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The Illusion of Choice

Interactive Narration in Dragon Age II

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

This thesis is an examination of interactive role-playing game *Dragon Age II* (2011), by video game studio BioWare, from the point of view of narratology. The basic foundation of narrative, as theorised by Gérard Genette and Mieke Bal, is analysed and discussed, and found to be somewhat lacking as regards a reading of a video game. Although the basic components of narrative, such as mimesis and diegesis, are easily accessed through these theories, more complex ideas of narrator and focalisation prove difficult to position. This is due to a video game being a visual medium. Here, an application of narratology as it pertains to film readings provides a better overview of the function of narrator and focaliser in this video game. It is concluded that the adaptation of Bal's theories to film by Celestino Deleyto may be applied not only to film, but a different visual medium such as an interactive video game. The issue of interactivity is addressed extensively. In order to build a coherent and compelling narrative experience for the player, interactivity must be limited in some manner as today's technology does not allow for an emotionally immersive experience built purely out of user input. It is established that the active participation in the narrative allows the player much greater agency than any traditional form of storytelling. The player may take a moral stance of the events of the narrative through the use of a branching structure, or dialogue tree. The game encourages the player to build emotional bonds with secondary characters, furthering the illusion of interactivity. Despite tracing a route already set by the authors of the game, the player feels engaged and in control through the choices provided. Despite the narrative not being truly interactive, the illusion of choice is sufficient for the player to experience narrative control.

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1. Introduction

Role-playing video games have opened up a new world of interactive storytelling in the past decade. Rather than focusing entirely on gameplay, video games are able to tell deeper and more compelling stories than before. *Dragon Age II* (2011) is a fantasy role-playing game that takes place in the fictional universe of the *Dragon Age* series, created by video game company BioWare. It is an independent sequel to the 2009 game *Dragon Age: Origins*, the first instalment in the series. Since its publication, this fictional world has been gradually expanded with novels, comics, a tabletop RPG system, a web series, and a third video game, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014). All three video games share the mechanics of interactive storytelling, but the extended materials all follow the storytelling rules of their respective medium.

Although this fictional universe is so vast and varied, the focus of this thesis will be the second video game. *Dragon Age II* provides an excellent juxtaposition of narrative modes, engaging game mechanics, and compelling characters. The story itself takes place on a continent named Thedas, in the Free Marches, a confederation of city states. The city state of Kirkwall is the main setting, as well as its immediate surroundings, including a large mountain rife with criminal activity, deep underground tunnels filled with monsters, and a forest which inhabits nomadic elves. The game's use of a city as a setting is a vast departure from the theme of the first game, as the original heavily engaged with nature and the bastardization of it, its player character traversing through the landscape of Ferelden, a country in southern Thedas. The themes of *Dragon Age II* centre more on the nature of people, their morals, and the consequences of their actions. The player takes on the role of Hawke, a refugee from Ferelden. It is through the beginnings of this character that the sequel finds its connection to the first game, as the destruction of Ferelden causes its population to flee. In the second game's prologue, Hawke and her family escape to Kirkwall, where the game's three main acts take place. The player takes Hawke's place within the fantasy world, guiding her through the trials that face her.

In the first chapter of this thesis, narratology as theorised by Gérard Genette and Mieke Bal will be applied to the game's narrative, examining whether these classic theories fit a video game narrative. In the second chapter, a discussion of interactivity will take place, applying the texts of Jonas Carlquist, Kristine Jørgensen, and Marie-Laure Ryan in order to examine what kind of interactivity truly takes place between the player

and the game. In the third chapter, the relationship between narrator and focaliser will be discussed, as well as how focalisation differs between visual and text media, and how it may be applied to a video game. The fourth and final chapter will examine the game's supporting characters, their emotional impact upon the player, and how they are utilised to drive forward a compelling narrative. Through interactivity and compelling gameplay, *Dragon Age II* allows the player to immerse herself in a fictional world in a way that traditional storytelling cannot accomplish, providing the player with a feeling of power and agency over the story being told.

2. The Foundation of Narrative

The basic building blocks of the narrative of *Dragon Age II* follow the same rules as most dramatic narratives, taking the player on a hero's journey. The narrative follows the 'Tale of the Champion', wherein the Champion is the game's player character. In the very beginning, the player is able to choose between genders, and an adventuring class with differing abilities and strengths. In this thesis, the character of Hawke, as well as the theoretical player, will be referred to as 'her'. The player has the opportunity to name the character, although her last name is locked as 'Hawke'. This allows the secondary characters to refer to the player character by name. The game does provide default given names, the male version being Garrett Hawke, and the female Marian Hawke. The player may choose between three classes, which are common within the role-playing game genre: warrior, mage, or rogue. The choice of class impacts the narrative, as it more or less dictates which of Hawke's two siblings survives the prologue. The player then has an opportunity to customise the look of the character, modifying facial features, skin tone, and hairstyle. The player controls Hawke from her humble beginnings as a refugee from the blighted country of Ferelden, working her way up Kirkwall society by providing favours and solving mysteries, and eventually becoming the city's saviour. Along the way, Hawke meets and has an opportunity to ally with several supporting characters from vastly diverse backgrounds, all of whom share the trait of having somewhat flexible morals. These characters will be discussed further in the fourth chapter.

The tale itself is presented in a prologue and three acts. The prologue begins by introducing Varric Tethras, who is being dragged into an interrogation by a heavily armed soldier, Cassandra Pentaghast. Cassandra demands to know of the Champion of Kirkwall and her current location. Varric reluctantly offers information about Hawke, and the events that took place in Kirkwall. In the first act, after the prologue establishes Hawke's escape from Ferelden and settlement in Kirkwall, Hawke meets the companions who will share in her story, including the tale's apparent teller, Varric. She ends up accompanying Varric on a treasure hunt in the Deep Roads: a nigh inaccessible network of tunnels and cities made by the dwarves of old deep below the surface. The second act has Hawke and company clashing with the Qunari, a militant race that has plans of invading the city. The end of the second act sees Hawke driving them away, earning her the title of Champion. The third and final act is a climax of unrest between mages and Templars that has been

escalating since the first act. In conjunction with these main story events, the game uses mini-narratives, also known as ‘side quests’, to further broaden the scope of the city of Kirkwall. These mini-narratives include quests that employ Hawke on a task for a monetary reward; including finding someone’s missing wife, cleaning out criminal cartels, or retrieving someone’s stolen property.

As is already apparent by this summary of the game’s story, the narrative is largely fixed. It is therefore necessary to explain the term ‘interactive video game’. A true interactive narrative would be ‘produced through a collaboration between the machine and the user’ (Ryan 43). In its strictest sense, an interactive narrative would be purely driven by an artificial intelligence’s ability to extrapolate from a player’s input of data. However, as Marie-Laure Ryan notes, as the technology is today, the user’s choices must be restricted. This is because it is highly unlikely that an artificial intelligence would produce a story that adheres to narrative logic (44). Video games that have an artificial intelligence construct a narrative from user data have been attempted, but they rarely manage to form a coherent narrative (Ryan 44). Another level of interactivity in the modern video game is physical interactivity. With devices such as the Microsoft Kinect, a motion sensing camera for the video game console Xbox, players can drive a narrative with physical interaction. Butliko, Hernandez, and St. Hilaire attempted to create such a game that would additionally drive an emotional response. The game, *iGiselle*, requires the player to form specific ballet poses with the use of the Microsoft Kinect in order to continue the narrative (Butliko 151). The term interactive, with regards to *Dragon Age II*, simply means that the player has some choice in exactly how an event progresses and how the player character responds to a given situation. For example, Hawke may respond to events or conversations with dialogue characterised by Nobility/Kindness, Sarcasm, or Anger/Aggression. Occasionally the player will have an additional option, such as attempting to convince an auxiliary character to pay coin for information or services, which the character will sometimes react negatively to. However, in order to examine the basic building blocks of the narrative, interactivity will be set aside for now.

Applying literary theorist Gérard Genette’s theories on narrative discourse to a video game seems ideal, as Genette’s work focuses entirely on how the story is told; or as Peter Barry phrases it in his discussion on Genette’s work, ‘the process of telling itself’ (222). According to Jonas Carlquist, video games cannot be compared to written text such

as a novel, as they lack the linguistic quality of cohesion. He does concede that the two may be compared in a much wider perspective (17). In Genette's essay on narrative, he discusses how narrative may be either mimetic or diegetic in nature, referring to Plato's theories on these two modes of narrative (162). Diegesis, or 'pure narrative', is when the author openly speaks as himself, while mimesis is when the author 'delivers a speech as if he were someone else' (162). In later narrative theory, this was articulated as '*showing vs telling*' (Genette 162, original emphasis). Mieke Bal disagrees with this analysis, stating that 'narration, by definition diegetic, cannot be mimetic' (76). She posits that narration is only ever an illusion of mimesis, and that narrative can never be absolutely mimetic (77). It is clear here that these classic theories of narratology are mainly focused on prose text, and does not necessarily expand to include other forms of narrative. However, they should not be absolutely dismissed. According to Genette's point of view, the narrative of *Dragon Age 2* seems mostly mimetic in nature, 'showing' rather than 'telling', but contains significant occurrences of diegesis. The story begins as an account relayed by Varric to his interrogator, Cassandra. The narrative is framed so that the player believes that Varric is providing the unfolding events to his interrogator. The narrative mode then shifts to mimesis as the player takes control of Hawke, and the bulk and essence of the story is told in a dramatic, mimetic fashion. Bal's suggestion that narration is only ever the illusion of mimesis seems unable to account for a visual medium. It may be posited that the narration of the game is indeed diegetic, as the narrator is relaying this tale verbally to an interrogator. This, then, fails to account for the point of view of the camera, and begs the question whether the camera may be considered a narrator. Since *Dragon Age II* is a story told through a visual medium, it is vital to see how narratology applies to it as such. Celestino Deleyto claims that both Bal and Genette assume that 'in order to have a narrative there must be a narrator' (219). Deleyto claims that a film narrative does not require such an explicit narrator, and that the camera may at times act as a narrator. A film has the capacity to depict events outside of the narrator (Deleyto 219). This must apply here if Varric is the presumed narrator, as within the mimetic narrative of Hawke's story, the player has access to scenes and information that Varric would hardly have been privy to. This includes intimate moments between the player character and her chosen romantic partner, or side-quests that Varric would not have been a part of. This will be further discussed in the chapter on focalisation.

Genette mentions a mimetic story having ‘quantity’ (166). Mimesis requires the author to take more time in telling his story, delving deeper into describing events as they appear to the focaliser of the narrative. Diegetic text would however be a great deal shorter. Genette provides an example of this from Plato’s attempt of making a short line of text from Homer’s *Iliad* diegetic rather than mimetic. Plato condenses the text by removing adjectives and other flowery language, something which Genette says is ‘functionally useless in the story’ (165). As Bal puts it, ‘the more diegetic the narrative, the fewer the details’ (81). Bal adds that a mimetic narrative will always be slower, while diegetic narrative ‘in which narrative efficiency is greatest, will be fast’ (82). Therefore, it is not only a question of density of the narrative, but also time. An example of this idea can be seen in *Dragon Age II*. The game occasionally needs to turn to diegesis to summarise events, particularly between acts, and then turns back to its mimetic form. This slip into diegesis is usually accomplished by turning back to the exchange between Varric and Cassandra. Varric provides a short account of relatively unimportant events between acts, his account often spanning several years in few sentences. Doing this reminds the player that the major events are fixed. For a narrative to make dramatic sense, it must in some ways be pre-set. It would be possible to make the narrative of the game diegetic in nature while still providing the player with some narrative influence, although it would most likely not be as compelling or immersive. For the game to be diegetic, it would simply have the player observe Varric’s interrogation while occasionally prompting the player to choose between actions. The player would not connect with secondary characters at the same level, or indeed the player character herself. ‘Choose Your Own Adventure’ books would be the closest equivalent of this diegetic style, but as video games rely heavily on visual storytelling, this narrative mode would be counter-intuitive.

3. An Illusion of Choice?

An interactive narrative may be defined in a very literal manner as a narrative constructed purely by user input, or with more consideration towards modern technology's capabilities of formulating a coherent narrative. While *Dragon Age II* is considered an interactive narrative, its level of interactivity is limited in order to be both coherent to the player, and to provide emotional immersion and narrative pleasure. This particular interactive narrative does provide a cohesive story, rather than a game in which the player has absolute control of events. Kristine Jørgensen, in her article on story-driven interactive games, writes that the goal of an interactive narrative is not necessarily to provide absolute narrative power to the player, but to create a player character 'that basically is an extension of the player into the game world' (319). What happens to Hawke needs to be personally relevant to the player. Jonas Carlquist agrees, arguing that the player must be made the most important figure from the very beginning of the game, which then 'denotes that it is not about any ordinary story, it is about an interactive story' (13). To have the player take meaningful action and witness the results of their decisions and choices within the narrative provides satisfaction and pleasure, which cannot be accessed by observing it passively (Carlquist 20). Jørgensen discusses the player's connection with the player character, proposing that the player's ethics will most likely mix with the morals of the player character (319). Carlquist counters this idea by suggesting that the player needs not strictly identify with the player character, only to be allowed to take action (25). If Carlquist's idea is implemented here, the game loses its goal of immersing the player in the world of Thedas. The player needs to connect with Hawke at some level, whether Hawke operates as an extension of the player's morality, or the player chooses to attempt different modes of morality through the freedom of fiction. This is where the player feels most connected to the game, and most involved, as the events in the game become more relevant to the player's extension of self.

Carlquist discusses three layers of storytelling in a video game: out-of-game storytelling, in-game storytelling, and external materials (14). Out-of-game storytelling refers to any instance in which the player loses narrative control, such as during cinematic cut-scenes. In-game storytelling is any time the player is actually playing the game. In *Dragon Age II*, Hawke moving around the city or quest areas, fighting battles, or having dialogue options, would be considered in-game storytelling. External material is any kind

of storytelling made outside of the game itself. This can range from the descriptive text on the back of the game's case or at online retailers, to the short video series *Dragon Age: Redemption*, made by Felicia Day in conjunction with the game's release. The game provides a wealth of cut-scenes, or out-of-game storytelling, with which to narrate the main points of the story and move the plot forward. According to Marie-Laure Ryan, this use of film clips removes agency from the player (i.e. the interactivity) in order to drive forward an intricate plot point or a character's backstory (52). Usually, the player becomes witness to the narrative through these cut-scenes, rather than active participant. *Dragon Age II* will in most cases give the player direct influence during these scenes through the use of the dialogue tree, allowing the player to take a stance on what is transpiring. This combines Carlquist's concepts of on out-of-game and in-game storytelling. Ryan does consider this a rigid mode of interactivity, as the path is already traced, even if several destinations are provided by this branching structure (52). Warren Spector, game designer, references this as a 'powerful illusion' for the player, saying that 'no amount of branching can allow players to do things we don't allow them to do' (qtd. in Carlquist 37). Despite whatever decisions the player is allowed to make, eventually she is directed back onto the path as written by the game designer. Jørgensen argues that through providing the player with choices, the story's events are made more personal compared to a similarly empathetic moment in a film or novel (319). In several cases in-game, the player must make a moral decision, which may deeply impact both player and player character. Ryan does agree that the narrative is made more immediate through the player's active participation, even if the game employs out-of-game storytelling as scripted events or other characters take control (53). Since the player is allowed to choose Hawke's attitude towards the world around her, through the differing dialogue options, the player adds her own interpretation of the character into the game (Jørgensen 324).

The game developers of *Dragon Age II* relied on the branching storyline structure, as it has been established to be an effective mode of storytelling in an interactive game. By providing this branching structure in an interactive narrative, the game developer 'becomes more the architect of the narrative' (Carlquist 36). The developer uses this tool to present a narrative which progresses entirely on their terms 'without having to worry about whether or not the player activity is going to ruin it' (Jørgensen 321). Despite the developers having removed narrative control from the player at certain points, the player

does not feel entirely powerless in the progression of events (Jørgensen 324). It must be noted that if the player chooses a path to go down within the narrative, she cannot return and choose a different path. The actions of the player have real consequences on the progression of the fictional world (Carlquist 36). This is how the game designer intends for the game to work – however, it is possible to save the game’s progress in many separate files, and it is simply a matter of re-loading a previous saved state and choosing a different response. This action depends upon the player entirely, as the game does not explicitly suggest that this is an option.

Jonas Carlquist states in his article that ‘computer games are games. It is about winning’ (14). The article, published in 2002, does carry an outdated view on this issue. While certain parts of *Dragon Age II* are indeed about winning, such as the fights, and perhaps even the romances, the attraction of a game like *Dragon Age II* is to get to know the world and hear the tale of its inhabitants. Marie-Laure Ryan suggests that the appeal of an interactive game is not to win, but to ‘observe the evolution of the storyworld’ (46). It is nonetheless important to note that the ‘function of narrative in games is not primarily to create a fascinating story, but to render compelling, interesting play’ (Carlquist 33). Some skill is required to play the game to completion, as the battles between Hawke and her enemies may prove challenging. The game provides four difficulty modes: casual, normal, hard, and nightmare. It is possible for the player to become ‘stuck’ if an enemy proves too much of a challenge, such as during the final battle with the Qunari leader, or the last battle between the mages and Templars. The difficulty may be changed in-game if the player finds a challenge she cannot overcome. If the player does not have the skill to complete a fight in a Main Plot quest, she cannot advance the story. The game will nonetheless place no limit on how many times the player may attempt to win the battle. Regardless, the ‘casual’ difficulty mode is designed for players looking for storytelling rather than gameplay, and is forgiving to the novice video game player. Therefore, through the usage of differing difficulty levels, the game is made appealing to both players looking for a story and a player looking to win.

Where the game provides the player with most freedom, and interactivity, is through the use of mini-narratives, or side quests. The game distinguishes quests received by Hawke by four categories: Main Plot quest, Companion quest, Secondary quest, or Side quest. The Main Plot quests are the driving force of the game. The player needs to

complete these quests in order to advance the story of the game. Companion quests provide Hawke with information about her allies, and provides an opportunity to establish deeper relationships with them. Secondary quests, as well as Side quests, enrich the world around the player and are more or less optional. These quests allow the player to gain experience points, which allow Hawke to level up. Levelling up is mostly for battle purposes, as accumulating experience points allows Hawke to gain new abilities, as well as greater strength, dexterity, magic, cunning, willpower, and constitution. In addition to being rewarded with experience points, Hawke is usually awarded gold for her efforts in completing these quests. It is only in Act One that the Secondary and Side quests are mandatory, as Hawke is required to gather a significant amount of gold in order to ‘buy in’ as an investor to Varric’s mission to the Deep Roads. To gather the gold, the player must take Hawke through these side quests, although the player may pick and choose which ones to complete.

These mini-narratives contribute to the game’s non-linearity. As Carlquist describes it, non-linearity in a game provides certain fixed events, but in between them the player has some control over what quests to take and in which order (8). It is here that Carlquist raises the question of who may be considered the author of the game, if the player participates so actively in the creation of the narrative. Despite the player taking on this proactive role, often carving out an experience and connection with the world that may differ from another player’s experience, Carlquist concludes that the player may not be considered an author (18). The player is, however, encouraged to observe and judge what she sees. The player being allowed to be an active participant in the ‘joint construction of meaning’ (Carlquist 34) means that the player never ‘reads’ the same story twice. This encourages the player to replay the game, and make different choices to test their outcomes. This additionally means that no two players will have the exact same experience with the game.

The game designers and writers of the game firmly hold the position of author, as the player is only ever treading the paths carved by the makers of the game. The power of the player is not the power over narrative but the power of choice. The player chooses her companions, chooses which sub-quests or mini-narratives to engage with, and in the end, chooses whether Hawke is noble or evil.

4. Focalisation

To further assess the mode of storytelling in *Dragon Age II*, an examination of perspective must be made. Focalisation is a term proposed by Genette, intended as an expansion on the discussion of ‘perspective’ or ‘point of view’ in narrative (189). The question that the term focalisation attempts to answer is ‘who sees?’, or through which perspective is the narrative presented. Both Genette and Bal have set forth precise formulations of focalisation in order to provide an answer. Genette defines the term as a ‘choice (or not) of a restrictive “point of view”’ (186). Bal defines this even more precisely as both a ‘set of objects, scene on which one fastens one’s gaze’, and a ‘particular opinion’ (91). This definition more clearly accounts for the object and subject of the focalising. The attention of the focalising agent acts as a filter on what the reader (or in this instance, player) perceives. According to Genette, there is a marked distinction between the narrator of the tale, and the character who orients the narrative (186). As Bal mentions, before a discussion on characters themselves can take place, it is imperative to discuss and locate the focaliser, as the focaliser ‘influences how the reader perceives the character seen’ (87). Due to the close connection between narrator and focaliser, the role of the narrator must be analysed before the focaliser may be properly assessed.

As previously mentioned, Varric Tethras is the narrator of *Dragon Age II*. He performs his function mostly off-screen, and may be considered to be an unreliable narrator. As he appears in his own story, he may be classified as a homodiegetic narrator according to Bal, also referred to as an intradiegetic narrator (208). The prologue of the game establishes his unreliability in the moment that the player is first acquainted with Hawke. He is not entirely willing to provide the unembellished truth to his interrogator Cassandra, and so spins a tale of Hawke’s escape from her hometown in Ferelden. The player gains control of a Hawke that is quite powerful and stylized, and she easily strikes down her enemies. Cassandra interrupts Varric’s story as a dragon appears on the battlefield. Despite the game being named after dragons, they are exceedingly rare within Thedas. She therefore finds this turn of events unlikely, and pointedly asks Varric for the truth. The player is then taken through the same sequence of events, but this time with a level-appropriate Hawke and more difficult enemies. The dragon, however, turns out to have been factual, according to Varric. A second prominent evidence for Varric’s unreliability as narrator is in Act Three during an optional side-quest. Hawke receives a

quest to investigate a haunted mansion in Hightown, the city's more opulent area, which turns out to be the home of Varric's brother, Bartrand. It is here that Varric puts himself into the position of a protagonist, as the player receives control of him. Without Hawke and the rest of the party, Varric then proceeds to slaughter his brother's lackeys. Varric is suddenly able to kill with a single hit and receives little to no damage from his opposition's weapons. At long last he makes his way into Bartrand's study, whereupon Bartrand falls on his knees and showers Varric with compliments. It is here that Cassandra interrupts again, unimpressed with Varric's embellishments. Even Varric himself confirms his unreliability as a narrator in Act Three, saying 'In case you haven't noticed, I lie a lot' (*Dragon Age II*).

As Varric only ever narrates off-screen, he must surrender the job of focalising to other characters, and even the camera itself. Genette proposes three modes of focalisation: zero, internal, and external. Zero focalisation, or a non-focalised narrative, is what is typically known as an omniscient narrator, or a narrator that knows more than the character, or says more than the character knows (188). This term is entirely non-applicable to *Dragon Age II*, as no character may be considered truly omniscient. It is possible to read Varric's function as that of an omniscient narrator. However, he never truly knows more than the character, he only knows more than he should, describing events that he was not witness to. Internal focalisation typically applies when the narrator is a character within the story. Genette postulates that internal focalisation means that the focal character is never 'described or even referred to from the outside' (192). This is not quite applicable to the video game, as a character has no real need to be explicitly *described* as he already visually present. Varric is certainly an intradiegetic narrator, but it cannot be said that the narrative is internally focalised. Finally, external focalisation, according to Genette, is when the narrator communicates less than what the character knows (189). In external focalisation, the story is told from the narrator who has a specific point of view on characters in events. This most closely describes Varric's function, though it does in a way assume him to be omniscient. These three terms, as posed by Genette, all fall short in some manner in trying to discover the focaliser of the narrative of *Dragon Age II*. Genette, however, does concede that 'the commitment as to focalization is not necessarily steady over the whole length of a narrative' (191), meaning that focalisation may move between characters at any point in the narrative.

Bal further expands on Genette's theories. In addition to asking 'who sees?', she makes a distinction between character and author by asking 'who is?' and 'who writes?' (87). According to Bal, literary critics tend to jump from asking 'who writes' to 'who is' without considering the narrator. Furthermore, they fail to consider the additional level of focaliser, or the agent that exists somewhere between narrator and character (87). Bal does not agree with Genette on using the narrator's 'knowledge' to position the mode of focalisation within the story, claiming that it is inoperative because it is 'purely figurative' (92). The basis of Bal's theory postulates that focalisation may be found by looking at who is the subject and who is the object, in whatever form that may appear and outside the narrator himself. The subject, the focalised, is not strictly limited to characters, but may also be applied to things, places, and events. The theory is then further expanded to include a distinction between 'perceptible' and 'imperceptible' focalisation. This differentiates between what may be perceived by the focaliser and what cannot, and characterises only the nature of what is focalised (Bal 93). Although these theories are indeed relevant, the differences in media make it complex to illustrate. The issue of focalisation in a prose novel is more easily identified; meanwhile, in a visual medium such as a video game, the question of 'who sees?' takes on a different meaning. In the end, it is the player who sees. Though cinematic cut-scenes may remove that power from the player, the player may choose where and when to look at certain information. However, the secondary characters themselves choose what information to share about themselves and are often extremely secretive.

With regard to perceptible and imperceptible focalisation, Bal mentions that in terms of focalisation, a dream is 'by definition imperceptible' (99). In the world of *Dragon Age*, the world of dreams is called the Fade. David Gaider, a writer at BioWare and one of the main authors of *Dragon Age II*, discusses the Fade as a corporeal place. It is possible to 'enter the Fade', which according to Gaider is considered to be lucid dreaming (131). Gaider additionally mentions that it is only possible to enter the Fade through your mind, writing that it is 'nearly impossible for any person to physically set foot there' (131). The Fade is populated by spirits and demons; people who have died and passed on (Gaider 132). In a side-quest in act two, Hawke is asked to save an elven woman's mage son from the Fade in order to save him from the demons attempting to possess him. As Hawke physically enters this dreamscape, focalisation does not differ in

any significant way from usual gameplay. Therefore, it is hardly possible to support the analysis that this is imperceptible focalisation. If a character was to recount a dream they had, this would possibly fall under the idea of imperceptible focalisation, but this does not occur within the game.

Celestino Deleyto, in discussing focalisation in film, proposes that the camera itself may be the focaliser (221). Carlquist relates this idea to the game, saying that 'visuality has taken centre stage' (15). Due to advances in computer hardware and software, the experience of the video game is placed between watching a film and playing a game (Carlquist 15). As the bulk of the game's dramatic scenes take place out-of-game, through cinematic cut-scenes, focalisation in film must apply. Deleyto proposes that narration and focalisation is carried out by the same agent: the camera (221). The camera, in this instance, is not the physical machine but the window through which the spectator experiences the story. Therefore, focalisation and narration exist simultaneously in film. Deleyto claims that, due to this basic difference, Bal's theory must be designed exclusively for the prose novel (221). As established earlier, the focalisation in a novel is 'not explicit in the text, but must be elicited by the critic from the information given by the narrator' (Deleyto 222). However, in film, the focalisation is explicit through external or internal gazes. Deleyto goes further and theorises that through the camera, there is an almost permanent existence of an external focaliser (222). Despite this, the focalisation may be either external or internal. According to Deleyto, there is never an occurrence of zero focalisation (223). Bal theorised that there may be instances of double focalisation, that is both internal and external at the same time, and refers to this phenomenon as 'double focalisation' (113). This double focalisation is easily found in film, especially if it is presumed that there is a permanent external focaliser in the position of the camera. An example of an internally focalised occurrence in a film is the point-of-view shot. This same technique may be found in video games, especially in a game that utilises cinematic language, like *Dragon Age II*. For example, in one scene the camera moves from an externally focalised shot of Hawke looking around the room, and then moves into a position of allowing the player to see through Hawke's eyes, internalising the focalisation (Deleyto 224).

An example of an editing device pushing forward a switch in focalisation is the shot/reverse shot (Deleyto 227). This may be exemplified by a 'romancing' sequence, if

Hawke decides to romance Fenris. In a ‘morning after’ scene, Fenris becomes agitated, claims that the two of them getting together was a mistake, and leaves in a hurry. The scene is set up so that the dialogue is exchanged between the two characters, by the camera overlooking Hawke’s shoulder to focalise Fenris externally, but the reverse shot provides an internal focalisation of Hawke, allowing the player to feel Hawke’s sense of hurt and confusion. According to Deleyto, ‘our position with respect to the frame is very close to that of the character, and internal focalisation is thus activated’ (228). The character’s perception of events becomes essential to the narrative. Applying focalisation in film to the narrative of *Dragon Age II* alongside traditional theories of focalisation in prose allows for a more complete dissection of how the narrative is narrated and thus focalised.

Through utilising the theories on focalisation of both traditional narratology and film narratology, a correct reading on the mode of focalisation in *Dragon Age II* may be reached. In both theories, external focalisation fits the narrative mode, though the camera may occasionally shift the focalisation towards internal. Varric, as an unreliable intradiegetic narrator, rarely communicates as much as he knows, a technique employed for narrative suspense. The player therefore experiences the tale as if it were taking place before her eyes, and were not fixed. This is also consistent with Varric’s characterisation. One of his main characteristics is his success as a crime novelist, which makes him ideal to narrate a tale such as this.

5. Hawke's Companions

Video games are most well-known either for puzzle-solving challenges, such as *Tetris* or many *Super Mario* games, or a battling system of some kind. While *Dragon Age II* does employ some level of puzzle solving, and contains a great deal of fighting and battling, one of its greatest characteristics is the emotional bond the player builds to its secondary characters, and how information is relayed through them. After all, the story is not exclusively about how events impact Hawke's life, but the world around her and the people she – and therefore, the player – cares about. The characters operate outside of Hawke's wants or needs, pursuing their own goals and agendas. This is somewhat unusual, even for a role-playing game, as secondary characters tend to provide unilateral support to the player character.

The *Dragon Age* game series employs an approval rating system that 'defines how well a companion gets along with the PC' (Jørgensen 316). The exact mechanics of this system vary between games, but in *Dragon Age II* the rating is influenced by how the player character speaks to a supporting character, and which actions she chooses to take during quests. Not all of the supporting characters will agree with Hawke, resulting in the system awarding points towards either Friendship or Rivalry. It is also possible to interact very little with a supporting character. This will lead to neither Friendship nor Rivalry being established, so the character remains neutral towards Hawke. This may cause certain quests or dialogue events to not be triggered, altering the player's experience of the game according to who is Hawke's friend or rival. Whether a character is a friend or rival does not strictly influence whether a supporting character may be 'romanced', but does determine the nature of the relationship.

A strong example of the secondary characters having agendas of their own is the character of Isabela. She is a pirate that joins Hawke's team because she needs to recover a valuable relic that she lost. Her particular story within the narrative can go two ways. If Hawke befriends her – a process measurable by the friendship/rival mechanic – she will run away with the relic once it is recovered, but eventually return and 'do the right thing'. If Isabela is not befriended, or becomes a rival, she will take the relic and never return in-game. A primary character is therefore removed from the narrative as a result of the player's action, or inaction. Isabela is not the only example of this happening with a

supporting character. Any character, except Varric, may be removed from the narrative by Hawke, usually through confrontational or violent means.

In his article on sexuality in the *Dragon Age* series, Stephen Greer writes that romance has always been an integral part of the game (12). Emotional immersion in this second instalment is a vital part of both narrative and gameplay. Ryan considers this a difficult feat to achieve, as the player will need to form a personal relationship with computer controlled characters (56). This is achieved in the game to a certain degree, as the player is allowed to ‘get under the skin of characters’ (Jørgensen 315), as hopes, fears, sorrows, and ambitions are revealed. Although it is not required for the player to form a romance between the player character and a supporting character, it does provide a significant amount of emotional immersion to the player. Several of the supporting characters may be romanced by the player character, regardless of gender. This is a significant step for both BioWare and role-playing video games in general. Many video games provide an option to enter a romantic relationship with a supporting character, but usually these relationships are strictly heterosexual. Out of the eight companions in total, only four are romantically available. These characters are Anders, Fenris, Isabela, and Merrill. Sebastian, a character available for purchase separately as downloadable content, or DLC, may enter in a romantic relationship with Hawke, but he is the only strictly heterosexual character in the game. He pledged an oath of celibacy before he met Hawke, ‘rendering the only exclusively heterosexual option an asexual one’ (Lauteria 7). Lauteria discusses the availability of the supporting characters to either gender as ‘the path of least resistance’ (2) when it comes to LGBTQ representation in games. He criticises the game’s developers for creating a highly volatile city, in which the political landscape is extremely poisonous, but at the same time creating a world devoid of heterosexism (7). Despite this analysis, it may be theorised that mages are a reflection of what real world LGBTQ people experience. The most compelling parallel in that regard is that mages are compelled to conceal their identities, or else possibly suffer discrimination and rejection from their families or peers (Lauteria 8).

Stephen Greer disagrees with Lauteria’s analysis of the supporting characters’ ‘path of least resistance’ sexuality. He suggests that the characters ‘appear to orient themselves towards the player, regardless of gender’ (14). The game’s deployment of sexuality is therefore only a reflection of the player’s own desire ‘through reciprocation

of romantic intent' (15). Greer continues, suggesting that these romantic characters are not 'essentially bisexual' but 'potentially bisexual' (15). There is little to support the argument of the characters being explicitly bisexual, as these characters never profess an interest for one gender or the other. They only express interest in the player character. There is an important distinction between these readings, as Greer notes. In the game's first act, when Hawke and Anders are introduced, Hawke receives a quest to aid Anders with breaking his friend Karl out of the Circle of Mages. The Circle of Mages is the Chantry institution within which mages are forcibly kept, under the guise of public security. Within, they are watched over and controlled by the Templars, the militant arm of the Chantry. Anders fears that his friend has been 'made Tranquil', or essentially lobotomised, and is urgently attempting to get him out. If Hawke is played as a male character, Anders admits that Karl was his first romantic encounter. If Hawke is played as a female, there is no confession of a previous relationship. Anders' perceived sexuality is therefore dependant on the player character's gender, and any suggestion of Anders being bisexual is removed from the game. Note that Anders may be romanced by a female Hawke. Through this analogy between mages and LGBTQ people, Greer proposes that the player is exposed to 'a larger metaphor concerning homophobia and religious intolerance' (15).

Emotional immersion within the game is not entirely dependent on romance. According to Ryan, for a game to contain characters who 'not only serve a functional role by helping or hindering players,' or indeed make a player emotionally invested, is 'exceedingly rare' (56). The supporting characters, or companions, add emotional development to the game and take on important roles in the plot, contributing to the narrative in an extensive way (Jørgensen 320). Generating interest by empathising with the player character's love and loss for a character drives further need to see what comes next, whether a relationship may or may not be salvaged. The player is positioned to experience sadness over betrayal and loss, as well as joy in the success of building a friendship or romantic relationship. By giving the characters an agenda of their own, the game creates a narrative that is equally dependent on the actions of the supporting characters rather than the player character (Jørgensen 315). The plot 'unfolds in conjunction with character development' (Jørgensen 316). Anders' particular story may illicit a contrasting set of emotional responses from players. Seeing himself as a freedom

fighter, Anders ends up blowing up the Chantry in Kirkwall in an act of terror against the religious institution, for oppressing and killing mages within the Circle. Hawke can do nothing to stop this from happening, and one narrative path sees Anders making Hawke complicit in the bombing. Three choices are available to Hawke after the bombing: she can spare him and let him remain in the party, spare him and tell him to leave, or kill him for his crime. The game provides an opportunity for the player to immediately serve justice for the bombing, depending on if she disagrees with Anders' actions, or condones the event and allows him to stay with the group. Despite this, while the player has some narrative control, the supporting characters will have their own agendas and plans outside of what Hawke wants. As Jørgensen notes, 'having a central character abruptly leave the game or being killed is dramatic and the event is not likely foreseen by the first-time player' (320). Establishing an empathetic relationship with these characters creates a powerful narrative effect (Jørgensen 317). The supporting character's development is central to the narrative progression of the game. The characters grow and change through the course of the game, through the so-called Companion quests. Hawke's actions during these quests may serve to further her friendship with another character, or to alienate them. After completing these quests, 'the companions will have a changed attitude towards life and towards the PC' (Jørgensen 317), whether it be a positive or negative outlook. Jørgensen additionally suggests that supporting characters may be seen as protagonists of their own mini-narratives, embedded within the whole (323). The companion quests provide additional information about the characters, their background and their motivation. The quests are put forward as 'issues that haunt the companions and that they should face before being fully able to focus on the task at hand' (Jørgensen 323). These quests engage the player's conscience, often asking the player to make difficult ethical choices. For example, should the player choose to play Hawke in a morally bankrupt manner, the player may end up committing genocide upon the nomadic Dalish elves, or sending Fenris back to his slave master. Within these Companion quests, the supporting characters take on the role of narrator momentarily. Varric, the narrator of the tale as a whole, yields to the supporting characters, giving them the freedom of relaying their own past and their opinions to the player. The Companion quests add depth and complexity to these characters 'with a past that still affects them' (Jørgensen 323). Additionally, these quests are relevant to the gameplay itself, as they allow the player to

become more familiar with that particular character's fighting style, skills and strengths. These opportunities for the player to bond with the supporting characters, and to be presented with several moments of emotional impact, makes the player 'personally motivated' (Jørgensen 319) to continue playing the game. It may in addition illicit an urge to help the characters affected by the game's events, or seek revenge for any wrongdoings. It provides an additional level of the illusion of interactivity, as the player may impact the supporting character's emotional wellbeing, just as the fictional character may invoke the player's empathy even further.

6. Conclusion

The story of *Dragon Age II* follows the most basic guidelines of a traditional narrative, although applying traditional narratological reading to this visual medium proves in many ways problematic. In reference to the very foundation of narrative, the traditional theories of Genette and Bal could well be applied. The narrative turns out to be almost entirely mimetic. It occasionally allows the narrator, Varric, to take over in order to summarise events between acts, utilising the compressed nature of diegesis to do so. When it comes to more complex analysis, traditional narratological theories are wanting, as they were formulated around written texts, such as a prose novel. These traditional theories do not account for a visual language. As proven by Deleyto, these theories can however be reformed to fit a visual medium, and applying his ideas on narration and focalisation in film suits *Dragon Age II* much better. As there is no overt text to analyse, it is difficult to discover exactly where the narrator yields focalisation to a secondary character. Therefore, using narratology as it pertains to film provides a more accurate and reliable reading on the narrator and focalisation in this video game, and in video games in general. The text itself cannot focalise, but the camera and even the player herself can. Additionally, the camera narrates in conjunction with the narrator Varric, occasionally yielding the floor to secondary characters to narrate their own backstories.

The player herself does not narrate, as the interactivity within the game is somewhat restrictive. The player nevertheless feels in control of the player character's destiny. Despite having no say in the major, fixed plot events in the game, the illusion of choice provides the player the power of having an opinion and voicing it to the characters in-game. It may be said that this is an example of 'art imitating life', as people have some power over what actions to take in their own lives, but not explicit control over what happens around them. And it is here that the most valuable point of interactivity with the narrative occurs; emotional immersion. The player has a sense of kinship, if not ownership, of the character of Hawke, as one is an extension of the other. The player is not only reading a story, or watching a film, but taking part in a fantastical narrative which allows her to actively interact with both the narrative itself and its vibrant characters. Even though Carlquist argues that out-of-game storytelling, or cinematic cut-scenes, removes agency from the player, the player never feels out of control. The restrictions set upon the interactivity do not seem unreasonable to the player, as she may expect the same from her

life outside of the game. The secondary characters, with their own morals and agendas, only add to the immersion to the game, whether they become Hawke's friends, rivals, or lovers. The game may build a bond through the distribution of 'friendship points', but the unpredictable nature of the characters remove any feeling of simply being computer generated battle support.

The future of interactive storytelling in role-playing games is bright, but there needs to be more research and literature focusing on the implications of this kind of storytelling. Whether positive or negative, the reality is that this mode of storytelling is becoming a much more common format in video games today. Applying a mixture of traditional and film narratology may suffice for the time being, but developing a language for the analysis of interactive video games is vital for the continuing development of this medium. It is doubtful that this format will exceed the popularity of the novel or the film, but with growing technological advances and its influence on the consumer of this type of narrative, the interactive video game will continue to grow and evolve.

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