GENDER DISCRIMINATION *IN DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS* GAME NARRATIVE

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Abstract

This article explores the narrative in *Dragon Age: Origins*, a video game released in 2009 that was developed by BioWare and published by Electronic Arts. This research aims to show how this game's narrative can be experienced both by passively watching and actively involving the player's input through the video game narrative forms, according to Sebastian Domsch, while showing gender issues through them. This research uses qualitative analysis to explain the video game narrative. The result is that *Dragon Age: Origins* shows that this game can be experienced both passively and actively through the video game narrative forms, which are passive and active nodal forms. It also shows discrimination towards women in its narrative with the women treated mainly as a victim and the sexual violence against them being used as a way to bring drama to the game's narrative.

Keywords: Video Game Narrative; Gender Discrimination; Gender Issue

INTRODUCTION

The video game plays an important part in cultural history. It was the first medium to combine moving imagery, sound, and real-time user interaction in one machine. A video game made it possible for the existence of interactive, on-screen worlds in which a game or story took place. It was also the first medium that required hand-eye coordination skills to be experienced. In the early 1970s, the first computer that the general public could use for video arcade games and the first computer that could be used in people's homes was the home game system (Wolf, 2008a, p. 21). Video games started to be sought after because they build a positive, fun, and user-friendly image of the home computer.

It has yet to be discovered who exactly invented the video game. However, the starting point of video game consoles is known. It started with a television engineer named Ralph Baer, who wondered about the possibility of using television for interactive purposes and not just as something that can only be appreciated by passively looking at it. Then, he had the idea of building a device that would attach to a television and act as a transmitter that would deliver a signal to the television, allowing the user to

send the signal back to the device. He brought his idea to the company he worked for called Sanders Associates, which led to him creating the prototype called "Brown Box." The Brown Box then got licensed to a TV manufacturer called Magnavox, which created the first video game home console called "Odyssey"(Herman, 2008, pp. 53–54). Over the years, the video game console has grown as more people demand to play video games at home. However, video games nowadays can not only be played on video game home consoles, like PlayStation and Xbox, but also can be played on a personal computer or laptop.

Initially, video games did not have any story or narrative whatsoever. So many people wanted to repurchase Odyssey then because of *PONG*, a tennis-like video game (Herman, 2008, p. 54). Over time, the game started to include more than just gameplay but narrative. The video game's narrative differs from many seen in films, novels, etc. However, since some video games have certain narratives by implementing the characterization, setting, plot, and theme, these elements can be analyzed through the theories of culture and literature—one of the video games with appealing narrative is *Dragon Age: Origins.*

Dragon Age: Origins is a role-playing video game released in 2009 that was developed by BioWare and published by Electronic Arts. It is an RPG game where the main character has six backgrounds that the player can choose from. The game's story takes place in a fantasy country named Ferelden. The time setting of Ferelden is in the Medieval Era of Europe. In the narrative, Ferelden is threatened by an army of creatures called Darkspawn, and the main character is tasked to gather many allies in the country to stop them.

Several studies have researched the relationship between gender issues and video games. For example, Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2009) exhibited their experimental designed research findings on the short-term effects of exposure to sexualized female video game characters on gender stereotyping and female self-concept in emerging adults. The result then suggested that suggest that playing a sexualized videogame heroine unfavorably influenced people's beliefs about women in the real world. Another study by Harrison et al. (2016) focused on the position of female gamers in the masculine-oriented gaming consumption context. The findings revealed an undercurrent of gender-based consumer vulnerability, driven by stereotypical perceptions of "gamer girls" in the masculine-oriented gaming subculture. Furthermore, the findings highlighted the multilayered, multidimensional nature of gaming as a vulnerable consumption environment, at individual, marketplace, and cultural levels.

The third study, conducted by Bègue et al. (2017), focused more on assessing the relationship between video game exposure and sexism for the first time in a large and representative sample. A representative sample of 13520 French youth aged 11–19 years completed a survey measuring weekly video game and television exposure, religiosity, and sexist attitudes toward women. Controlling gender and socioeconomic level, results showed that videogame exposure and religiosity were related to sexism. From another

perspective of a female hero/heroine main character video game, Forni (2019) focused her study on the *Horizon Zero Dawn* video game. The study found that the video game's narrative offers a balanced representation of both femininity and masculinity. Therefore, *Horizon Zero Dawn* not only counteracts gender stereotypes but also renegotiates gender. The video game goes beyond male and female ideals and represents gender as a social construction that should be reconsidered.

Dragon Age: Origins presented itself as progressive in its story. BioWare, the developer of *Dragon Age: Origins*, prides itself as a progressive game developer in including modern ideas in this game. *Dragon Age: Origins* is a game where the player's actions and choices can change the story. Makuch (2014) found that BioWare tried to bring a sense of inclusivity to the different types of players. Thus, this background leads to the question of whether the game narrative provides gender-inclusive content or not. This research focuses on the gender discrimination shown in the narrative forms *of the Dragon Age: Origins* video game.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is considered a literary criticism focusing on discovering gender issues within the narrative of the storyline of the *Dragon Age: Origins* video game. The study's data source is a video game with certain narrative forms that can also be considered as having literary elements since the forms contain the elements of characterization, plot, setting, and theme. Domsch (2013) stated that the narrative forms of video games are split into four parts: passive forms, active nodal forms, dynamic forms, and digression: architecture and protocols. The research data taken are the dialogues, the cutscenes, and the gameplay from the video game *Dragon Age: Origins*. After that, the data will be analyzed by observing the existence of gender discrimination.

Gender discrimination or gender inequality is the difference in treatment based on the person's gender within society (Sovitriana, 2020, p. 69). This discrimination tends to be directed at the woman. Societies in the world are primarily male-dominated. Woman in societies is supposed to be a mother, ideal wife, and a homemaker, with many roles attributed to the woman in the family. It leads to the woman experiencing low status, oppression, and exploitation(Akhter, 2020, p. 593).

According to Mansour Fakih (1996), gender discrimination appears in the form of marginalization, subordination, stereotyping, violence against women, and job burden. Marginalization is the process that causes the woman to be impoverished. An example of marginalization is an inheritance rule. The woman tends to get a lot less inheritance than the man. Therefore, it will make a woman more likely to be impoverished than men. Subordination is when a woman has lower status or position than a man. Subordination happens because of many factors in social construct. For example, there is a belief among Javanese that women did not need a high education because they will become housewives at the end of it all. The stereotype is a labeling or a marking of a group. Stereotyping people tends to cause injustice in society. The stereotype applies to gender.

An example is a woman who dressed provocatively. This kind of woman is stereotyped as a woman that tried to attract men. Many cases of sexual harassment are always associated with this stereotype. Violence is an attack or assault on someone, whether it be a physical attack or a mental attack. Violence motivated by gender bias is called *gender-related violence*. Gender violence happens because of an inequality of power within society. Lastly, a job burden is when someone's workload is much heavier than the others. In the case of women, they tend to have a much heavier workload compared to men if they are married and also hold an official job. The reason is that women have to do domestic housework as well as their job, which leads to them having more workload than men.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Dragon Age: Origins game is set in the fictional world of Thedas. Thedas is portrayed as a world in which race and class merge to determine social class and political dynamics. Humans are portrayed as the most respected race, while elves, mages, and dwarves are portrayed as a secondary race and class. Aside from race and class, the game shows gender equality. It shows equality between men and women, where women are allowed to fight in the army like men. The game also allows the player to pick the main character, either a man or a woman, showing little difference within the story. At least, that is how the game seems when it's being looked at on the surface.

The first way to look at how gender is equal in this game is through the main character. In the narrative, the player customizable the main character in this game. The game offers three races for the player to pick as the main character: human, elf, and dwarf. The players who can choose the class are warrior, rogue, and mage. Dwarf is a race that cannot be chosen as a mage because the game's setting has it. Those dwarves cannot perform magic. They can all be picked as men or women, as seen in Picture 1 below.

Picture 1: Character Creation Interface

After choosing the main character, the player also selects one of the six backgrounds dependent on the race and class the player chose. The selection of the background develops the narrative of the gameplay. For example, if the player chose a dwarf race with a warrior class, the player will be able to choose the background of either Dwarven Commoner or Dwarven Noble. Another example is that a human with a mage class can only choose the background of the Circle of Magi and not Human Noble, unlike if the player chose a human with a warrior or rogue class. Therefore, gender is irrelevant in the choice of background for the player character because all the backgrounds can be played either as men or women with very little difference.

The other way to look at gender equality within the game's narrative is through the companions' choices. Companions are allies that the player can pick up as the game progresses to help the player clear the game and develop the main character. The player can have up to three companions to be taken during gameplay while the rest stay behind. The gender ratio among the companions is equal as provided by the evidence in picture 2 below.

Picture 2: Companions Selection Interface

Ignoring the player's character in the middle and the dog below her, the companions consist of four men and four women, as provided by picture 2 above. The men are signed with the blue circle, while the women are signed with the red circle. From left to right, the men have Oghren, Sten, Alistair, and Zevran. The women have Leliana, Morrigan, Wynne, and Shale. Shale is the stone golem on the far right. The story initially did not disclose what gender she was because she did not know who she was due to amnesia. However, the player finds out later by helping her regain the memory that she used to be a dwarven woman before becoming a golem. Therefore, the player is given four men and four women to accompany them on their journey. It is evidence of equality in gender distribution.

Although the game has attempted to provide equal gender distribution, the narrative provides different roles and characterization between both types of gender. Since the companions given by the game consist of four men and four women, there is still an imbalance in the class given to the companions. The male companions have

Alistair, Sten, and Oghren as warrior class, with Zevran as a rogue class. The female companions have Morrigan and Wynne as a mage class, Leliana as a rogue class, and Shale as a warrior class.

The gender issue stems from how the characters are meant to be played. The male characters with Alistair, Sten, and Oghren as warrior class mean that the male must engage the enemies in close-range combat. Zevran also needs to engage in close-range combat because his skills are specialized in daggers, which are close-range weapons. The female characters, Morrigan and Wynne, are from the mage class, meaning they must engage the enemies in long-range combat and be far from the enemy because they cannot wear heavier armor to protect themselves. Leliana, a roguelike Zevran, has her skills specialized in archery, as shown in the picture above, which means she must also stay in the back of formation to attack. It is odd because Leliana carries a dagger when the player/main character first meets her. Shale is the only female character who can engage in close-range combat. However, she is characterized as having a bulking physique like a man. This characterization implies the stereotype that the women must stay in the back of the team to be protected while the men must stay in the frontline to protect them. Moreover, the women's role is to support others and themselves.

Another gender issue found in the game's narrative is women's victimization. The game's narrative provides a setting that shows women can join the army and fight their enemies. Based on the roles, it implies that some women are characterized as physically and intellectually capable. However, there are still several times in the story when women are characterized as powerless. In other parts of the narrative, women are portrayed as victims of violence. From the narrative perspective, such actions become the rising actions of the plot, which the player/main character should follow to end the game.

The female characters suffer from violence several times in the game's narrative. The violence is not only suffered by the non-playable female characters but also by the player/main character if the player chooses a female character as the main character. One of the violence against women happens in the City Elf Origin's story. The main character, an elf, is going through an arranged marriage, and the story happens on their wedding day. The game's narrative is the same for the male and female main characters until a noble's son crashes their wedding to take all the women there to be raped. If the main character is male, the noble's son's friends beat the main character and leave him at the wedding place as seen in Picture 3 below. If the main character is female, she is still getting beaten but was taken to the noble's palace as shown in Picture 4 below.

Picture 3: Male Main Character wakes up after the wedding incident

Picture 4: Female Main Character and the other women were taken captive

Both Picture 3 and Picture 4 above show a cutscene of what happens to the player/main character after the wedding catastrophe. Picture 3 shows the male main character waking up at the wedding place while his cousin, Soris, is helping him. Picture 4 shows the female main character waking up at the noble's son's palace, looking at the terrified women who are also taken to the palace. The narrative of the game also provides different plots between the male main character and the female main character. In the narrative of the male main character, he is immediately trusted to rescue the woman taken by the noble's son after the wedding catastrophe. He is also given a weapon to accomplish his task. Then, he has to sneak into the palace in order to save the women. However, in the narrative of the female main character, she is about to be taken by the guards to their quarters until Soris comes in and saves her by throwing her a sword. Both narratives become one again when the male or female main character attempts to save the other cousin, Shianni, who has already become the victim of rape.

This particular narrative division provides evidence of gender discrimination in the roles where the female main character gets victimized while the male main character acts as a hero. The other origin stories are mostly the same for both genders, the only difference being how they are referred to. This evidence further reinforces the stereotype that women are victimized while men are glorified as heroes.

Lastly, discrimination can also be discovered after the climax of the narrative of the game. The falling action of the game's narrative provides the player/main character with the choice between the coronation of either the new king or the new queen of Ferelden. If the choice is the king, the king's narrative shows that the king does not know how to rule because of being raised away from royalty. While if the choice is the queen, the queen's narrative shows that the queen does know how to rule even though she was raised as a noble. Furthermore, the queen is characterized negatively because of her treatment of the elves. The king's narrative shows that he treats the elves fairly by appointing one of them as his advisor. On the other hand, the queen's narrative shows that the queen condemns the elves because of the food shortage, which leads to more tension between the elves and humans. Since the theme of the narrative of the game is the war between the elves and the humans, to avoid more tension between the elves and the humans, the player/main character has to choose between appointing the king as the ruler of the land or matchmaking the queen to marry the king so that the king becomes the ruler of the land. Such a narrative implicitly conveys that men are better as a leader than women by characterizing male characters with positive values while characterizing female characters with negative values. Even though there are many evil male characters as the enemy in the game, such narrative can be perceived as specific gender discrimination within the characterization in the narrative of the game.

CONCLUSION

The findings above surprisingly reveal that despite the narrative of the game initially providing equality in its treatment of gender, the narrative still shows discrimination towards women. Based on the findings above, the narrative of *Dragon Age: Origins* implies the gender issue of discrimination. Initially, it can be said that the game shows that gender is treated equally with its character's creation, character attributes, and companion's gender ratio. However, inequality or discrimination can be seen in the companion's weapon specialization, class of the companions, victimization of women, and sexual violence against women in general. The victimization and the sexual violence seem to be used by the game's writer to create drama in the narrative and give motivation to the player/main character. The findings provide evidence that in the narrative of the game, women are seen as weak or become victims prone to suffer abuse and need a man to help them either in the game proper or the game's backstory. The gender discrimination continues by how the narrative of the game characterizes the king with positive values while the queen with negative values.

Even though the setting of the narrative of *Dragon Age: Origins* is in the imaginative medieval era where humans and elves live together and where gender issues are most possibly not become the concern of the society of the era, however in this modern game, game creators and their story makers should at least consider how gender issues may become a disadvantage in the marketing of the game. Since *Dragon Age: Origins* was marketed in 2009, and there are many more video games with exciting narratives being

marketed nowadays, this study thus suggests further studies on the different gender issues presented within the different game narratives and on comparing the development of gender equality within different game narratives along the years.

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