ONCE UPON A GATE:

HOW THE *BALDUR'S GATE* CRPG SERIES

EMBODIES THE FAIRY TALE GENRE

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Emma Leigh Lowe

Advised by Bo Ruberg,

Associate Professor in the

Department of Film & Media Studies

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Abstract:

It is undeniable that folklore has been a crucial aspect of human expression and connection for thousands of years. The nineteenth century saw interest in folkloric stories bloom thanks to the work of folklorists like the Brothers Grimm and fairy tale writers like Hans Christian Andersen. With these minds came widespread recognition of the literary fairy tale genre. Since then, fairy tales have skyrocketed in pop cultural prominence. Taking into account the fairy tale genre's pervasiveness in storytelling, this thesis examines how the computer role-playing game (CRPG) series, *Baldur's Gate*, utilizes this genre in an attempt to create a set of adult fairy tales for their players. In three separate chapters, this thesis will connect the *Baldur's Gate* games to fairy tales in a way that exemplifies the latter's influence on the former. The first chapter will focus on the "leaving home" plot arc as it is presented in the first *Baldur's Gate* game from 1998, and we will examine how this narrative format is used in fairy tales to convey a message about self-actualization. In the second chapter, we will examine the hag character type, and how *Baldur's Gate 3* Early Access (2020—present) both reiterates and subverts this feminine archetype. Finally, the third chapter will focus on perhaps the most important aspect of RPGs and fairy tales both, which is choice. Essentially, we will analyze how the *Baldur's Gate* series honors the fairy tale principle of moral exploration through choice. Additionally, we will examine how the *Baldur's Gate* series takes this aspect of moral exploration from fairy tales and amplifies it according to their targeted demographic of adults.

PART I

Introduction

Introduction

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"We can learn a lot from fairy-tales, don't you think?"

—Wyll, an origin character from *Baldur's Gate 3*

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A youngling fleeing into the forest. A shadowy, feminine villain. A transformation of the self. It is probable that the person reading this can attach one of these concepts to at least one fairy tale. One would be forgiven for thinking that these famous tales are confined to the realm of childlike wonder, their symbols fossilized in our minds as remnants of a simpler past. But just as life itself is ever evolving, so too are the stories we create. Our favorite childhood fairy tales never stay as they were upon creation. Instead, they change with us.

Now, what if I told you that the three concepts in the above paragraph were evident in some very surprising material? What if I told you that we need not look further than *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) to see a mutation of these typically fairy tale concepts?

Enter the *D&D* computer game series, *Baldur's Gate*. The first game being published in 1998, it is clear that these titles are not Grimm or HC Andersen contemporaries. In fact, they are not even contemporaries to their very source material, *Dungeons & Dragons*, which was released more than two decades prior. And yet, this game series replicates the fairy tale experience for its target audience of young adults and older.

It is reasonable that one would not be able to tie something like *D&D*, or role-playing in general, to fairy tales. However, a look at these two storytelling mediums shows far more

similarities than one would initially think. In fact, both mediums are directly informed by folklore. In her book, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*, in which she similarly argues that "[r]ole-playing represents a recent permutation in the evolution of . . . artistic representations" (Bowman 13), Sarah Lynne Bowman highlights the folkloric influences in the RPG genre. In her first chapter, she makes clear that role-playing stories often utilize "deep, archetypal symbols" that we typically see in "[m]yths, epics, and fairy tales" (13-14).

Fairy tales are one in a long line of folklore, however, and even then one in a long line of *written* folklore. There are of course myths, which one can argue are our oldest form of widespread folklore. In an article titled "Scientists Trace Society's Myths to Primordial Origins" on *Scientific American*'s website, Julien d'Huy, a doctoral candidate in history at Paris's Pantheon-Sorbonne University, notes the potential relationship between migration patterns across the Bering Strait and the spreading of certain myths. This, according to him, would take the myth's origins back well over ten thousand years. And yet, as I implied earlier, folklore has been oral for much of human history. Our written tales only really appear in the last two thousand years. On this, children's literature author Jane Yolen writes in her article, "From Andersen On: Fairy Tales Tell Our Lives", that the first iteration in written folklore is likely the fable, citing the Sanskrit *Panchatantra* and Aesop's fables (Yolen 240), both of which were recorded at around 200 BCE and 600 BCE respectively. With these respective accounts understood, we have a general (and, admittedly, very simplified) idea of the fairy tale's oral and literary ancestors.

It is in the nineteenth century where we see the fairy tale genre—as we know it today—truly blossom, with the publication of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's *Nursery and Household Tales* in 1812. In her article on the two brothers titled "Oral Tradition and the Brothers Grimm", Ruth Michaelis-Jena illustrates the brothers' effect on European literature, and the subsequent boom in

folkloric publications across the continent after their stories' popularizations. According to Michaelis-Jena, the Grimms ushered in a new era in literary studies, where, in the words of Sir George Webbe Dasent (cited by Michaelis-Jena) "what had come to be looked on as mere nursery fictions and old wives' fables . . . [became] a study fit for the energies of grown men, and to all the dignity of a science" (Michaelis-Jena 274). As detailed by Michaelis-Jena, folk stories were recorded and polished by folklore collectors like the Brothers Grimm, and with them came a new type of story which could be transported across borders not by sound, but through text.

However, note how I said the fairy tale blossoms in the nineteenth century. Sure the genre thrived thanks to the Brothers Grimm, but they are certainly not the inventors of fairy tales. In fact, fairy tales' beginnings are far from what meets the eye. While one would be forgiven for thinking fairy tales first gained popularity as children's tales, the fact of the matter is that their origins are far from kid friendly. On the contrary, fairy tales began as imaginative safe havens for adults. It is this truth which will help guide my interpretation of the *Baldur's Gate* series as a set of adult fairy tales.

In her article titled "Violence in Fairy Tales: Basile's 'Lo Cunto de Li Cunti' and Garrone's 'Il Racconto Dei Racconti'" Cristina Mazzoni writes how it is in fact Giambattista Basile's posthumously published work, *Cunto de li cunti*, which can be ascribed "as the oldest European collection consisting entirely of fairy tales" (Mazzoni 178-179). In the same article, Mazzoni mentions how the "intended audience" for Basile's tales is "made up largely of adults" (178), something which is replicated a few centuries later in the French courts. In her aforementioned article, we see Jane Yolen argue the true origins of fairy tales are among Parisian high society, the writer saying, "the fairy-tale writers began their enormous and lasting popularity in the seventeenth-century French courts" (Yolen 241). According to her, these stories

were first “an art form of the upper classes” that dealt with “politics, government, and the social and gender issues of the day” (241). Furthermore, these stories indeed had oral folk inspirations (241), just as with Basile, who is believed to also have been influenced by folk oral storytelling (Mazzoni 180). We see with this evidence that fairy tales were not initially created for the amusement of children. In fact, fairy tales’ origins are utterly wrapped up in adult affairs. With this information in mind, we can look at the fairy tale not as something that has morphed *from* children’s literature into adult retellings, but rather as a genre that began as a way for adults to make sense of the world around them, or at the very least to entertain those around them. Thus, it is prudent to remember when examining *Baldur’s Gate* as an adult fairy tale that it is just a newer iteration in this long line of tellings.

And yet despite the fairy tale’s origins as a vehicle of storytelling for adults, the genre still operates as an outstanding mode of education and exploration. In the aforementioned Michaelis-Jena article, the author cites Edgar Taylor, the man who translated the Grimms’ stories into English, in his assessment that folktales “have imbibed earliest lessons of moral instruction” (270-271). Maria Tatar, another incredibly influential name in the folkloric studies sphere, states similarly in her article, “Why Fairy Tales Matter: The Performative and the Transformative”, that fairy tales are crucial for “help[ing] children move from that disempowered state to a condition . . . that marks the beginnings of some form of agency” (Tatar 63). Although in these analyses the authors take into account fairy tales’ influences on children, education through fairy tales can be and is replicated in adulthood. In his essay “Folklore as a Mirror of Culture” , folklorist Alan Dundes explicitly states that “[f]olklore is one way for both adults and children to deal with the crucial problems in their lives” (Bronner 64). Even one of the most prominent voices in the fairy tale genre, Hans Christian Andersen, emphasized the fairy tale’s importance in adult life, which

Yolen cites in her article. There, she describes Andersen's discontent over his stories being perceived as only for children, stating that children "only understood the outer trappings" of his tales and that they would "not comprehend and take in the whole work until they were mature" (Yolen 241). Clearly, fairy tales hold considerable merit in our adult lives, and I would argue this is rightly so, for without these realms of imagination so uniquely tied to our childhoods, our creative worlds would suffer.

Knowing this information, I feel that we can embark upon the fairy tale aspect of this thesis comfortably. However, I would not be surprised if readers are still unclear as to why I am specifically focusing on the *Baldur's Gate* games in my attempt to understand them as adult fairy tales. The ever-evolving nature of the genre is a well-trodden subject, with many of the articles I have already cited examining this phenomenon in some respects. Of course, there is also Jack Zipes, who writes in the beginning pages of his book *Why Fairy Tales Stick* about the mimetic (Zipes xiii) and virus-like evolution (3) of popular tales, his ideas being informed by Susan Blackmore, Richard Dawkins, Dan Sperber, and Deirdre Wilson respectively. Fairy tales are and will continue to change so long as the cultures telling them exist, and even then our stories can be artifacts of what once was (something which d'Huy notes in his article by connecting cave paintings to folklore motifs). My argument is that the *Baldur's Gate* series is just another evolution or mutation of the fairy tale, utilizing many of the genre's motifs, character types, tropes, and much more in revitalizing a fairy tale experience for their players—albeit with a remarkably more adult lens. Furthermore, the fact that the *Baldur's Gate* series are games proves even more why we should examine the series in relation to folklore. Hansjorg Hohr writes in his article, "Dynamic Aspects of Fairy Tales: Social and Emotional Competence through Fairy Tales", how the relationship between games and fairy tales underlines a process in which "[t]he

child explores and appropriates the rules of its culture by symbolically playing through them" (Hohr 99). I argue in this thesis that the *Baldur's Gate* games play with and complicate this process according to adulthood's more complex quandaries. More specifically, I will be examining how the *Baldur's Gate* games allow players to explore and play with their own culture's perceptions of agency, femininity, and morality.

With all this taken into account, let us embark upon Part II of my thesis in which you will find three separate chapters. In the first chapter, the reader will learn about the leaving home plot arc in fairy tales and how *Baldur's Gate* (BioWare, 1998)[1] replicates this format. In the second chapter, we will analyze the hag archetype and how *Baldur's Gate 3*'s early access material (Larian Studios, 2020) explores this aspect of femininity in stories. In the third and final chapter, we will examine how the *Baldur's Gate* series mimics the fairy tale exploration process, and how the games allow us to grapple with complex philosophical and personal conundrums relating to morality. I would like my readers to know it is my ardent hope that, through reading these chapters, they will have learned how fairy tales can mutate and evolve into different genres/mediums yet still exhibit significant pedagogical and explorative functions. It is also my goal that readers will understand that video games like the *Baldur's Gate* series can be critically examined and appreciated with the same respect and admiration we allot to more traditional forms of storytelling. All in all, I hope this thesis conveys a merging of our childlike wonders and our adult frustrations in a way that only the best fantastical stories do.

[1] NOTE: My in-text citations for *Baldur's Gate* and *Baldur's Gate II* credit BioWare, the initial creators of the series, but I conducted my research by playing the **enhanced editions** of these two games, which were published by Beamdog in 2013. As such, I credit Beamdog in the works cited.

PART II

Analyses

Chapter 1

Leaving Home

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"But now the poor child was all alone in the great forest, and so terrified that she looked at every leaf of every tree, and did not know what to do. Then she began to run, and ran over sharp stones and through thorns, and the wild beasts ran past her, but did her no harm."

—"Little Snow White", *Grimm's Complete Fairy Tales* (p. 188)

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In our world, home typically constitutes a place of safety and routine. Regardless of if one categorizes home as a material place or a group of people—or both—home usually represents a place of security. Thus, when we are displaced from our homes, our minds are forced to adapt. Outside of our place of comfort, we change according to the stimuli around us. Therefore, it is no wonder why leaving home is one of the most formative aspects of the hero's journey across storytelling. We need only think of a few famous examples to help solidify this point: Frodo leaves the Shire; Dorothy is transported to a strange land because of a tornado; and perhaps most famous of all, we have Odysseus, whose ten-year journey back to Ithaka has entertained people for over two thousand years. Clearly, the hero's departure from home is remarkably important in many of our stories.

Thus, it is no surprise fairy tales utilize this conflict to help inform their characters' developments. Some examples include "Hansel and Gretel", "Little Red Riding Hood", and "Little Snow White". However, these three are far from the only examples, for fairy tale

collectors and writers across a broad plethora of locations understood the innate importance of the hero's departure from home. Pauline Dewan, a librarian who has written extensively about children's literature, explains in her article, "Perennially Popular: The Appeal of Classic Fairy Tales for Children" one of the underlying reasons for children's investment in fairy tales. In her article, she explains, "Fairy tales also appeal to children because they typically embody patterns of growth and development. Children become adults in these tales by moving away from home and entering 'the wide world'—a place filled with danger, challenges, and exciting adventures" (Dewan 28). Here, we have a lens with which we can examine the importance of leaving home in fairy tales. According to Dewan, the removal of the protagonist from their home is influential in the fairy tale's narrative because it prompts maturation. Leaving one's place of comfort forces one into uncomfortable situations, thus creating new pathways both mental and physical.

Similarly, the forging of pathways and the process of maturation are things RPGs excel at. The player's decisions have a direct impact on the in-game world, thus making the player a contributor to the game's story as opposed to a mere observer. This is where we turn to the *Baldur's Gate* series, for within these games the concepts of maturation, travel, and departure from the home take center stage.

With all that said, let us actually get into the narrative of *Baldur's Gate* (BioWare, 1998). Our story begins in the walled city of Candlekeep, a place known for its academic splendor and rich history. Within this city, players assume the role of Gorion's Ward, an orphan raised within the walls of Candlekeep by their adoptive father, Gorion. The game states we are twenty years old at the start of our story, therefore clueing us into our player character's (PC's) youth and sheltered upbringing, for at twenty they are still under the watchful gaze of their adoptive father and the city's monks. Despite its serene nature, Candlekeep has an underlying air of tension as

we meander about during the first hour or so of the game, for Gorion's Ward is told continuously by town residents to meet with their adoptive father as soon as possible. When we finally meet with Gorion, he immediately orders us to pack our things so we may leave Candlekeep with him. After exchanging a few words, your character relents. Soon after, the two leave the city gates and enter the surrounding forested lands.

Baldur's Gate (Bioware, 1998) opening. Screenshot from Mortismal Gaming's video on *YouTube* (see works cited for more info)

All is well and good until Gorion and his ward are ambushed by a group of assassins. The supposed leader of the group, a deep-voiced man in armor, commands that Gorion give him his ward. And just like that, the pieces of the game begin falling into place. It turns out that *you*—the player character—are why Gorion has fled Candlekeep, for someone is hunting you. For what, we do not know as of yet in the game, but the imminent signs of danger are enough to assure us it is for something significant. This revelation follows what Dewan calls "a domestic problem", something which we can understand as beginning within the home itself. For example, in "Hansel and Gretel", the domestic problem is their family's food scarcity, which causes the children's parents to force them from the home (Grimm 54); in "Little Red Riding Hood", or "Little Red Cap" as it is known in the Brothers Grimm version, the domestic problem is the grandmother's illness, which prompts Red to deliver food to her (96). Within the world of *Baldur's Gate*, the domestic problem can be understood as Gorion's fear for his child's wellbeing—a fear that is not unfounded, for within the walls of Candlekeep we can encounter preliminary, albeit less major, assassination attempts.

This brings us to the end of the encounter between our PC, Gorion, and this dangerous entourage. In a final act of sacrifice, Gorion commands his ward to flee the scene as he battles these assailants. As your PC evades the ensuing battle, they get a last glimpse at the man who raised them as he crumbles under the overpowering effects of his adversaries. Gorion's Ward can only flee further into the forest lest they too are struck down.

Gorion's sacrifice. Screenshot from BringItDon's video on *YouTube* (see works cited for more info)

Now, the forest is a common tool utilized by storytellers. In both *Baldur's Gate* and *Baldur's Gate 3*, our PC must make sense of their dilemma by first traversing through the forest. The forest, put simply, is a place of discovery and risk. It is where outside stimuli overpower us, where our knowledge is utterly limited. Maria Nikolajeva, cited by Dewan, writes of this acquirement of knowledge and that "[v]enturing into the woods is . . . instrumental in their [the character's] progression from childhood to adulthood" (Dewan 29). In other words, the woods begin the process of maturity. If we look at canonical fairy tale literature, this notion holds true: using our earlier examples—Snow White discovers the home of the seven dwarves only after being left in the forest by the merciful huntsman; Hansel and Gretel are abandoned in the forest by their parents, therefore putting them on the path to the witch's candied hut; Little Red Riding

Hood first encounters the scheming wolf in the forest. Moreover, in *Baldur's Gate* and *Baldur's Gate 3*, gaining knowledge about our tumultuous situation begins in wooded areas.

Going off of Nancy Canepa's analysis, Dewan writes that the forest "is often the site of fairy-tale challenges and tests" and "initiation" (29), therefore we see why the hero being placed in the forest at the beginning of the story is important. The foreignness of the forest emphasizes the hero's vulnerability. Thus, as said by Canepa (cited by Dewan), only through "'the successful completion'" of these tests do we see "'a radical change in the protagonist's life'" (29). In *Baldur's Gate*, our PC must traverse the perils of the forest without Gorion, forging alliances and fighting enemies as they travel. For what is conceivably the first time in their life, they are able to call the shots and make important decisions, two definite signs of transitioning into adulthood.

Now that we have examined the forest as the "initiation" of these tests, it is important we consider other aspects of the leaving home conflict within the fairy tale. More specifically, let us examine the general format of the fairy tale and how the concept of home is innately tied to it. For this, we shall look back to Dewan's article, where she cites the Jack Zipes quote: "The wandering protagonist always leaves home to reconstitute home" (28). In other words, the departure from home recontextualizes the protagonist's relationship to their past. The increased distance from familiarity gives the protagonist more perspective, harkening back to the importance of new pathways being tread, which I mentioned earlier.

Within *Baldur's Gate*, we can contextualize home as two separate things for Gorion's Ward: the material place that is Candlekeep and Gorion himself. The PC's departure from these homes helps them reconstitute their relationship to both. In analyzing this concept, I will begin by taking a look at the figure of Gorion. In his article, "Dynamic Aspects of Fairy Tales: Social and Emotional Competence through Fairy Tales," Hansjorg Hohr examines the meaning behind

the “negative test” or (citing Meletinsky et all. [1974]) that “which consists of the lack of a desirable object or of a misfortune” (91) in three versions of the “Cinderella” tale. Put another way, this “negative test” is synonymous with Dewan’s aforementioned “domestic problem”. Following Hohr’s analysis, we can conceive of the loss of Gorion as parallel to Aschenputtel’s (the Grimm version of Cinderella) loss of her mother. For background, let us consider the following analysis from Hohr in which he states, “Instead of relying on the [loved] object for regulation, the child acquires skills of self-regulation and environmental control by introjecting the object. By doing so he or she also establishes an ideal self (Kohut, 1971)” (Hohr 97-98). In other words, Hohr is saying the “negative test” of losing the “loved object” is the initiative point which allows Aschenputtel to grow and develop (“Aschenputtel has to come to terms with the loss of the loved object” [Hohr 97]). The departure from an emotional home, her mother, begins the process of reconstituting home and Aschenputtel’s place within it. Aschenputtel reconfigures home and herself by “introjecting the object” as Hohr explained (citing Kohut, 1971) and in doing so “establishes an ideal self” (98). In *Baldur’s Gate*, following the loss of the Ward’s “loved object”—that of Gorion—NPCs (non-player characters) and our adventuring party proceed to question the player character’s morality during major plot developments. Given that you can *choose* between doing good, neutral, or evil deeds, the ability to “introject” or abandon Gorion’s good-aligned values allows for player exploration of this leaving home process. Put another way, the player can decide for themselves what home means to their character. In this way, the plot of *Baldur’s Gate* adopts more of an adult fairy-tale aspect, for the nuances of morality can be considered in a way that is difficult to execute in children’s literature. The player can decide whether Gorion’s Ward follows in their adoptive father’s footsteps. Additionally, the player can craft for themselves reasons as to why their protagonist acts the way they do. And yet,

no matter their reasons, Gorion's Ward is still mentally reconstituting home along their journey, for they are juggling with their late adoptive father's legacy and their own place within it.

As has been made clear, home is just as much an emotional place as it is a material place. With that said, we will close this chapter by examining Zipes's "reconstitution of home" from a literal standpoint, where the protagonist physically departs from their material home only to return to it at the end of the story. This narrative format, where the protagonist leaves, experiences a series of tests, and returns, is typical of the fairy tale. In "Learning Group Psychology, Leadership and Anxiety Coping by use of Fairy Tales as an Educational Guide," Paul Moxnes calls upon Sundland (1995)'s work relating to "[t]he developmental stages in a typical European fairy tale" (11). There, Moxnes lists the eleven stages of the fairy tale narrative, beginning with the "Presenting problem"—or Hohr's "negative test"—, then advancing to the "Journey", its subsequent challenges and rewards, and later to stage #9, "Homecoming" (Moxnes 11). Although far from being the narrative denouement, we see here that "homecoming" comprises an instrumental structure in the European fairy tale. Turning back to our canonical works, we see the concept of "homecoming" across the genre: Hansel and Gretel return home after defeating the witch; Cinderella returns home after the ball; "The Frog King" ends with the transformed prince, his princess in tow, being delivered home by his servant Henry; Little Red Riding Hood finishes her story going "joyously home" (Grimm 99). Needless to say, these few stories exemplify the importance of "homecoming" in the resolution of the fairy tale.

Unsurprisingly, then, one will find that "homecoming" is a prominent aspect of *Baldur's Gate*'s plot. Toward the end of the game, Gorion's Ward must travel back to Candlekeep to confront Sarevok, the game's main antagonist, and other members of his gang-like mercenary group called the Iron Throne. Put succinctly, these people are the elusive villains we have been

hunting and fixing the wrongs of throughout the game. Additionally, Sarevok is the one who tried assassinating Gorion's Ward in the beginning of the game, for he and the Ward are both biologically fathered by the *D&D* pantheon's god of murder, Bhaal, and thus he does not want our protagonist thwarting his grab for divine power. This moment in the game corresponds with stage #10 in Moxnes's cited list of fairy tale developments, which is the "confirmation" challenge that sees "a glorifying or qualifying test" (Moxnes 11). Upon investigating Candlekeep, Gorion's Ward is suddenly arrested and falsely accused of murdering two of the leaders of the Iron Throne. As it would happen, we find out that Sarevok is behind this. We then learn we must escape Candlekeep and head back to Baldur's Gate to confront him, hence this sequence of events and the defeat of Sarevok comprise the final test and confirm the Ward's power over their half-brother.

Here, traveling back to Candlekeep is clearly an important aspect of the Ward's development. Even one of the Ward's former tutors at the Candlekeep library notes that our hero has a few "new lines" on their face from when he last saw them. Candlekeep thus becomes a point of reflection for Gorion's Ward, for by traveling home they are able to reconfigure how they relate to it. Furthermore, it is within Candlekeep's library that we read a note from Gorion that reveals our

Chapter opening when Gorion's Ward returns to Candlekeep. Screenshot from my own *Baldur's Gate* playthrough.

true fatherhood, therefore making the recontextualization process all the more clarifying. In their return to this studious city, Gorion's Ward not only reflects on their past, but they also must consider how their roots might impact their future. The homecoming process suddenly becomes one of revelation, as the accumulation of knowledge the Ward had collected throughout their journey culminates once they find out they are a Bhaalspawn. Because of this drastic change in perspective and their arrest in Candlekeep, Gorion's Ward realizes how differently they relate to their home, a situation which has occurred to countless fairy tale protagonists before them.

As we conclude, let us make our own homecoming to the beginning of this chapter. We compared the first *Baldur's Gate* game to scholarly analyses of the leaving home conflict in fairy tales. Firstly, we utilized Dewan's article to understand how leaving home begins a maturational process for the hero. As a reminder, we distinguished home as two separate things: the material home and the emotional home. With this distinguishment in mind, we analyzed how Gorion's Ward having to leave both Candlekeep and Gorion represents the "domestic problem" or "negative test" as put by Dewan and Hohr respectively. After this, we analyzed the trope of fleeing into the forest and its symbolism. Later, this chapter used Hohr's article and Zipes's quote extensively to consider how leaving and/or losing home constitutes a process of self-realization. We ended this chapter by analyzing the process of "homecoming" as put by Moxnes, which allows for the culmination of the hero's newfound knowledge and experiences, and confirms their status as a changed person. Based on this analysis, I believe the first *Baldur's Gate* game represents a new mutation in the fairy tale, for it stays true to the literary genre's narrative format and also utilizes one of its instrumental conflicts, that of leaving home. I consider it mutative, however, because of its proximity to the role-playing game genre and *D&D*. This specific factor makes *Baldur's Gate* mutative because it introduces player agency over the story in a way

traditional fairy tales were not able to, while also encouraging the player to explore the complexities of morality in the adult world.

Before concluding this chapter, I would like to note that although *Baldur's Gate 3* exhibits significant signs of the leaving home conflict (i.e., being displaced from home, fleeing into the forest), its unfinished nature (for it is still in Early Access) means I cannot faithfully place it in this category without basing my analysis on conjecture. With that said, let us move on.

Chapter 2

In the Lair of the Hag

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"Suddenly, the door opened, and a very, very old woman, who supported herself on crutches, came creeping out. Hansel and Gretel were so terribly frightened that they let fall what they had in their hands. The old woman, however, nodded her head, and said, 'Oh, you dear children, who has brought you here? Do come in, and stay with me. No harm shall happen to you.'"

—"Hansel and Gretel", *Grimm's Complete Fairy Tales* (p. 57)

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Among countless well-known tales, one particular character type seems to stand out above them all. Acting as both an agent of magical transformation and a craftswoman of beauty or horror, the witch is one of the quintessential tropes that color the fabric of the fairy tale. Although she can appear in many forms, one of the most common physical appearances of the witch is that of an old woman or old hag. The latter phrase denotes a particular kind of old woman who is physically unattractive or reprehensible. The old hag is a certain flavor of the witch, a woman who incites horrific events and therefore disgust in the main character and reader. In "Hansel and Gretel", the hag fulfills the role of the luring agent, enticing the starving siblings, Hansel and Gretel, to her home with her candied cottage so she might eat them. Here, we witness the hag as an authoritative figure, one who must be conquered by the brother and sister if they wish to survive and assert a sense of agency in their lives.

Given the hag's pervasiveness in popular culture, it is not surprising the developers of *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios, 2020) have produced their own take on the character type. As such, in this chapter we will examine how *Baldur's Gate 3* revitalizes the hag archetype. I will do this mainly by using one of the game's subplots in conversation with an article titled "Of Innocents and Hags: The Status of the Female in the Seventeenth-Century Fairy Tale," by Kathryn A. Hoffman, a University of Hawai'i at Manoa professor.

For background, the exposition of *Baldur's Gate 3* is thus: Tav, our playable character (PC) in Early Access, has been captured by mind flayers (evil-aligned cephalopod-humanoids) and infected with a parasitic tadpole. This tadpole will eventually erupt, replacing Tav's body and mind with that of a mind flayer's. After a series of events in the tutorial section of the game, however, the mind flayer vessel Tav is on, which is called a nautiloid, ends up crashing. As our PC escapes the site with their companions, the group can stumble upon a Druid's Grove. After battling a group of goblins attempting to assault the grove, Tav and their party are welcomed into the space. Inside we are free to explore and can speak to a number of non-playable characters (NPCs). In these conversations, we can meet allies, bargain for supplies, seek information, and—most importantly of all—ask for the help of a healer, as we need these tadpoles out of our heads pronto. It is during our quest for help that we can stumble upon a very peculiar woman.

Her name is Auntie Ethel. When first encountering Tav at her stall within the grove, the woman suspects there is something wrong with our party and offers us a health potion. As with most conversations in CRPGs, the game gives us several interaction choices so the player can choose what their Tav would do in this moment. Thanks to this freedom, we can decide whether Tav wants to confide in Auntie Ethel or not about their tadpole. This woman *seems* like a sweet lady, with one of our interactive choices being to just let her care for us. With a kind Irish lilt and

a warm attitude, Auntie Ethel seems trustworthy enough. In addition, the Druid's Grove and its atmosphere are produced in jaw-dropping detail. Calming music plays as we explore the scenic space, greens and earthy tones enchanting our vision with each step taken. From the get-go, the Druid's Grove calms our subconscious despite its exciting subplots. I only mention all of this because in a place of such natural beauty and aesthetic harmony, it's easy for subtle details to be missed. However, if we examine our introductory scene with Auntie Ethel more, players will already begin to notice things are off. One particularly interesting choice by developers is having Auntie Ethel's stall neighboring *another* grandmotherly figure in the camp, this one a tiefling (demonic-humanoid hybrid) who offers us soup—quite a kind gesture considering she, like the other tieflings in the Grove, is a refugee with meager supplies. As such, we can gather that Auntie Ethel's physical placement in the Grove in addition to her nurturing personality is deliberate . . . and even, dare I say, manipulative.

In this screenshot, we see the potentially manipulative placement of Auntie Ethel in the Druid's Grove. Screenshot from my own *Baldur's Gate 3* playthrough.

But let us not tarry on small details. Auntie Ethel would scold us for doing so! Let us return to our PC's interaction with the woman. As I described earlier, we can decide whether Tav confides in Auntie Ethel or not. If you decide to let her know about your precarious situation, she

responds in an unexpectedly understanding way. Long story short, she invites you to visit her home some ways away so she might help you there. If you take her up on this offer, you later find Auntie Ethel at the entrance of a beautiful swamp. Like the Druid's Grove, it too is a place of aesthetic beauty and peace. However, cracks in Auntie Ethel's subplot soon become more prominent, for we find her at the entrance to her swamp being confronted by two men. Upon investigation, the men tell us Auntie Ethel is holding their sister, Mayrina, captive. Meanwhile, Ethel pleads for them to leave her alone. Again, this scene is one that plays on our natural tendencies. Seeing one woman, and an elderly woman at that, being cornered by two grown men would have most people on edge. Add into the equation that Auntie Ethel has offered to help us with our tadpole (or, if you never told her about the tadpole, the simple fact that she was so kind upon your first meeting) and our suspicions are increased even more. Yet this is a game that is still reliant on choice, so the player can decide whether their Tav believes Auntie Ethel or the men. Regardless of our decision, this subplot's pathways lead us further into the swamp. It is within this bog where we witness a new mutation of the old hag trope, one that, like many iterations before it, sees motherhood and fertility take center stage.

As discussed earlier, nurturing explicitly defines Auntie Ethel's character. We come to find these traits are actually quite faithful to the hag archetype's DNA. In her article "Of Innocents and Hags", Kathryn A. Hoffman describes the main aspect connecting female tropes across fairy tale literature: fertility. Within her article, Hoffman illustrates the three stages of womanhood within the fairy tale, the first being the virgin (224), the second the married woman (229), and the third the old woman (225). Notably, these female roles are linked to patriarchal perceptions of womanhood and stages of fertility, which Hoffman makes clear throughout her piece. Auntie Ethel clearly fulfills the role of the old woman, a figure who is seemingly well past

the point of childbearing but is still capable of nurturing. Through her physical appearance as well as her caring demeanor, Auntie Ethel clearly embodies the witch/old woman/old hag character and implicitly invokes notions of female fertility. In several ways I will discuss, *Baldur's Gate 3* attempts an interesting play on this type of character.

With that said, let us return to the bog. One interesting way *Baldur's Gate 3* plays with our notions of grandmotherly trustworthiness is in Auntie Ethel's surface-level characteristics. We have discussed this in a lot of ways before, but we also discussed one instance—that of the tiefling grandmother deliberately placed near Auntie Ethel—where deeper investigation into Auntie Ethel's methods offers interesting results. Such is the case with her swamp, for once Tav and their party reach the entrance to this seemingly enchanted space, with sheep dotting the landscape and plant life flourishing, we are met with something quite odd: an investigation check. In *D&D*, an investigation check would require we roll a D20 (twenty-sided die) with our character's intelligence modifier. For example, say your character has an intelligence modifier of +2. If they roll a D20 and get an 11, you'd add their +2 modifier to get a final roll of 13. If they have a modifier of -1, then your final roll would be 10. This process takes place in the investigation check at the front of Auntie Ethel's swamp. If we pass the intelligence check, Auntie Ethel's façade crumbles in front of our character's very eyes. Her lush swamp rots and twists into colors of gray and sickly blue and her docile sheep are revealed to be impish redcaps disguised by her magic. In one moment, Auntie Ethel's surface level trustworthiness cascades away, revealing a disturbing underbelly. Of course, if you do not pass the investigation check, you are still under her spell and see the swamp as its falsely beautiful self.

A character stands in Auntie Ethel's swamp before (left) and after (right) passing an investigation check. Screenshot from my own *Baldur's Gate 3* playthrough.

As you traverse through the place, Tav can make their way to Auntie Ethel's teahouse. Once inside, you are confronted with yet another peculiar scene. As she did with you back at the Druid's Grove, Auntie Ethel is seen doting on a woman who is pale as death, her expression even grimmer.

"Auntie Ethel, please." The girl begs in the in-game dialogue, clutching her stomach. "One more bite and this pie is gonna come back up to say hello."

Auntie Ethel protests, reminding the girl she is "eating for two" now (*Baldur's Gate 3*).

Upon further investigation, it appears the brothers from before were right. This pale woman is their sister Mayrina, and she indeed is cooped up in Auntie Ethel's home, though for what reason we are not sure. Additionally, if your suspicions were not raised before, we also have it confirmed by Auntie Ethel herself that she is much, much more than she initially let on. If you did not confide in her about your tadpole earlier, she now makes it clear she already knows about our problem. Given this revelation of her true identity, Auntie Ethel now explicitly embodies the hag. As for Mayrina, she assumes the *figurative* role of the virgin. Thus, we

become new witnesses of this centuries-old feminine dynamic between young and old, fertile and infertile, which are integral topics in Hoffman's article.

One major way Auntie Ethel stays true to the old woman trope is by offering both magical *advancement* and magical *hindrance* to Mayrina and Tav. Of this, Hoffman writes: "Appearing, apparently from nowhere, to either ease or block the process of virginal transformation are the fairies and witches" (225). In the case of *Baldur's Gate 3*, we are interpreting "virginal" abstractly. We must remember that at the time many of these fairy tale tropes were being recorded, a woman's sexual status was incredibly socially relevant, hence the formation of the virgin role. However, we live in a time now where ardent defense of femme people's virginities is becoming wildly obsolete, and rightfully so. Thus, we will need to look at this trope through a new lens. We can conceive of a virginal state as one that comes before a major threshold. Utilizing the language of Hoffman, this threshold is a "rupture" in one's life. Going to her text, we see she writes, "The rupture of the hymen represents also the rupture of the old status" (225). For Mayrina, this "rupture" is the birth of her child; for Tav, their "rupture" is the birth of the tadpole in their skull. Note the importance of birth-giving here.

Now, there are multiple ways Tav and their party can go about dealing with Auntie Ethel and Mayrina. You can make a deal with Auntie Ethel to remove your tadpole (but at a cost) and ignore Mayrina, or you can battle Auntie Ethel to save Mayrina. While the full array of options for players is not limited to these aforementioned two, they give us a good reminder of what the quest can entail. For the purposes of this chapter on the hag, we will analyze the route that sees Tav and their party battle Auntie Ethel with the goal of saving Mayrina.

There are different moments where we are able to begin a fight with Auntie Ethel. We can battle in her teahouse, or we can play the long-game and investigate the area further. Because we

have already discussed the value of digging deep when it comes to this character, we will follow the particular branch in the quest that sees us investigating her teahouse. During your search, you can stumble upon the oven at the heart of Ethel's home. There, your party encounters a passive investigation check, which just means the dice is rolled for your character without your active involvement. If you pass this check, we discover the back wall of the oven is illusory, giving you the option to sneak past it. Once you walk beyond this magical false wall, a set of stairs leads further into what can only be assumed to be Auntie Ethel's lair.

A character spots the illusory wall behind Auntie Ethel's oven. The in-game text reads: "That's no fire. What are you hiding?". Screenshot from my own *Baldur's Gate 3* playthrough.

Tav and their party's passage through the oven is perhaps the most symbolically overt callback to the hag character type and, more broadly, folkloric femininity. In fact, folklorist Alan Dundes writes in his essay "Folklore as a Mirror of Culture" that "[t]he female-oven symbolism is consistent" across fairy tales, and names two significant stories ("Hansel and Gretel" and "Jack and the Beanstalk") where the oven is tied to femininity (Bronner 64). Like the witch in "Hansel and Gretel", the oven is a symbol of both doom and freedom, for it is only through the oven that the siblings are able to escape the witch's clutches and make it back to their father's home. Similarly, when mentioning the oven in "Jack and the Beanstalk", Dundes describes how the structure gives Jack a chance to escape danger by hiding from the giant in his wife's oven (64). Thus, the symbol of the oven is paradoxical, with its life-ending qualities (immense heat,

forced enclosure) being as important as its life-saving qualities (hiding, regaining agency against the villain). *Baldur's Gate 3* also works off this paradoxical nature, for the oven in Auntie Ethel's teahouse represents equal parts doom and regained freedom. We face doom because Auntie Ethel can very easily kill our party should we enter the oven, but we also have a chance at helping Mayrina regain her freedom. Furthermore, if we accepted Auntie Ethel's bargain, entrance into the oven also symbolizes our own attempt at freedom. For background, the deal Auntie Ethel offers is to remove our tadpole so long as she can "kiss" our eye (*Baldur's Gate 3*). If we accept, she removes our eye and places a strange magic on it before placing it back. Her magic, however, has several negative consequences to Tav's in-game performance. Also, our deal isn't totally fulfilled, for when Auntie Ethel tries to remove our tadpole, she reels back in disgust after finding out it is tainted by shadow magic, which she wants nothing to do with. Thus, going into the oven means we can possibly free ourselves from the strange magic she placed on us while also having a bit of revenge for the one-sided bargain. Agency is regained, or at least grasped at.

We see that through allusions to fairy tales like "Hansel and Gretel", the oven in Auntie Ethel's teahouse also invokes notions of cooking. These notions are only strengthened by other visualizations of cooking seen throughout her home and lair. If we refer back to Hoffman's piece, it becomes evident that these symbolizations help in reiterating the hag character type. On this, Hoffman states, "Old women cook or decompose, turn virgins into cultural objects, proper for marriage, or rejected nature, unused and unwanted, left to rot in the woods" (Hoffman 225-226). We therefore surmise from Hoffman's analysis that cooking is not only relevant to the hag character type, but also to the heroine she interacts with. Again, in this analysis, Auntie Ethel represents the hag, while Mayrina represents the metaphorical virgin/heroine. However, I want to

work off Hoffman's analysis and exemplify through *Baldur's Gate 3* how cooking represents so much more for these character types.

Through the Auntie Ethel side quests, we constantly witness an inversion of motherly qualities. As we discussed earlier, Auntie Ethel's initially doting nature twists and mutates into something predatory as her subplot continues forth. In the beginning she offers us health potions and warm care, only to later take advantage of our party's vulnerable state by offering to "help" with an ultimately one-sided bargain. With this in mind, I believe that cooking in the old woman character type is similarly an inversion of the domestic arts. This idea matches pretty well with Hoffman's paper, in which she writes, "The old woman, experienced over long years in the arts of cooking and the metamorphoses of childbirth . . . seems particularly well-suited to her role as magical intervener in the life of the virgin" (Hoffman 226). Put another way, I believe Hoffman is saying that it is precisely the old woman's experience with domesticity and femininity both that give her leeway in the transformation of the virgin. Cooking is a universal symbol of giving, of one being welcomed and cared for, things historically associated with women. However, in the hag character type, cooking inverts these gendered expectations and is instead used for personal advancement. Instead of giving, she is instead taking. Some fairy tale examples include "Hansel and Gretel", where the witch wants to cook children, Andersen's "The Little Mermaid", where the sea-witch takes the mermaid's tongue, thus her vocal agency as well as singing talent, before she makes a potion, and "Little Snow White", where the evil stepmother makes a poisonous apple to take away the life of her stepdaughter.

Similarly, Auntie Ethel in *Baldur's Gate 3* alludes to cooking several times, therefore drawing further parallels between herself and the hag character type. The oven in the heart of her house is only one example. As I said earlier, cooking is also explicitly referenced in both the

dialogue and in the decorations adorning her home. For example, on first coming into Auntie Ethel's home, the woman will make clear that she knows you are dealing with a mind flayer tadpole, saying, "I can tell you're almost done cooking." Within this line of dialogue, Auntie Ethel exposes her repertoire of magical knowledge much in the same way the old woman exemplifies her knowledge of the domestic arts. Like the old woman before her stewpot or the witch before her cauldron, Auntie Ethel looks upon Tav's precarious position with expertise. She observes the dish (Tav, in this case) as it bubbles, as the color changes, as the smell transforms. Within a single sentence, the writers have her alluding to the hag archetype beautifully.

Another example of cooking in Auntie Ethel's quest takes place once you descend the stairs hidden behind her illusive oven. Upon your descent, Tav and her party find they are in the hag's lair, a subterranean space composed of sediment, moss, and plants. The whole area is bathed in the earthy glow of Auntie Ethel's magic, and as your party journeys deeper into the area it becomes clear this is the hag's trophy room. Several past bargains decorate the space, one being a man turned to stone, the other a single eye displayed prominently on a branch and dripping as if with tears, another being a man trapped in a mirror. These three trophies and many others in her underground lair all surround a single bubbling pot of green liquid at the center of the room. It is in front of this suspicious stew that Auntie Ethel, now in her

A character stands in the middle of Auntie Ethel's trophy room. The in-game text reads: "That is *foul*", referring to the bubbling pot in the center of the picture. Screenshot from my own *Baldur's Gate 3* playthrough.

full green hag form (if she hadn't already transformed up to that point), confronts our party for entering her lair.

In this instance, Auntie Ethel's allusions to cooking are at their most explicit. Enraged that Tav has entered her "personal playhouse", Auntie Ethel threatens to put our party "in tonight's stew" (*Baldur's Gate 3*). That is not the end of Ethel's threats, however, for she continues by telling Tav they'll "go nicely with Mayrina" as "[s]he's already marinating" (*Baldur's Gate 3*). The references to fairy tales like "Hansel and Gretel" only continue. We see here that cooking for the witch is directly tied to consumption, which is another prominent inversion of femininity that the hag character type plays on. As I stated before, the witch inverts the giving nature of cooking by instead making it a self-indulgent practice. Unlike the gendered norms that see women only give, the witch can instead only *gain* when she cooks and consumes.

For those with uteruses, the birth-giving process has been, and continues to be, daunting. When someone with a uterus gives birth, it is the exact opposite of consumption, for it is ultimately an act of physical and emotional sacrifice. What the witch trope does with the concept of consumption, however, is turn the birthing process on its head. Whereas the one giving birth delivers life to a child, the witch who consumes is taking away the life of the child by eating it. There is also Alan Dundes's take on this gruesome process, where he sees the witch's consumption as an inversion of a baby's consumption: "[t]he witch," he writes. "[L]ike so many cannibalistic villains in fairy tales, intends to employ the infant's first weapon (eating, sucking, biting) by devouring the children" (Bronner 64). Put simply, the witch is a subversion of feminine sacrifice. Thus, I believe Hoffman describing cooking and birth-giving right next to each other in her article ("The old woman, experienced over long years in the arts of **cooking** and the metamorphoses of **childbirth**" [226]) is poignant, for it illustrates the gendered ties

between nutritional giving (i.e., cooking but also breast-feeding) and birth-giving. I posit that consumption *links* the concepts of cooking and birth-giving together as they relate to witch/old hag character type. Consumption necessarily follows the *inverted* concepts of birth-giving (which, when inverted, is *taking* the child's life vs. giving it) and cooking (which, when inverted, is cooking the child/hero vs. cooking *for* them). Put bluntly, the cannibalistic witch necessitates consumption since the preceding acts are murder and cooking. Consumption thus links these inverted feminine concepts together in this character type.

As the quest to save Mayrina and defeat Auntie Ethel continues, these concepts are only further exemplified. Once we reach the bottommost part of the hag's lair, Tav and their party are confronted with a striking scene: Mayrina in a cage and suspended above a dark pit as Auntie Ethel watches on. Here, the imbalance of power between the two women is most clearly represented. It is within this space where our final battle with Auntie Ethel takes place, and the whole time we hear as Mayrina begs for us to stop.

In this cutscene, we see Mayrina (circled left) suspended in a cage as Tav and their party (center) confront Auntie Ethel (circled right). Screenshot from RPGGirl's video on *YouTube* (see works cited for more info).

Once we defeat the hag, the frustration from the battle still very much in the air, we are immediately confronted with a scene of anger as Mayrina shows up on screen. Despite us having just saved her, the woman is utterly enraged, telling us that we have "ruined everything." Players are likely quite shocked to receive this reaction, especially after we fought one of the hardest enemies in Early Access. Yet, Mayrina's anger is soon to be understood as the aftermath of the Auntie Ethel quest takes place. The young woman explains she had also entered a bargain with Auntie Ethel so the hag could resurrect her dead husband, Connor. The price she was willing to pay? Her unborn child, who Mayrina said Auntie Ethel promised a good life to.

And yet, things are not as simple as Mayrina believes. She runs off in an understandable fit of frustration and fear, and Tav along with their party can investigate Auntie Ethel's lair for more information. If you cast "Speak with the Dead", a spell that does exactly as it suggests, the party can interrogate Auntie Ethel's corpse. The dialogue in this instance is admittedly quite hilarious, but it also works to illustrate some of the main concepts of the hag character type, namely a rejection of feminine norms, i.e. speaking like a "lady".

Once the spell is cast, and after Tav survives Auntie Ethel's litany of insults and threats, we are able to ask a few questions. If you ask the dead hag what her true intentions with Mayrina were, she admits the woman and her child were never the end goal for her. Her exact words as she states her plans are thus: "I would have gobbled it [Mayrina's baby] up and given birth to my very own hag daughter. From my guts she would've come – my blood, my bile. It would have been glorious" (*Baldur's Gate 3*). Now, these words are striking for a number of reasons. Firstly, Auntie Ethel's ability to reproduce stands in stark contrast to Hoffman's aforementioned analysis of the old woman trope, whom she says is "full now of a uterus unused and unnecessary for the re-engendering of the race" (Hoffman 226). In other words, the inability to give birth is a

foundational aspect of the old woman character type. On this, Hoffman cites Lévi-Strauss, who wrote that this post-menopausal stage illustrates she is "past the dangers of nature and the risks of transformation," to which Hoffman adds the old woman is also "liberated . . . from the patriarchy" (226-227). And yet Auntie Ethel simultaneously subverts *and* reinvigorates this trope, for while she is able to give birth, she is still outside the bounds of patriarchy. Not only is she planning to give birth irrespective of a heterosexual marriage, but it is also more or less through another woman, Mayrina, that Auntie Ethel is even able to get pregnant in the first place.

Additionally, Auntie Ethel saying she would have "gobbled" Mayrina's child is another example of consumption (*Baldur's Gate 3*). If anything, this is perhaps the side quest's most obvious illustration of this concept. According to Auntie Ethel, she would have eaten Mayrina's child so she could absorb the baby's life force, therefore enabling her to give birth to a hag daughter. Here, the process of childbirth is yet again inverted and made anew. As said before, an old woman consuming a child is a violent reversal of the birth giving process, one that sees violence as a *gain* for the feminine figure versus a sacrifice. With Auntie Ethel, the violence of consumption is paired with the violence of childbirth, for she says, "[F]rom my guts she [my daughter] would've come – my blood, my bile. It would have been glorious" (*Baldur's Gate 3*). Auntie Ethel relishes the violence of the process, further alluding to a self-serving nature that contrasts the sacrifice of motherhood.

From this quest, players gather an interesting and new perspective on the state of motherhood and how it relates to the hag archetype. Consumption and cooking are shown to be instrumental in the depiction of the old woman as a powerful figure who, as said by Hoffman, lays outside the realm of patriarchal power. However, if we leave Auntie Ethel's lair to talk again

to Mayrina, we see that cooking gains a whole new layer as it pertains to a common end goal of the fairy tale: the attainment of a prince.

After we have spoken to Ethel's corpse, we are able to go into her personal room that sits next to the battle arena we just fought in. Within this room, we can stumble upon a peculiar object in the shape of a branch. Hovering our cursor over the branch, we see it is named "Bitter Divorce" and is described as having "clumps of hair and flesh stick[ing] out from the twisted roots" (*Baldur's Gate 3*). Most importantly, the name "Connor" is labelled on the object.

Close to where we found this object, we can find a fairy ring that leads us out of the hag's lair and back into the swamp. A few ways from where we have reemerged into the bog, we find Mayrina weeping before a wooden coffin. It doesn't take much to gather it is her dead husband within the coffin, and we have the choice of speaking with the woman to end the quest. Here, Mayrina's voice actress really shines, for she conveys the hopelessness and forlornness of her situation. It is hard not to sympathize, so Tav can admit they found a wand in the hag's lair that could help Connor. Mayrina obviously becomes desperate upon this realization, begging for Tav to resurrect her husband. Here, again, the power imbalance between Mayrina and the now late Auntie Ethel is evident, as the latter dangled the promise of love over the former's head.

The choice of a wand as a resurrection method is also curious. Back to Hoffman's article, she uses the wand synonymously with a "phallus/finger/tongue," for these represent the witch being "the force of nature over culture" (227), of "the matriarchy come back to terrify the fathers and sons who thought they had disposed of it" (227-228). Even in death, Auntie Ethel remains a visible force in the world of *Baldur's Gate 3* through her resurrection wand, the object an eerie reminder of her contagious legacy, one that is literally within the grasp of Tav and perhaps already embodied by Mayrina.

Tav is given two quite emotionally significant choices when it comes to reviving Connor: they can either use the wand to bring the man back to life or destroy it right in front of Mayrina's eyes. For the purposes of this chapter, we will follow the route that sees Tav use the wand to resurrect Connor. The object at the ready, Tav uses the wand and immediately Auntie Ethel's glowing green magic encompasses the coffin, yet again representing the "phantasm of feminine-death still threatening the palace from without" (Hoffman 226-227). After the wand has been used, we eagerly wait alongside Mayrina. Suddenly, a rotted hand emerges from the topless coffin, the flesh of the fingers sloughed off and exposing bone.

In shock, Mayrina stutters out, "What – what's happening? Why is he still dead?" (*Baldur's Gate 3*) for, lo and behold, her husband emerges from the coffin in a mostly rotted state, his brain exposed through the cracks in his skull, muscle and sinew shining in the bog's gray light. The resurrected corpse stands before us as little more than a zombie, his mental faculties clearly lost. Perhaps more perversely, Auntie Ethel's wand seems to control the corpse, meaning Connor's agency is all but gone. Mayrina makes clear that this was not part of the bargain, for she states she "wanted him back . . . the way he was" (*Baldur's Gate 3*). According to Hoffman, the attainment of a prince is tantamount to the virgin and her dealings with the witch (227). Here, we see Mayrina has technically obtained her prince, albeit not in the way she thought she would.

With all this in mind, Tav again has a choice here whether they give the wand to Mayrina or keep it for themselves, therefore having Connor as their slave. Again for the purposes of this chapter, we will examine the path where Mayrina keeps the wand. Here, we see an evolution of the virgin character that Hoffman describes in her paper. According to her, "The aged ones, long escaped from the patriarchy, haunt it again through their protégées. The virgin carries the threat

of the old woman along with her, like Peau d'Ane with her fairy wand dragging her treasures behind her underground, beyond the grasp of the desirous king" (Hoffman 227-228).

The above description is eerily similar to the last we see of Mayrina: with her wand in tow, we watch as she leads her limping corpse of a husband out of the bog, her ultimate goal being to arrive and seek help in the city of Baldur's Gate. More importantly, the green of her dress acts as a foreboding warning, especially since green is so central to Auntie Ethel's character and magic. So as Mayrina marches off to find a way to truly resurrect her husband, the player likely cannot help but wonder how much of Auntie Ethel has rubbed off on Mayrina. After all, we do initially find Mayrina eating one of Auntie Ethel's rotted tarts, a literal representation of Mayrina ingesting the rot and decay of Auntie Ethel. As we watch the young woman leading her husband away, one cannot help but wonder what may become of Mayrina once we make it to the city of Baldur's Gate itself. Early Access limits our full knowledge of her fate, yet given her abstract fulfillment of the virgin role, it is not strange to assume Mayrina may, like many virginal characters before her, "[take] the powers of the witches with her to the marriage bed" (Hoffman 227-228).

Mayrina holding Auntie Ethel's wand in front of her husband's reanimated corpse. Screenshot from RPGGirl's video on *YouTube* (see works cited for more info).

As we have seen, *Baldur's Gate 3* has reinvigorated the hag character type from fairy tales through Auntie Ethel. Thanks to Kathryn A. Hoffman's article and various input from Alan

Dundes, we have been able to use the thinkers' concepts in conversation with Auntie Ethel's subplot. For one, we have seen concepts such as cooking and consumption as representations of the old woman's inversion of patriarchal feminine ideals. Furthermore, we have witnessed through the relationship between Auntie Ethel and Mayrina a further reinvigoration of the old woman/virgin dynamic, the two characters acting as foils to each other for the duration of the subplot only to surprise us toward the end as the virgin begins to adopt the traits of the old woman. As we have seen within this chapter, *Baldur's Gate 3* masterfully utilizes centuries old character types and tropes in a way that makes them relevant to a modern audience while also paying homage to the original stories that inspired this subplot. Through this chapter, I hope readers will have gained new insight on the fairy tale hag and can examine the characters of Auntie Ethel and Mayrina in new, more complex ways.

Chapter 3

To Choose or Not to Choose, that is the Question

**

"Look at you. So confused, brimming with power. Yet still a shadow of what you will become."

—Dream Figure, *Baldur's Gate 3*

**

At this point in my thesis, we have discussed two major ways fairy tales and the *Baldur's Gate* series intersect: through the leaving home plot arc and through the hag character type. While they are both important in understanding the connection between *Baldur's Gate* and fairy tales, they are very self-contained. I believe they are self-contained because both the leaving home plot arc and the hag character type are subplots in their respective *Baldur's Gate* game, thus these story aspects are relatively self-isolated. With that said, I want to finish my thesis by examining a more over-arching aspect of the *Baldur's Gate* games, one that further solidifies their status as adult mutations of the fairy tale genre. Additionally, this final chapter is important because it connects both mediums—those of fairy tale literature and role-playing games—to the participant (i.e., the reader/player) in a way that the aforementioned topics do not. Whereas the previous chapters focus on topics more relevant to the in-game world, this final chapter will examine how fiction influences our real-world lives.

Without further ado, let us discuss the final topic in this thesis: choice.

When one thinks of their childhood moments with fairy tales, choice might not be the first thing that comes to mind. After all, reading is usually passive. However, fairy tales are anything but usual in the world of published literature. Although we can consider certain versions of fairy tales "canon", the fact of the matter is fairy tales are a result of their collectors' choice when discerning collected folklore. As we learned, fairy tales are in a long line of folklore, thus collectors and writers like the Brothers Grimm or Perrault shaped the stories we now consider "canon" with their selected biases, opinions, and desires. Put another way, fairy tales and the folklore they belong to are utterly entrenched in choice.

If we look into relevant research, it becomes clear that the concept of choice in fairy tales has already been heavily considered. For example, in the article "Why fairy tales are still relevant to today's children" in the *Journal of Pediatrics and Child Health*, Anthony Zehetner makes clear just how important choice is in fairy tales, writing that "[t]he emphasis [in fairy tales] is on choice of action rather than the title of the characters themselves" (Zehetner 1). As vehicles of "moral instruction" (Michaelis-Jena 271), fairy tales must make choice of the utmost relevance throughout their narratives. The characters in these stories reinforce the power of exercising one's free will, regardless of whether that power leads to ill or victorious effects. Characters from the hero to the villain constantly show off the enactment of free will through choice, and the consequences they reap then act as reinforcers of this "moral instruction" (again, going back to Michaelis-Jena's aforementioned terminology). Zehetner illustrates what he calls these "path[s] of action" children learn from with the example of "The Three Little Pigs": "The little pig who worked hard building his house out of bricks was safe, while the pigs that used the easier straw and sticks and went off to play got gobbled up" (1). Zehetner emphasizes how, as one would expect, this series of events teaches to the child the virtues of "hard work . . . and . . .

delayed gratification" or patience (1). This instructional relationship feeds back to the reader, therefore making them feel connected to the story. Additionally, Zehetner highlights the importance of a reader's personal investment in fairy tales, dropping an interesting historical fact on us when he writes that "Hansel and Gretel were so named because these were the prevailing children's names at the time" (1). Here, we see that reader self-identification with the heroes of a tale is crucial in the story's conveyance of societally acceptable morality. If one sees themselves as the ever-learning and ever-improving protagonist, they open themselves up to the same self-improvement. Again, I am far from the first to consider the ways tales teach children morality, and it is through the extensive research of others that I have understood these ideas (see Bettelheim 5; Michaelis-Jena 271; Frances Weld Danielson's "Teaching Morals to Little Children—(IV.)"; Hansjorg Hohr's "Dynamic Aspects of Fairy Tales: Social and Emotional Competence through Fairy Tales"; Pauline Dewan's "Perennially Popular: The Appeal of Classic Fairy Tales for Children"; Maria Tatar's "Why Fairy Tales Matter: The Performative and the Transformative").

Coincidentally, choice and its investigation of morality is something role-playing games, and thus the *Baldur's Gate* series, excel at. Although this writer is but one in a series that have elaborated upon the social and psychological appeal of role-playing games, Gene Doty excellently and concisely describes the appeal of exercising autonomy in RPGs. Citing the results of a survey that questioned both players and "referees" (or game masters, who essentially act as storytellers/worldbuilders for an RPG campaign), Doty states the findings that players "indicate a strong preference for referees who allow freedom for players to shape the game-world" (Doty 55). In conversation with that, Doty's cited survey also shows that referees "indicated a similar strong appreciation of unexpected decisions by players" (55). Based on this

information, Doty, just like so many RPG enjoyers and ludologists, finds that "freely elaborating" on the in-game world contributes heavily to the "appeal of role-playing" (55). Therefore, we see already there is a strong connection between fairy tales and RPGs in that expression of autonomy is an essential component of the enjoyment process.

But at this point we are only speaking of role-playing games as a genre. If we turn to our specific example of the *Baldur's Gate* series, the importance of choice is still very much present, albeit in a more limited way than the standard tabletop RPG (TTRPG) format. Because programmed computer games have only so much space for specific options to be included, the computer RPG (CRPG) genre is admittedly more structured and limited than an RPG session in which the game master can make real-time adjustments according to player decisions. In the CRPG world, the game master is technically the studio developing the game, and, understandably, a studio that needs to publish a finished game does not have the same flexibility the traditional game master does. And yet they still try, and with the evolving technology of the past two decades, one can see a dramatic increase in choice selection between 1998's *Baldur's Gate* and *Baldur's Gate 3*'s Early Access, which was released and has been periodically updated since October 2020. Notably, however, only *most* of the first act of *Baldur's Gate 3* has been released for public consumption (hence the term "Early Access"), so the full versatility of their choice system is yet to be observed.

Even with their gaming system-bound limitations, choice is still very much a central and encouraged component of the *Baldur's Gate* games. Furthermore, these limitations in choice we see in CRPGs mirror the fairy tale reading process more faithfully, as we already established how the act of reading itself is fairly passive. And, to be clear, I am very specifically limiting the

passivity of reading to the literal, physical enactment of reading, for something even as simple as reflection is, alternatively, very much an active process.

With that said, let us look at the *Baldur's Gate* games to get an idea of how they interpret choice. On their official Steam page, *Baldur's Gate 3* describes its plot—in part—as thus: "Mysterious abilities are awakening inside you, drawn from a Mind Flayer parasite planted in your brain. Resist, and turn darkness against itself. Or embrace corruption, and become ultimate evil." In this brief appeal alone, the team of *Baldur's Gate 3* make clear that player choice is instrumental to the progression of the game's plot. The emphasis on moral outcomes is of further note, for we know that fairy tales illustrate how choice helps readers explore morality. In the gameplay of *Baldur's Gate 3* itself, this appeal to moral exploration holds true, for players are able to choose what their playable character (PC) does according to the specific morality they ascribe to their character.

Showing the consequences to our character's actions is both crucial in offering the player personal autonomy as well as in connecting these games to the experience of fairy tale reading. Notably, Zehetner draws a clear line between fairy tales and earlier folklore that similarly aimed to morally instruct children. In his article, he writes, "Fables demand the reader to choose a moral outcome. Fairy tales allow the reader to explore each virtue and path of action through the different characters' fates" (1). When reading fairy tales, children get to explore and "[deliberate] each consequence" (1) through the different characters. Earlier we examined Zehetner's example of the third little pig who built the brick house. However, where RPGs and *Baldur's Gate* improve upon this model of moral instruction is by giving the player a direct stake in the plot by allowing them to *embody* the protagonist. This fairy tale learning process is heightened in accordance with the age group the media is directed toward. Because children are being prepped

for life, they are detached from adult responsibilities. Thus, their modes of exploring adulthood are fairly one-sided and passive. As noted by Maria Tatar in her analysis of *The Wizard of Oz* in "Why Fairy Tales Matter", children can learn about the adult world by observing an adult ("But Dorothy has learned from observation" [Tatar 62]). However, children at these points in their lives still cannot operate and be perceived as adults. With that said, the *Baldur's Gate* series and many CRPGs are mainly geared towards older teenagers (18-19-year-olds) and adults. Because these age groups are able to interact with the adult world more directly, their media reflects that, as in *Baldur's Gate* where their characters have a direct influence on the in-game world. Furthermore, these direct stakes the player has in the game world fall in line with Doty's article, where he states that "[p]layers have the role not only of 'readers' but also of characters" and "therefore [the player] participates more in the story than the reader of a novel because the player is aware that his or her decisions will shape the story's outcome" (Doty 55).

Now, thus far we have examined the main way in which fairy tales morally instruct children, which is through, as Zehetner stated, permitting moral exploration. Zehetner also makes clear that this explorative process is one that sees the child observing the fates of different characters and gathering from their endings what the "right" way to go about a situation is. Additionally, we have talked about how the *Baldur's Gate* series, and RPGs in general, similarly allow for this exploration, though we have not gone over the specifics of this process. In other words, when one is allowed to choose the actions of their character, thus making the observation process more active than passive, what does moral exploration look like? When the story is not set in stone—or at least not *as* set in stone as in fairy tales—how is morality communicated?

Well, in line with anything involving adulthood, the process is a bit more complicated. Morality in the *Baldur's Gate* games, much like morality in our real world, is nuanced. This is

largely where fairy tales and *Baldur's Gate* separate, since fairy tales are, according to Pauline Dewan, "stripped of extraneous details" (30). More specifically, Dewan notes how fairy tales "depict character types" while "[n]uances and subtleties of portrayal are deliberately avoided" (30). Again, given the target age demographic of fairy tales, this is completely rational. It is likely that teaching children the complexities of morality at such a young age will result in confusion and frustration. After all, even many adults have a hard time grasping the complexities of morality. However, as we grow up, the stories we create and consume adapt with these increasingly more complicated reflections. When we enter the world of more grown-up entertainment, dynamics like "good vs. evil" more often lose their full proof credibility. Heroes can be flawed, villains can be sympathetic, and everything between—with good enough writing and forethought—is fair game (no pun intended).

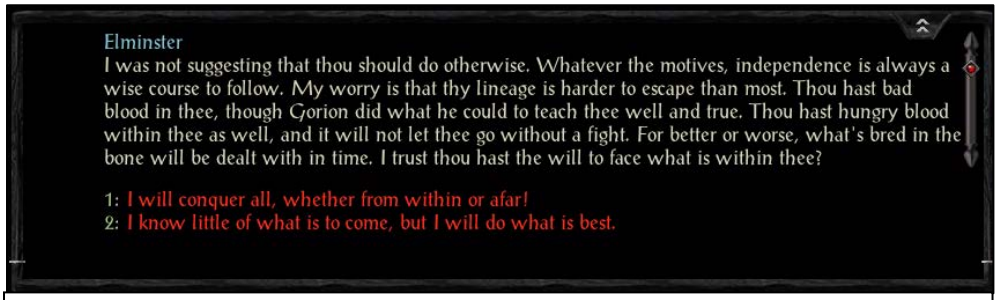
It makes sense, then, that a game series with such impeccable writing and development would similarly engage with the moral nuances adults often find themselves mulling over. The *Baldur's Gate* series need not focus on the tried-and-true tales of heroes coming to right the wrongs of evil. On the contrary, these games can very much become avenues for exploration of more unsavory traits and actions. In fact, the games take the fairy tale dynamics of "good vs. evil" and, instead of having the conflict be external, have some of the major conflicts be very much internal. This reflects the often-chaotic relationship many of us have with ourselves.

At the heart of the *Baldur's Gate* series is the question of self-improvement and self-deterioration. Will I resist my demons, or will I indulge in them? Is my morality completely lost if I descend into the darkness ever so briefly? Can good morality be regained even after a deep plunge into this darkness? It is this slipping into the depths of human desire and motivation that defines the games from the very first second we run their applications on our devices. If one

launches the first *Baldur's Gate* game from 1998, players will immediately be confronted with a quote from Friedrich Nietzsche in which the philosopher ponders, "He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster . . . when you gaze long into the abyss the abyss also gazed into you . . ."

Opposed to many fairy tales that see conquest of the monster being external, the *Baldur's Gate* series examines the monstrous as it appears internally. There are two main ways in which the games do this: 1) by representing the threat of monstrosity as something parasitic and 2) by representing the threat of monstrosity in the opposite way—by having something be coaxed out internally first, and then burst outward later. I call these two methods the "parasitic form" and the "extracting form". This is why Nietzsche's quote is so crucial here, for the "abyss" finds its way into us just as much as we find our way into it. With all that said, let's actually examine these two moral processes in the games themselves.

Now, the parasitic form I mentioned earlier is perhaps the most obvious form of de-evolution into the monster that the *Baldur's Gate* series presents. In the first two *Baldur's Gate* games, or the "Bhaalspawn Saga" as it is often referred to as, the parasitic threat is the very blood coursing through our protagonist's veins. Our playable character, Gorion's Ward, is the biological child of Bhaal, who is the god of murder in the vast *D&D* pantheon (hence the term "Bhaalspawn"). In the first *Baldur's Gate* game, the main antagonist is Sarevok, our PC's half-



A word of warning from the character Elminster to Gorion's Ward/the Bhaalspawn upon entering the city of Baldur's Gate. Screenshot from my own *Baldur's Gate* playthrough.

brother (unbeknownst to them for most of the game) who seeks to attain divinity by fulfilling Bhaal's legacy. Unsurprisingly, acting in accordance with Bhaal's legacy requires bloodshed—and *a lot* of it. As our character gradually pieces together the identity and schemes of Sarevok, the player essentially gets a blueprint for what our PC—the person we are embodying—might become. Should we indulge in the nature of our blood, we might become double-crossing and war-mongering like our half-brother. Later in the second game after Sarevok has been defeated, the question of moral deterioration comes up again, and reaches its climax in the form of the Bhaalspawn's/Gorion's Ward's transformation into the "slayer form". In the last few chapters of *Baldur's Gate II* (2000), the Bhaalspawn has their soul ripped from them by the game's antagonist, Jon Irenicus. As our character struggles to find the man, we suddenly morph into a ghastly, nightmarish "slayer form", even to the surprise of one of the game's other villains, Bodhi. Notably, once your character cools down from this change and morphs back into their true selves, the game narrates the following: "Your [the Bhaalspawn's] will had faltered, and the essence of Bhaal was there to take advantage." We are also told soon after by the game that should we fail to regain our soul, we will lose our will to Bhaal entirely. Again, transformation into the monstrous is posed in its parasitic form as an outside force corrupts our internal nature. Even if our character is evil-aligned, the loss of free will still represents a significant loss that anyone would be terrified by.

A screenshot from *Baldur's Gate II* (BioWare, 2000) when Gorion's Ward/the Bhaalspawn transforms into their slayer form (circled in lower righthand corner). Screenshot from my own *Baldur's Gate II* playthrough.

I would argue, however, that the parasitic form is most obviously depicted in *Baldur's Gate 3*. The game starts with our playable character, who it is worth noting is *not* the Bhaalspawn from the first two games, being captured by mind flayers/illithids (who, again, are essentially octopus-humanoid creatures that are incredibly cunning and powerful). In a cruel twist of fate, a mind flayer has planted an illithid tadpole into our heads in an incredibly violating procedure. Within moments, our playable character becomes a ticking timebomb whose body will eventually erupt violently and painfully into that of a mind flayer. Not only will our physical form be destroyed in place of a newborn mind flayer, but in planting a tadpole within our character, the mind flayers have also undermined our free will. This, I would note, is one aspect that separates the parasitic form and the extracting form, for in the parasitic form the protagonist's free will is undermined. This violation of personal autonomy and forced change into a monster via the parasitic form, i.e. the Bhaalspawn's genetic link to Bhaal and Tav's tadpole implantation, thus link the games together,

A mind flayer tadpole prepares to invade this character's eye. Screenshot from Larian Studios' video on *YouTube* (see works cited for more info).

With all that said, let us turn to the second way in which moral desecration is presented in the *Baldur's Gate* series. As opposed to the parasitic form, which is a notably more physical process, the second form is something far more mental. Furthermore, whereas the parasitic form sees the monstrous threat as initially external and then it later becomes an internal threat, the second form—what I call the "extracting form"—sees the monstrous threat be *coaxed out* of the PC. In other words, transformation into the monster is posed in its abstract form, where instead of physically transforming into a monster, the playable character mentally becomes a monster by acting on their selfish desires. Opposite to the parasitic form, the extracting form relies on the character exercising their free will, as their decisions directly impact their moral progression.

There are many ways the player can choose to indulge in their PC's darker aspirations. For one, how you deal with particular side quests can help you in molding your character's morality. The PC can steal from refugees and sometimes pick fights with them, can kill or betray allies, can lie for their own goals, etc. But these opportunities do not best represent the coaxing out aspect of the extracting form. Rather, the best moments in the *Baldur's Gate* series that illustrate the extracting form are when our protagonists dream.

In *D&D*, sleep and rest are central aspects of the game mechanics. Spell slots and certain skills can only be replenished once the character has had enough rest. Mimicking real life, if one does not have enough rest, then they will not perform well the following day. As such, our characters throughout the *Baldur's Gate* games need to stop at inns or camp outside if they want a fighting chance against the next day's monsters and villains. Also mimicking real life, however, is the sometimes antagonistic relationship we can have with rest, and the dreams that can throw us for a loop in the process. In *Baldur's Gate II*, the Bhaalspawn is often confronted with disturbing, uncanny dreams when they rest. We as players know these are dreams, for we watch

as the Bhaalspawn is transported back to their hometown of Candlekeep. However, the place is encompassed with stars and a strange, dark energy. This is not the home we remember. Throughout these dreams, we walk alongside our childhood friend, Imoen (who we later learn is our half-sister and also a child of Bhaal), and reflect on our past. At the end of these dreams, the game's antagonist, Jon Irenicus, appears and speaks to us as if he is observing our dreams like an experiment. When we ask him what is going on in the first dream, Irenicus is blunt with the reality of the situation. He asks us, "You feel the potential within, don't you? Will you cringe from what you know you want? What you can take as your own?" (*Baldur's Gate II*). This is a prime example of the extraction form. Irenicus is attempting to pull from within us the perfected version of evil he so desires to use. He is trying to awaken our blood, so to speak, and it is up to us if we want to see this power awaken. In the last dream from *Baldur's Gate II*, the parasitic form and the extraction form merge as our PC transforms into their slayer form. At this, the dream version of Imoen says in a way similar to Irenicus, "There is great power in your heritage. Use it, and you will become closer to who you are . . . what you could be" (*Baldur's Gate II*). Here, the monstrous potential within us is born from no one other than

In this screenshot, we witness Gorion's Ward/the Bhaalspawn dreaming of Candlekeep. We listen to Irenicus as he says the words described to the left of this picture. Screenshot from my own *Baldur's Gate II* playthrough.

ourselves. Power is the commodity, our morality the cost. We are being encouraged to not only look into the abyss, but to embrace it.

In line with the first two games, *Baldur's Gate 3* also uses dreams to help build the narrative. As background, we learn fairly quickly in gameplay that our tadpoles grant us significant powers. In the tutorial section, you can feel the thoughts of your fellow infected, namely Lae'Zel and Shadowheart, and you find later in the beginning of the game that you can feel the thoughts of others with the same affliction. You also discover that you can use your tadpole powers to manipulate those around you, but only once per long rest. This is significant, for entire battles can be avoided if you use your tadpole abilities. To add further layers to this scenario, you are not truly sure where these strange powers come from. They may even be the reason why throughout Early Access, our character never experiences *ceremorphosis*, the excruciating process that turns a humanoid into a mind flayer. According to Auntie Ethel, it is shadow magic that is tainting the tadpole, thus leaving the implication that the magical properties of the tadpoles are more complicated than initially assumed. Yet, there are drawbacks to using our tadpole abilities, and this is where dreams come in. Every time you use your new powers, you have strange dreams once night comes. In them, a figure our PC desires evaluates them, gauging whether we are ready or willing for whatever they have planned for us.

The alert in *Baldur's Gate 3* that appears after you dream of this person. In-game text reads: "Illithid Powers (General Tutorial): You have gained new power from your illithid tadpole!" Screenshot from my own *Baldur's Gate 3* playthrough.

Clearly, dreams operate as major thresholds in our characters' journeys. In *Baldur's Gate II*, our dreams build up to the final dream in which we witness the Bhaalspawn's transformation into their slayer form. For background, the slayer form turns the Bhaalspawn into an all-out murderous unit. We see in our slumber that not only is the slayer form the ultimate physical manifestation of Bhaal's blood within us, but it is also a promise of our potential power. Again, as I said before—power is the commodity, our morality (or whatever semblance of it we have) the cost. And as I exemplified before, *Baldur's Gate 3* similarly follows its predecessor's use of dreams in conveying an awakening of power. After our first encounter with our strange dream person, we awaken with powers unique to *Baldur's Gate 3* alone. Our new powers depend on class, so, for example, a wizard will find that they can now create a forcefield around them that sends incoming missiles *back* to the assaulting enemy; rogues can hide in a cloak of shadows; clerics can keep themselves and allies standing even after their hit-points reach zero, etc. This process of self-development through dreams not only mimics real-life, but also theoretical approaches to our slumbering fancies.

In his article in which he discusses dreams in literature, Albert D. Hutter explains that "Freud defined the dream as the disguised fulfillment of a repressed infantile wish" and that "at the heart of every dream and as the cause of every dream there remains this earliest wish" (Hutter 182). Wish-fulfillment and the leftover desires of childhood can be understood as something inherently self-developmental. To wish is to hope for something more, and change can be a direct result of wishing. Freudian theory and analysis aside, authors we have previously learned from have similarly expressed the importance of sleep and self-development in literature and, of course, fairy tales. Zehetner states on the subject that, "Sleep represents introspection and the process of maturation" (2). Thus, we can interpret dreams in the *Baldur's Gate* series as

crucial in the PC's self-development, for within these scenarios we witness a tempting of the self, an allurement to a darker internal seed. Self-development here is represented in its negative form: self-degradation for the sake of power. Where *choice* comes in is in our reaction to these tempting influences. Are we willing to keep using the tadpole's powers for convenience and authoritative will? Will we give into our blood and take the power that seems so rightfully ours?

In *Baldur's Gate 3* (left) and *Baldur's Gate II* (right), the protagonists are encouraged into corruption by dream figures. *BG3* screenshot from Drowsy via *YouTube* (see works cited for more info), *BGII* screenshot from my own playthrough.

With all these things examined, it seems as though we have steered away from fairy tales a bit. Again, when it comes to morality we have to remember fairy tales are usually considered as lacking in significant nuance, hence their exclusion in the past few pages' worth of analysis. As I stated before, the *Baldur's Gate* series takes the black-and-white moral codes of fairy tales and reinvents them for an adult audience, encouraging us to explore the nuances in morality we so often see replicated in our real world. Despite this understandable idea, there are some who have tried to bring nuance back into fairy tales, either through adaptations or through analysis. One such person who examines moral nuance in this genre is Cristina Mazzoni, whose article "Violence in Fairy Tales: Basile's 'Lo Cunto de Li Cunti' and Garrone's 'Il Racconto Dei Racconti'" is incredibly useful in understanding the genre's more unsavory aspects.

The bulk of Mazzoni's article is concerned with filmmaker Matteo Garrone's adaptation of Basile's fairy tales in his movie *Il Racconto Dei Racconti*. Similarly to *Baldur's Gate*, Garrone takes these classic tales and brings out their horrific aspects in his movie. At one point in her analysis of his movie, Mazzoni brings up a quote that is instrumental in interpreting negative self-development in fairy tales. Citing Stephen Prince, she offers the following words before adding her own analysis:

> "'What must be done to remain human? This is the great question that horror films pose, and it is a question that gets asked again and again because it can never be answered [...]. The question of what must be done to remain human is posed in its negative form, by showing the loss of humanity (via lycanthropy, vampirism, decay, disease, violence) because the fear of this loss motivates the genre' (3). Garrone seizes and elaborates on the most violent of Basile's transformative moments as the pivotal ones in his own version of the tales, chosen and represented so as to inspire fear in the viewer — including the fear, as Prince puts it, that we are all in danger of losing our humanity" (Mazzoni 188-189).

This interpretation, in my opinion, perfectly incapsulates the intersection of choice and morality in fairy tales and the *Baldur's Gate* series. Though in this instance she is talking about the horror aspects of Garrone's movie, I think the above words from both Stephen Prince and Mazzoni bring to our attention the question of negative self-development in the *Baldur's Gate* games, and how this process echoes the dark undertone evident in fairy tales. Similarly to other stories that see a handsome royal transformed into a frog ("The Frog King"), a prince into a beast ("Beauty and the Beast"), and two children potentially into a witch's feast ("Hansel and Gretel"), *Baldur's Gate* tackles the question of humanity by threatening us with our humanity's removal. The threat of becoming a mind flayer and the appearance of the slayer form act as physical manifestations of our self-degradation. It is through the choices our playable characters make that the question

"What must be done to remain human?" is answered. How do we react to the threat of our humanity's loss? What if this loss comes with the promise of power? Do we embrace the change, or do we shun it?

At the heart of these philosophical musings is a deep yearning to make sense of ourselves. While fairy tales are indeed learning tools, they are also excellent ways for children to make sense of their own realities, which has been discussed by plenty of the fairy tale scholars I have cited. Similarly, *Baldur's Gate* and its endless series of scenarios gives players the chance to figure out the stranger aspects of life. The series' emphasis on moral degradation and the allure of power helps frustrated minds with making sense of the conflicts all around us, and the people who foster them. On connecting with our darker selves, Sarah Lynne Bowman writes in her book, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*, that the Dragon in the hero's journey "represents the Shadowside, the repressed aspects of the psyche that the individual finds fearful or disdainful or frightening" (Bowman 14). Citing Joseph Henderson, a scholar in Jungian theory, she further includes his assessment that "[t]he hero . . . must realize that the shadow exists and that he can draw strength from it. He must come to terms with its destructive powers if he is to become sufficiently terrible to overcome the dragon" (14). Here, we see that the *Baldur's Gate* series brings the shadow-self front and center in their games. Solving the iron crisis in the first *Baldur's Gate*, or finding our half-sister in *Baldur's Gate II*, or avoiding ceremorphosis in *Baldur's Gate 3* are the immediate threats, but, as we have learned, these games ultimately grapple with *how* we solve these problems, and often the solutions force the PCs to engage with their shadow selves. By witnessing their own internal struggles, we as players can learn from these dark confrontations and apply them to our own lives. We can learn from our characters' encounters

with their shadow selves how power can corrupt, or how corruption can be avoided. Complex philosophical topics can be pondered and ultimately learned from, as with fairy tales.

In this chapter, we first learned of the relevance of choice in both fairy tales and in RPGs. We locked in on the RPG's uniqueness in that players can actively change the game world with their choices, which is a noticeable deviation from the reading process of fairy tales. Nevertheless, we also discussed how witnessing choice and its impact in these mediums encourages moral reflection. On the topic of moral reflection, we examined how the *Baldur's Gate* series creates a more nuanced environment with which we can analyze the complexities of morality, something which is more lacking when it comes to fairy tales. Following this train of thought, we found ourselves analyzing the theme of morality's degradation across the *Baldur's Gate* series. Firstly, we laid down some vocabulary, namely the "parasitic form" and the "extracting" form. We considered the physical aspects of becoming "the monster", namely through the transformations of the PCs into the slayer form and mind flayer respectively, and then transitioned to how moral degradation is represented mentally. We saw how, through the dream sequences across the last two games, the allure of power and the cost of the self are made apparent. We ended this discussion with a consideration of how all these factors feed into a reflection of one's humanity. Furthermore, we also considered how examining the darker aspects of the self—namely, the shadow self—encourages a reflection on our own relationship with corruption and darkness. From these processes and themes, hopefully one can use their newfound wisdom to help them as they make sense of the real world and the personalities in it. If one does so, they will successfully be replicating the fairy tale learning process.

PART III

Conclusion

Conclusion

If there is one thing that can be taken away from this thesis, it is an increased understanding of how we interact with stories. As exemplified in my introduction, folk stories have been used for thousands of years to help connect humans to one another, as well as to help us make sense of the world around us. Later with the advent of literary fairy tales, these constructions of fantasy were used by adults to entertain fellow adults, before the genre morphed into the pedagogical genre geared mainly for children. And now, fairy tales are a mainstay of pop culture, with new iterations of these classic tales being produced by some of the largest companies today. But as we have seen with the *Baldur's Gate* series, a story need not be a direct replica of a tale in order to play with the genre's many characteristics.

Taking that principle into practice, this thesis examined how the Baldur's Gate series exemplifies an adult fairy tale by taking many of the traits of fairy tales and reinventing them for an adult audience. In our first chapter of Part 2, we examined how one of the ways the Baldur's Gate games replicate the fairy tale is through the leaving home conflict. In this chapter, we examined how the first *Baldur's Gate* game from 1998 uses this conflict as a way to inform our playable character's arc. By seeing the departure from home as a "negative test" (Hohr) or "domestic problem" (Dewan), we see how *Baldur's Gate* (1998) replicates the plots of many fairy tale stories. Later, using Hansjorg Hohr's analysis, we discussed how leaving home in both Baldur's Gate and fairy tales helps the character grow more self-sufficient from their parent figures.

In the second chapter of Part 2, we then examined another way in which the *Baldur's Gate* games replicates fairy tales: through the appearance of the hag character type. Using Kathryn A. Hoffman's article in conversation with *Baldur's Gate 3*, we examined the character of

Auntie Ethel and how her subplot simultaneously reiterates and reinvents the hag archetype. Additionally, by using Hoffman's article as a reference, we saw how hags in both fairy tales and Baldur's Gate 3 usher in a discussion of patriarchal norms on femininity and how dark fantasies can play with these societal expectations for women. Finally, this chapter also analyzed Hoffman's stated dynamic between the old woman and the maiden, and how Auntie Ethel and Mayrina from *Baldur's Gate 3* embody and subvert these roles.

Looking over to the third and final chapter of Part 2, we examined perhaps one of the most foundational aspects of the fairy tale that finds its way into the *Baldur's Gate* series: moral exploration. We examined how the *Baldur's Gate* games encourage the player to explore what Zehetner labeled a "path of action" in fairy tales. By observing many characters' various "path[s] of action", we as players are able to play with and understand how various types of morality are received and manifested in social settings. Following the theme of morality, we also looked into how the Baldur's Gate games enhance upon the fairy tale's exploration of morality by focusing specifically upon morality's degradation. Because the Baldur's Gate series is geared towards adults, we established that these more nuanced and darker interpretations of human morality are more easily executed. Along this line of thought, I coined two terms in the chapter that relate to the types of moral degradation presented in the games: the "parasitic form" and the "extracting form". By analyzing both terms as they pertain to the *Baldur's Gate* series, we were able to better understand how these games present declining morality. Finally, we finished this chapter by reminding ourselves how we can use these explorations of morality in our own lives as we make sense of the endless moral nuances and frustrations in our own world, both as they apply to the people around us and ourselves (remembering Sarah Lynne Bowman's use of the term "shadow self").

With everything recapped, I suppose now we can only look to the future, when you finish this thesis and move on with your life. Although we have read about and examined a multitude of complicated topics in this thesis, the ultimate thing I would hope readers take away from this work is play. My idea for this thesis was conceived out of a love for playing video games, and from there a broad swath of information and ideas from writers have come forth to me. Among other things, I learned that both fairy tales and the *Baldur's Gate* games share their ultimate strengths in their ability to help people have fun. Thus, after you close or click off this thesis of mine, I implore you to engage with and honor play that positively impacts you, and perhaps examine how your favorite forms of play connect to deeper modes of human expression, like we have seen in the connection between *Baldur's Gate* and folk stories. All in all, I suppose the ultimate goal of this thesis is to better appreciate the works of our imaginations—both on a collective human scale and a personal one—and to encourage others to more deeply examine that which enchants them. Through stories and games, we grasp at the magic bursting behind our eyes.

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"My tale is done, see the mouse run, whoever catches it, may make himself a big fur cap out of it."

—"Hansel and Gretel, *Grimm's Complete Fairy Tales* (p. 59)

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