGs are slightly different. While I still agree that fatness is primarily visual, which brings with its own problems (Harper, 2023) and its own opportunities, if fatness is a floating signifier, and the body which it represents can be fluid, then why shouldn't the same also be the case for the ludic dimensions of characters? This presents itself as being the case when comparing the Character Creators of POE and DAO. In both games certain bonus attributes are given to the player depending on their choice of race. This instrumentalization of race has previously been criticized (Iantorno and Consalvo, 2023) and is absent from the newest game in this corpus (BG3) but still present in the older games. In DAO the Dwarfs get +1 Strength, +1 Dexterity and +2 Constitution while in POE they get +2 Might (representing strength in both magic and physical ways) +1 Constitution and -1 Dexterity. The +2 to Constitution means that, if the player wants to play a strong and *healthy* character which can stay alive the longest, the game *requests* that they play a Dwarf. This is in stark contrast to the narrative surrounding fatness and the "obesity epidemic", which paints fat as unquestionably unhealthy. However, in this comparison DAO has a more positive representation of fatness, and yet a more disputable one due to its 1+ to Dexterity. Reading the characters purely from the game's procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2008) POE makes the argument that the Dwarfs are fat by connecting them with heartiness and strength while also simulating them as slower and less graceful. This argument is furthered in the elves, which get a +1 to Dexterity and are represented as the thinnest, visually. Thus, within the POE's logic Dexterity comes to be signified by body type together with constitution and might, and particularly fatness rather than muscle. The effect this has on the reading of the games affordances, is that POE ends up *allowing* for the creation of fat characters in the rules dimension through a negative representation, which while stronger than DAO's, leaves out the aspect of DAO's rules which is that the player gets to be a quick, smart and nimble character while also being fat. But this leaves an important question unanswered: does the 1+ to Dexterity come from the Dwarf's size, or is it a representation of something else? And is the Dwarf even fat, or just "stocky"?

The stocky and the stout

Whether or not the Dwarf should be read as fat comes largely down to the context of the interface itself, as was seen in POE, where no clearly fat option is given. The main way we find fatness afforded is through comparison and often at a cost of height, which is still the case in BG3 and was the case for DAO. To play a fat character in POE, BG3 and DAO the player is *refused* any tall and fat characters and in POE and DAO are only given one option through the Dwarf. This makes it, in the context of those games' interfaces, easy to read as the choice for a fat character. This is different in BG3, as the Halfling race also affords a form of fatness.

BG3 is built on Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition (Mearls and Crawford, 2014). Where both DAO and POE take inspiration from older versions. The player interacts with the body type of the PC in two main ways. First, they pick the race of the character, after which they pick a body type from a side panel in the bottom right of the screen. The Human, Dwarf, Elf, Half-elf and Tiefling all get four body types: 1 and 2 being a thin and masculine feminine body, respectively, and 3 and 4 being masculine versions of the same. The Half-Orc, Halfling, Dwarf, Dragonborn, Githyanki and Gnome

only get two options: one feminine and one masculine. For PCs of these races, they are largely stuck in whatever body type is defaulted to them, with some notable differences between the two gendered body types. Another feature which the player can find fatness within is the options of faces. Each race gets a set of faces which changes the general shape of the character's face, and this is the only way the player can interact with the facial structure of the characters. In the case of DAO, the Dwarf comes to be the fattest character, despite its muscly default and has a limited pool of customization options compared to the other races in the game, this can however be bypassed by first selecting another race, backing out and then going back into the Dwarf, in this sense DAO *requests* that the player keeps the Dwarf fat in the face. In BG3 the player has three options for body type: thin, muscly and fat. This is through the Gnome, Dwarf and Halfling, but another hurdle is that BG3 *requests* that the player plays a default, masculine Halfling, because the feminine Halfling loses the double chin and beer belly. The player also has the option to pick younger, more defined faces of the masculine halfling, but must navigate the submenu of faces to do so, and even then, the final character's beer belly remains. Being the newest game in the corpus, BG3 has been praised for its progressive Character Creator (King, 2023) and to its credit it is the only one with a nonbinary pronoun option, however its representation of fatness is still tied to problematic depictions of race and very limited. It thus continues the trend of *refusing* the creation of tall fat characters, and specifically *requests* the Halfling to be fat. This also means that, uniquely to BG3, the Dwarf ends up being more closely related to the body archetype of a muscleman. It also ties the abilities of the Halfling to its unique attributes, that being its fat. Halflings are in the rules considered to be brave, lucky, naturally stealthy and slightly slower moving than the tall races. Retained from DAO is the stealthiness, now removed from the Dwarf but instead found here in the Halfling, while also retaining the connection of slowness from POE. But tied to these features are bravery and luck, traits befitting of a hero and highly likely holdovers from the Halflings' most notable cultural icon the Hobbits from Tolkien's works. While there is a negative modifier when playing Halflings, this modifier is shared by the Gnomes and Dwarfs, which means its signifier is found in height rather than fat. So, in the land of Faerûn those who are fat are braver than most and are considered lucky, a far cry from the hate given to fat people in the real world.

Potentially queer

What the analysis reveals is that fatness is *demanded* of those who wish to play smaller characters, yet is *refused* if characters more closely resemble humans, or are tall in other words "gentle giants" are *refused*. In this sense Players are *demanded* to draw within the lines of normative body standards, as humans and elves are *demanded* to be muscular or thin. This paints a bleak picture of not only the way fatness is afforded, but body type all together, the races which colour within the lines so to speak are forced to do so, while the races of smaller stature (marked by their height as an "other") are *allowed* queer body types, seen in the Dwarf or the Halfling.

But perhaps this is a too narrow view. While Fat characters are denied height and in text humanity, they are still represented as a desirable choice. From the dexterous Dwarfs to the lucky Halflings, the fatness which is present in the rules of CRPG's is either positively coded or not seen as a valuable factor, to answer the question posed at the end of Harpers Fighting/Fat "*What does their fatness signify?*" (Harper, 2023: 7). In the case of these PCs, it signifies healthy, sturdy, lucky and sometimes acrobatic characters who are on the same playing field as their thin counterparts. I also believe this analysis can help answer the final call of Harper's article:

"(...)if work looking at fat characters in video games continues. In both this study and my previous work on avatar creators, what constituted "fat" or "fatness" was ultimately a judgment call informed by both my life experience as a fat person, and my expertise as a media critic/scholar. That judgment call was made necessary, however, by a lack of concrete criteria for determining if a virtual body—a 2D sprite from an aging NeoGeo title, for example,

versus the increasingly photoreal 3D models of a game like Tekken—“counts” as fat.”
(Harper, 2023: 9)

While a part of the literature review handled my interpretation of what fatness is understood as, I too have made and relied on “judgment” calls informed by the notion that fatness was to be found. As to whether these races are fat, perhaps the true answer is that it is highly dependent (as with other performances) on the socio-cultural context of the perceiver, or in this case the player.

I propose that the language of nuanced affordances is best suited for this developing study of fatness in video games, not just for more analysis but also for more player forward social scientific based interviews or discourse analysis, since *“There’s no law and indeed, no technical and mechanical limitation that says a fat character must also be foolish or delusional, or wear ill-fitting clothing, or be obsessed with food”* (Harper, 2023: 8) that inhibits neither developer or player from creating fat characters, only socio-cultural circumstance and symbolic power relations (Jones, 2014). Further research might just find games which do *request* or *demand* fat characters, or modders might intervene as Margerard has for BG3. Either way these interventions and readings could further add resistance to the symbolic annihilation of fat from visual archives (Pratt, 2018).

Conclusion

I hope to have shown through focusing on how fat is afforded through a critical lens of fat studies and too close playing. That Dragon Age Origins, Pillars of Eternity and Baldur’s Gate 3 all can allow fat player characters, which in fact, request or encourage players who want to be lucky healthy or even dexterous to play as a fat halfling or dwarf. However, were this imagined player to want to play as a gentle giant, this would still have denied them. This then puts this analysis at its limits. While these games, and others with discrete racial body type interfaces, should be considered when archiving and considering games with fat representation, the problem of the player is still in question. More research is required that focuses on the players who play too close on their own outside of academic interest in order to find the games which could be considered part of the larger effort to archive fat experiences (Pratt, 2018).

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