

Playing with Consent:
An Autoethnographic Analysis of Representations of Race, Rape, and Colonialism in BioWare's
Dragon Age

by

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Abstract

In this thesis I analyse BioWare's Dragon Age series of video games using a modified autoethnographic method and Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology to explore how rape and consent are represented within the games. I find that the player embodies three roles throughout the games in relation to sexual assault – victim, justice, and rapist – and I dedicate a chapter to exploring each in detail. I analyse the games using my own experiences to explore how the player is an embodied subject with an orientation. I also explore the idea that video games are a form of virtual tourism, and that some in-game relationships available to the player are similar to sex and romance tourism.

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Introduction

Despite my anticipation I managed to sleep in on my wedding day. Granted, when I went to bed I did not actually expect to get married the next morning. My cousin, Shianni, woke me and told me the good news. My betrothed has arrived earlier than expected, so the community decided that my cousin Soris's wedding that was already taking place that morning would become a double wedding.

Father was full of pride at my big day but admitted that it was difficult without my mother here to see it. We stood in reflective silence for a moment, remembering the daring woman who was struck down by human hands. I was just about to say my farewells before joining the festivities outside our door, but he chose that moment to present me with my wedding gift. In his outstretched hands were a pair of boots. Despite the years of use etched into the leather, the boots were in good condition. "They belonged to your mother," he told me. I smiled as I put them on, the boots were a perfect fit.

The elves of the alienage are a close-knit community, and all were excited by the prospect of the two weddings. The kegs had already been tapped, and all were in their wedding best. On the street outside my house I found a group of young men reciting a delightful rhyme about a young woman that they loved. Their enthusiasm made up for their slurred speech as they performed:

There once was a woman; she lived in the sea,
I didn't love her, but I think she loved me.
I brought her diamonds, rubies, silver and gold,
But all she wanted, was to be saved from the cold.

She begged me to catch her, convinced me I should,
I promised her a house, all gray stone and wood.
We made love in the sea, we made love on the shore,
I was just there for playing, but she wanted more!

But there's one small problem you see; I can't grant her wish,
My wife gets suspicious when I come home smelling like fish!

I shook my head at the inappropriate nature of the poem, and then went looking for some more agreeable guests to talk to.

I found Soris, my cousin, who was also readying himself for his wedding. At his chiding I changed into my own wedding clothes and readied myself to meet our future spouses who had just arrived. Our matches came from outside the city and we had not expected to so much as set eyes on them before we were in front of a crowd to be married. Luckily, they had already arrived, and we were allowed a couple minutes to talk before the main event.

Before we could find our future spouses, a voice broke through the din and made my blood run cold. "Let go of me! Stop, please!" a woman cried. I watched as she ran past us, away from whoever had grabbed her.

I heard her attacker before I saw him. "It's a party isn't it? Grab a whore and have a good time." A finely dressed human walked through the crowd of wedding guests, flanked by two other men, who were eyeing the women in a way that could only be described as predatory. The man laughed menacingly and continued, "Savour the hunt, boys. Take this little elven wench, here ... so young and vulnerable." He pointed to Shianni, who immediately responded in anger.

"Touch me and I'll gut you, you pig!" Before the man had a chance to respond her father tried a different tactic.

"Please, my lord! We're celebrating weddings here!"

The man sneered and roared, "Silence, worm" before backhanding Shianni's father across the face. The hit was punctuated by a woman's shocked scream at the sudden escalation of what had only moments before been a peaceful event.

Soris was hesitant to confront the men but agreed when I argued that we couldn't allow them to treat us like this. I put on a brave face, but I would be lying if I said it wasn't intimidating to stand in front of three shem in my wedding clothes, with them ready to grope anything in a skirt. Our quick discussion seemed to draw their leader's attention, and when he saw us he, approached and said, "What's this? Another lovely one come to keep me company?"

I told him that he needed to leave, but this only made one of the other thugs laugh, "Ha! You hear that Vaughn?"

The leader, Vaughn, turned back to me and scoffed, "do you have any idea who I am?" Before I had the chance to respond, I noticed movement behind him. Shianni, the brave fool, had grabbed a rather large bottle and smashed it over Vaughn's head. When he hit the ground, his

friends yelled, “Are you insane?! This is Vaughn Urien, the Arl of Denerim’s son!”, and they uttered threats as they carried off his unconscious body. If I was scared before it was nothing compared to how I felt at that moment. The Arl ruled the city, and only the King had more power over us.

I watched the men drag their friend out of the alienage gate, and my only comfort was the knowledge that no human noble would admit to being bested by an elven woman. Shianni was understandably worried, but there was little we could do once the men left except continue on with the weddings.

We all shook the fear from our bodies, and slowly the celebrations renewed. Soris introduced me to our future spouses, and we all chatted briefly before they went to get ready. My betrothed seemed kind, but perhaps a bit boring for my taste. I remembered my father’s plea to stay out of trouble and keep my own aptitude for fighting a secret from any who might ask. So, I quelled the worried voice in the back of my mind and prepared myself for the ceremony.

The Chantry Mother arrived, signalling that the ceremony was about to begin. Soris, our soon-to-be spouses, and I gathered on the stage before the Mother, and she began the prayer to the Maker. We listened as she retold the story of Andraste, Bride of the Maker, freeing the elven slaves. The familiar story was a comfort after so much unrest. Shianni and other friends from the community stood with us as we began the next chapter of our lives.

But alas, we were naïve to think that a slighted noble would not retaliate a slight such as the one we had given. He returned with his friends, and this time with guardsmen in tow. He announced that he was hosting a party and was woefully short of female guests. The Chantry Mother objected to his presence, and angrily protested the inappropriateness of his actions at a wedding. Vaughn only laughed and told her, “If you want to dress up your pets and have tea parties, that’s your business. But don’t pretend that this is a proper wedding.” Shianni was the first to be taken, and the last thing I remembered was a ringing in my ears as I was knocked out before getting the chance to truly resist.

I woke up in an unfamiliar room with many of the young women of the alienage. Shianni, they explained, had already been taken, and they knew that soon it would be their turn. At that moment guards walked into the room and told the women to come with them, but one of the women was too panicked to follow their orders immediately. So, they struck her down. The women were terrified as they filed out, avoiding her body and the blood spreading across the

floor.

I hung back and prepared myself to fight, wearing only my wedding clothes and my mother's leather boots, when I saw Soris outside the door. He slid me a sword and together we killed the men and got a small measure of revenge. We continued into the Arl's estate to save Shianni and the other women. We killed everyone in our path, and my arm was tired as I braced myself against the final door. It led to Vaughn's bedroom, and my stomach clenched as I thought about what we might see inside.

I opened the door, and the first thing I saw was Shianni, curled up on the ground and obviously in pain. The men stood around her, leaving little doubt to the nature of the horror she had just endured.

As Vaughn waited for my response to some question or statement, I began to process my shock at the events that I had just experienced. Though I had played this game, this scene, many times in the many years since my teenage-self first bought *Dragon Age: Origins (DA:O)* in 2009, I had never once had such a visceral reaction to the men kidnapping and hurting the elven women (BioWare 2009a). I also had never realized that Vaughn and his cronies meant to rape the women that they kidnapped, that they had actually raped Shianni. Or maybe I just did not have the same understanding of rape and was less sensitive to its portrayals in video games and other forms of media when I had played this game in the past.

My character had also been taken. She had been under the same threat of rape that the rest of the women had been. But it felt like I too had been under attack, like I was in danger still. I looked around my living room to collect myself, and it was in that moment that I knew I was going to have to change the topic of the research paper that I was working on. At the time of this incident I was in my third year of undergrad and had decided to study *DA:O* as part of an assignment in my Feminist Research Methodologies class. I had meant to write about the ways that the representations of elves within the game mapped onto the histories and experience of indigenous peoples, specifically repatriation of artifacts and knowledge. My paper instead became an analysis of rape, comparing the game to colonial narratives and the legacy of *Custer's Revenge* (Mystique 1982).

Rape in video games continues to be a common device, but my interest has since shifted from the act of rape itself, to the way that the player interprets and experiences rape in games. My own reaction, the anger and discomfort that I had felt during that playthrough, was the

catalyst that set me on a path of inquiry as a means to unpack my feelings as a player, feminist, and scholar. It was this moment that made me choose video games as a research object and find a graduate program that would allow such a project.

I was in my late teens when *DA:O* came out, and I bought it as soon as I was able to. I grew up in a small town in Saskatchewan, so I had to wait until we made a family trip to Prince Albert or Saskatoon before I could get the game. When I did get my hands on the game I fell in love, and it became one of my all-time favourite games.

DA:O is important to me for a number of reasons. It got me interested in thinking about culture in games, specifically how lore and history was created for the purpose of world building. This was the spark that made me want to work in the game industry, creating game worlds with realistic cultures. I had always been interested in culture, and I especially liked that I could think about culture without leaving my bedroom. This interest foreshadowed my eventual degree in anthropology.

Perhaps equally important was the social aspect of the game, which might seem odd, considering that *DA:O* is a single-player game. I do not refer to the fan pages or forums that were built around the game, but the characters within the game itself. I was a bit of a lonely, shy, and awkward teenager, and *DA:O* provided a retreat from the world, where I had control and unlimited quick-saves if I messed up a task or social interaction. BioWare is known for offering romanceable companions in its games and *DA:O* was no different. The romances in this game were my first foray into romance at all, and so there is a special place in my heart for the characters and the game as a whole, as it played such a formative role in my young life.

After I began university, I became more sensitive to issues that I had previously never been aware of, and my own prejudices began to be uncovered and challenged. For example, I had not realized how truly racist my small town had been, though it is typical for towns near indigenous reserves. I began to learn about how racism manifests, and eventually I came to view the representations of culture in video games with a bit more insight and understanding of cultural appropriation and racial stereotypes.

Simultaneously I began to learn about sexual assault and consent, which I had never really learned about before my second year of university. My sex education in school began in fourth grade health class when we were told that kissing someone with AIDS would give us AIDS, followed by five or six more years of more accurate and detailed information about STIs

and how one gets them. In grade eight or nine we were told that if we respect ourselves we should say no to sex, because if we say yes we would probably get one of the STIs that we had previously spent years learning about. I was never told that I was allowed to say yes to some activities and no to others, because all activities had been bad or would lead to bad things. And I was never taught about consent, either as a nuanced concept that does not just mean yes, or even as something that is necessary for sexual activity.

I remember ‘jokes’ in my first year of university that were all versions of “it’s not rape if there are candles” or “it’s not rape if you yell surprise first.” Looking back, I am horrified at how blasé we were about rape, though, to our credit, these jokes disappeared as we matured and attended presentations by the Sexual Assault Centre on campus. In my second year I attended three or four of these presentations, probably because I had begun taking Women’s and Gender Studies classes, and speakers for the Centre were often invited as guest lecturers. But my views of consent and sex were still incredibly stunted, and so I was left annoyed and uncomfortable after the first of these presentations, as it challenged my own understandings of sex and consent. I had to let ideas of ongoing and enthusiastic consent, which could be withdrawn at any point, percolate for over a year until I could finally accept what the Sexual Assault Centre staff had been trying to tell me. Intellectually I knew that what they were saying made sense and was probably correct, but there was a cognitive block that made it impossible to immediately accept. I worked through this instinctive block, but it was difficult and required more soul searching than 19-year-old Jocelyn was always ready for.

While writing this thesis I would encounter similar moments of resistance or blocks that I would have to work through. Often these were instances where I had to accept that even though I personally enjoyed a certain quest or liked a character or romance, the object in question was still problematic in some way and needed to be unpacked. One amusing example of this resistance is my difficulty critiquing two characters: Morrigan and her mother Flemeth, two witches that are incredibly powerful and definitely more than a little evil. I loved Morrigan, in part because she was funny and sarcastic, but also because the voice actor who played her was Claudia Black, whom I knew from one of my favourite shows *Stargate SG-1* (“Stargate SG-1” 1997). I was less critical of Morrigan than I should have been, and I still have a bit of a hard time criticizing her actions, because of my deep-seated love of Claudia Black. Flemeth, Morrigan’s mother, is another case where I have a bit of a hard time being critical of the character because I found her

so compelling. It wasn't a couple years ago that I realized Flemeth is voiced by Kate Mulgrew, who played Captain Janeway on *Star Trek: Voyager* ("Star Trek: Voyager" 1995), another one of my childhood heroes.

I have included these anecdotes because it is important to show how my understanding of the games I analyse and the method I have chosen to do so are tied up in my own life and childhood. Throughout the process of analysing the games and writing this thesis I had to challenge and confront my own preconceptions and resistances around those things that I enjoy. I grew up in a racist, conservative small town that told me I was less because of my gender. My town also told me that I was superior because of my race. Racial animus in my town was directed primary at indigenous peoples, but by no means was it limited to one group of people. I will draw on my upbringing throughout this thesis, as it still affects me to this day, and it is an important point of reference for how I had understood the objects of study in this work.

Summary of Methodology

In this thesis I explore representations of sexual assault and sexual consent in BioWare's *Dragon Age* series. I use autoethnography to analyze my own experiences playing the games, and then draw from game studies, anthropology, rape theory, and phenomenology to find broader conclusions than my own observations can allow. I discuss how the lived experiences of the player affect how they interpret and understand the games. I then attempt to think beyond my own experiences and consider how the race, gender, or class of the player might result in understandings different than my own.

The *Dragon Age* Series

BioWare was founded in 1995 by three Edmonton men who met in medical school and who shared a passion for computer games and comics. As the company grew they gained success by creating some of the most critically acclaimed games, such as *Baldur's Gate* (BioWare 1998), *Neverwinter Nights* (BioWare 2002), *Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic* (BioWare 2003), *Jade Empire* (BioWare 2005), *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007), and *Dragon Age: Origins*. The company was bought in 2008 by Electronic Arts, a global interactive entertainment publisher. BioWare has since released sequels to their popular *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* series, and have studios in Austin, Texas, and, until relatively recently, Montreal (BioWare n.d.).

Dragon Age: Origins was released in 2009 and sold over 3.2 million copies and is available for PC, Mac, X-Box 360, and PlayStation 3. Numerous new editions have been released since 2009, such as a Collector's Edition, Ultimate Edition, and Digital Deluxe. It received numerous accolades and was named Game of the Year by Spike, IGN, Giant Bomb, and other publications (BioWare n.d.).

Dragon Age II (BioWare 2011a) was released in 2011 and sold over a million copies in the first two weeks. Like the first installment, it was released on a number of platforms, and included numerous extra Downloadable Content or DLC. *Dragon Age II* was nominated for and won numerous Game of the Year awards (BioWare n.d.).

Dragon Age: Inquisition (BioWare 2014) was released in 2014. BioWare announced that it was the largest release they had had to date (Savage 2015). It sold millions of copies and was named Game of the Year by numerous publications, just like its predecessors (Campbell 2014; Maiberg 10:05).

Dragon Age is a highly popular and well-known series with numerous awards and accolades. BioWare has released novels about characters in the series, as well as graphic novels and other extra content (Gaider 2012; Weekes 2014). Fans cosplay, or dress up as, characters from the games and buy official art as well as fan art based on the games. A pen and paper game based on the world of *Dragon Age* was released in 2010 (*Dragon Age RPG* 2010). In 2018 an in-game novel, *Hard in Hightown*, written by one of the companion characters was released as a physical book (Tethras and Kirby 2018).

Overall BioWare is known for creating games with complex stories and characters, as well as including LGBTQ representation. One important aspect of the games for many fans is the ability to form friendships, and even romantic relationships, with characters in the game. Many BioWare games also include same sex relationship options.

I chose the *Dragon Age* series for this thesis because of the effort BioWare has put in over the years to create stories with diverse characters. I felt it would be more useful to look at how sexual assault is represented in games that are known to have a progressive slant, while still being incredibly popular, than to look at games that are well-known for being sexist and racist.

My own familiarity with the games was an important aspect for choosing them as I would be able to analyse them as both a player and a researcher. As indicated above, I played the games as they came out and they have always held a special place in my heart, along with other

BioWare games such as the *Mass Effect* series and *Baldur's Gate*.

Throughout this thesis I will be drawing parallels between elves in *Dragon Age* and peoples that have been, and continue to be, oppressed, in the real world. The series deals with complex issues such as the impact on slavery and colonialism, which make such comparisons apt. David Gaider, one of the lead writers of *Dragon Age: Origins*, discussed the inspiration behind the elves on the official BioWare Forum:

Yes, you can find analogies from history for most of Thedas – that's intentional, as the world was built with these sorts of commonalities in mind. "What if Europe had magic?" ... As for the elves, there are some comparisons to be found in the minorities present in medieval Europe. A friend of mine pointed me to a discussion online where someone was utterly convinced that the elves in Thedas were copied from the Witcher, which I found amusing since right there in history we have the Jewish and the Rom. There were "Jewish Quarters" in many major cities, places where the Jewish were confined to – similar to the Alienages in Thedas. The Dalish started off as the wandering Rom (or gypsies, if you prefer) but evolved into something more akin to North American Natives (and, really, the Native situation is also a good analogy for elves as a whole). (Gaider, 2009)

Though it would be valuable for scholars to look closely at the Jewish and Romani comparisons that Gaider is pointing to, I have decided to look at the similarities to indigenous peoples in North America. As I discussed above, I grew up steeped in anti-indigenous racism, so those are the comparisons that I continue to find most salient in the context I live within and study. Additionally, I draw upon the work of scholars thinking about race in North America more broadly, because issues such as colonialism and slavery affect not just one community but a wide range of people and their lived experiences.

Chapter Summary

Chapter One serves as my literature review and methodology chapter. I introduce Fantasy Role-Playing Games (FRPGs), which is the specific genre of games that I am studying. FRPGs include video games, but cover other games as well, such as collectible card games and table-top games. Well-known examples of these types of FRPGs are *Magic the Gathering* (Garfield 1993) and *Dungeons and Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974). Using FRPGs, I introduce key games

studies concepts that I utilize throughout this thesis, such as the role of the player, game mechanics, and the game world. I then introduce rape theory and the framework that I apply to analyse examples of sexual assault from the *Dragon Age* series. My analysis applies Ann J. Cahill's discussion of rape as an embodied experience as my starting point to think about how rape is represented within the games (Cahill 2001). Game studies has a wealth of knowledge about gender and racial inequalities in video games, and I draw upon that literature and connect these issues to representations of sexual assault. Sexual assault in video games, especially in single-player FRPGs, is an understudied area of game studies, but I introduce the work that has been done and expand on how my thesis addresses some of the gaps in the existing scholarship. I end the chapter with an explanation of my methodology, first by introducing autoethnography and why I chose it as my primary method for this research. I touch on virtual ethnography and the aspects of my project that draw upon this method but explain how my work diverges from this method. I conclude the chapter with my methodology and how I made choices within the game.

Chapter two further expands on embodiment and explores how the embodiment of the individual affects how they experience issues of rape and racism within the *Dragon Age* games. I connect Cahill's discussion of embodiment to Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*, in which she explores how the ways that individuals are oriented in relation to people and objects around them is socially constructed and affected by factors such as gender, race, and sexual orientation (Ahmed 2006). I argue that by treating the player as an embodied subject I can explore how I, as a player, am oriented towards the *Dragon Age* games and how my embodiment affects the way I relate to issues of rape and gender within the games. The player is an embodied subject who is oriented toward the games they play, but the game developers have created orientations in the game based on their own lived experiences and orientations. To explore the orientations within the *Dragon Age* games I draw upon the example of the wedding which opened this thesis. I discuss how this case study places the player in the role of victim, but the role itself is gendered, raced and classed.

Chapter three explores how the player is put in the position of justice or adjudicator throughout the series. I draw upon a case in *DAII* in which the player is tasked with resolving a conflict between a human nobleman and the father of an elven child he kidnapped. In order to more fully contextualize and unpack this case study I draw upon discussions of race and tourism

in the FRPG genre. Fantasy races, such as elves, dwarves, orcs, and trolls have long been used as vehicles for real life racial stereotypes (Monson 2012; D. Leonard 2003; Higgin 2009). Players are also able to engage in a form of virtual tourism into worlds inhabited by racial caricatures masquerading as fantasy creatures. Humanity is often equated with whiteness in these games, an idea which I explore by examining the human protagonist of *DAII*, who is put in a position to administer justice throughout the game, including adjudicating the affairs of the non-human residents of the game world.

Chapter four makes the admittedly provocative argument that the *Dragon Age* games allow the player to take on the role of rapist. I call into question the way BioWare frames sexual relationships and consent across the series and argue that many of these relationships have troubling power dynamics that are important to explore. Drawing on romance and sex tourism, I explore how power imbalances between characters make many romances unethical and potentially non-consensual. I use the relationship between the protagonist and Zevran, an assassin whose life depends on the goodwill of the protagonist, to explore how consent is misapplied throughout the series.

I conclude the thesis by pulling together the main roles of the player I have discussed – victim, justice, and rapist – and discuss how they connect to each other and larger societal issues. I provide some suggestions for future research and reiterate where this thesis fits into the larger academic conversation about sexual assault in games.

Chapter One: Approaching Rape in a Fantasy RPG with Virtual Autoethnography

Introduction

In this chapter I introduce the theoretical frameworks and methodologies that I will be using throughout this thesis. I begin by situating myself in relation to the games and genres that I am researching. I then introduce Fantasy Role-Playing Games and discuss the primary attributes of these games – setting, system, players, and characters – and link these attributes to game studies concepts such as game worlds, game mechanics, and avatars. I also briefly discuss some of the critiques of this genre, such as the abundance of sexualized female characters and the celebration of violence. Finally, I situate these issues within the larger field of games studies.

In The Player section, I introduce Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*, in which she articulates how individuals are oriented in relation to other people and objects, depending on one's lived experience. Bodies that disorient or are disoriented are important to showing the socially constructed nature of orientations and the spaces we all occupy in our daily life (Ahmed 2006). Using orientation theory, I show that games are constructed spaces and argue that game developers have certain types of players in mind when they create their games, and that this might leave other players disoriented, if their experiences are contrary to those the developer intended.

Drawing on Ahmed's work I will introduce rape theory, beginning with Susan Brownmiller whose foundational text *Against Our Will* (1975) began the conversations of feminist rape theory. After discussing rape theory in a broad sense, I will introduce *Rethinking Rape* (2001) by Ann J. Cahill in which she offers a theory of rape that focuses on the individuals involved and discusses how the lived experience of those individuals has a powerful influence on the way rape is interpreted and experienced by those involved and by the larger society.

I then review how game scholars have approached sexual assault in video games, along with situating these discussions into larger arguments about representations of sexual assault in media. Rape and the experiences of rape victims have been used as spectacle and to create drama in popular culture and the news media (Alcoff and Gray 1993).

I end this chapter by introducing my methodology, first by discussing autoethnography

and why I chose it over other methods, and then delving into the method I developed.

Autoethnography allows the researcher to examine cultural objects and events connected to their own life or community and turns the researcher themselves into the research object, along with the community or phenomena that they are studying. My rationale for this choice was two-fold: this method allowed me to study a single-player game with an ethnographic lens without having to mediate the experience through other participants, and it allowed me to answer Laura Nader's call to 'study up'. Nader challenged anthropologists to turn their gaze from communities with limited social power to those with tremendous social power (Nader 1972).

Fantasy Role-Playing Games

I do not remember the first video game I ever played. I suspect it was *Duck Hunt* (Nintendo 1985a), or maybe *Super Mario Bros* (Nintendo 1985b), as they were the only two games we had for our old Nintendo Entertainment System. One of my oldest memories is aiming the orange plastic gun, trying to shoot the ducks on the TV screen, and at other times trying to keep Mario alive long enough to save Peach and always failing spectacularly and quickly. Video games were part of my life from the moment I could hold the controller, but it was not until I reached the advanced age of 7 that I found a game where I was reflected, the game against which I would measure all other games: *Baldur's Gate* (BioWare 1998).

Once I was older and more sophisticated in my understanding of video games I learned that *Baldur's Gate* is a classic Fantasy Role-Playing Game based on the pen and paper game *Dungeons & Dragons*. Seven-year-old Jocelyn only knew that she was finally able to create the character that she wanted to play as, whether that was an elven wizard, a dwarven paladin, or a human bard. The most important choice for seven-year-old Jocelyn was whether her character would be a boy or a girl, and according to the accompanying text "females of the realm can excel in whatever profession they choose, whether wizardry, thievery, or the arts of war" (BioWare 1998).

Fantasy Role-Playing Games (FRPGs) are a genre of gaming that encompasses three main categories - from pen and paper/table-top games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974), *Call of Cthulhu* (Peterson 1981), and *Numenera* (M. Cook 2013); collectible card games such as *Magic: The Gathering* (Garfield 1993); and video games like *Baldur's Gate*, *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), and *Monkey Island* (Mackay 2001; J. P.

Williams, Hendricks, and Winkler 2006a). Pen and paper games, or table-top games as they are also called, are games where the players gather together and play in a way similar to playing a board game. In these games there is generally one person who runs the game, the Game Master (or Dungeon Master in *D&D* specifically). The Game Master narrates the story, adjudicates disputes about rules, and responds to the actions taken by the other players.

Though this thesis will ultimately dedicate itself to studying fantasy video games, it is worth noting that the lines between these three categories is blurred due to the many games that have begun as pen and paper, adapted to video games or vice versa. *Baldur's Gate*, as noted above, uses the rules and setting from *D&D* and became a popular game which had two sequels and inspired many more similar games. *Dragon Age: Origins* was billed as the spiritual successor to *Baldur's Gate*, though many of the rules from *D&D* were adapted or removed, and eventually inspired its own *Dragon Age* pen and paper game.

The main attributes of a table-top FRPG are the system, setting, players, and characters (J. P. Williams, Hendricks, and Winkler 2006b, 3–4). These attributes are also important building blocks for collectible card games and FRPG video games, though they manifest in different ways due to the differences in the game play between the two genres. For example, in table-top games like *D&D* or *Dragon Age* the player creates a character that they embody and make decisions for. In card games like *Magic: The Gathering* the player does not play a specific character. Instead they will use cards with different abilities to try to compete against other players.

The system refers to the set of rules by which the game is played. Pen and paper games have a rulebook that dictates all of the rules, such as how combat works and navigating social situations. They often have information on the setting, such as how much in game currency common items cost, and stats on different weapons and armor. By their nature pen and paper games involve discussions of the rules and even some negotiation of specific rules, sometimes called 'rules lawyering' between the Game Master and the players. In contrast, the rules in a video game are written into the code, so if the player disagrees with the way a rule is implemented there is no recourse or negotiation. The player must play within the bounds of the game.

The setting is the place where the narrative of the game unfolds. For example, the setting of the *Lord of the Rings* is Middle Earth and the setting of the *Dragon Age* games is Thedas. The

setting of the game might be dictated by the FRPG, or created by the players themselves. The setting, or game world, generally has defined rules and norms which the players will interact with while they play, as well as providing many story elements of the game. The game world is vitally important to both players and game scholars in understanding and contextualising the game and determining its larger societal context.

The players in FRPGs have differing levels of agency and overall effect on the games themselves. Pen and paper games offer the most agency to the player as so much of the game is agreed upon by the group, such as how they interpret the rules to how they feel about the often sexist imagery typical to FRPGs. Schut discusses how FRPGs tend toward sexist ideas about women in the source material (Schut 2006). Katherine Cross discusses how role-playing games can be a medium for exploration of gender identity and as a form of feminist resistance (Cross 2012). The values of the players will dictate how they will approach problems and even what solutions they conceive of. So even if two groups of players play through the exact same quest they may come up with different solutions to the problems they face based on their backgrounds, experience with similar games, and general view of the world. This possibility for divergence is less available for most video games. The players can also add diversity by playing as trans character, person of colour, or by creating a character with a disability. Game Masters have even greater power to add diversity as they create the vast majority of the characters.

The characters in FRPGs come in two broad categories: player characters and non-player characters. The key difference between these two types are whether the player can control the character during the game. Video game characters play a variety of roles in FRPGs, such as providing quests for the player character, functioning as obstacles the player must navigate, or simply populate the game world as a form of set dressing.

Game Rules and Mechanics

The *Dragon Age* series, like most FRPGs features combat and killing as a central aspect of the gameplay. The player creates their character, the player character, for which they select the class and abilities that the character will have access to during the game. Throughout the game the player will encounter other, non-player, characters who will join their cause and fight beside them. These new characters are known as companions, or party members, and the player can select up to three of them at a time to accompany the player character on quests and exploration

of the game world. Companion characters have their own classes, such as rogue, warrior, or mage which will not change throughout the game. But the player is able to choose new abilities for the companion characters as they level up and gain experience, much like they can with their own character.

Though much of the gameplay of the Dragon Age series revolves around combat, the games offer mechanics for socialization with other characters. The player will have various dialogue options available, based on which character they are talking to and which abilities the player has selected. For example, if the player has chosen the persuasion abilities for their character, they may be able to persuade or deceive other characters for personal gain or as an alternative solution to whatever situation they might find themselves in.

Rules are important to video games. Understanding the rules of the games we play, and how they shape the choices the player is able to make are important to understanding the content of the game and how that relates to larger social issues. Jesper Juul says that games are rules based systems where the interplay between ‘real’ rules and ‘fictional’ worlds make games ‘half-real’ (Juul 2005). Rules are how we play the game, but we are playing the game in a fictional world where the rules may not completely match up with the fictional world. In games with elaborate, fictional worlds, the rules will not match up with the vast majority of the fictional world.

For Ernest Adams, rules provide the contextual framework for the game (Adams 2014). They are “definitions and instructions” that the player, or players, accept for the duration of the game and the rules “establish the object of the game and the meanings of the different activities and events that take place within the magic circle. They also create a contextual framework that enables the players to know which activities are permitted and to evaluate which course of action will best help them achieve their goal” (Adams 2014).

Sicart draws a distinction between game rules and game mechanics (Sicart 2008). He defines a game mechanic as “the action invoked by an agent to interact with the game world, as constrained by the game rules” (2008). Mechanics are the way the player is able to interact with the game.

Rules often provide the structure to games, including the conditions for success when that is a factor of the game being played. Video games are often considered to be rule based systems, and those rules which the player interact with most directly are game mechanics, the systems in

place that the player interacts with in order to play the game and explore the game world. Ian Bogost described the unique rhetorical capabilities that video games possess (Bogost 2007). Video games are, at their core, a series of commands and rules that are more or less complicated depending on the type of game. Games must be coded, and part of this code is repetition and procedure based on the aspect of the code that the player is interacting with. Bogost argues that this produces what he terms ‘procedural rhetoric’, which refers to the way that the proceduralism of game mechanics make arguments. These arguments are intentional on the part of the game developer, such as the *McDonald’s Video Game* which through its gameplay argues that profit is dependant on making unethical business decisions by (Molleindustria 2006).

Treanor and Mateas argue that procedural rhetoric is too narrow, and too much about intention (Treanor and Mateas 2014). They suggest procedural perspective, meanings which produced by the game but do not rely on intention. They discuss further that those seeking to make arguments with games must consider the subjectivity of the player:

A proceduralist must accept that the only aspect of the game that they have direct control over is the game as mechanism and that the meaning of the artifact is ultimately produced through the dialectical interplay between the mechanism and ways that players ascribe meaning to it (2014, 7)

The player will bring their own interpretations to the game based on their experiences, so the game mechanisms are the only aspect the designer, or proceduralist in this case, has control over.

One important aspect that dictates the mechanics of games is the human game designers that make the games. Gillian Smith discusses the effect of the game developer on the diversity of games, a well-documented issue in the industry, by pointing out that every aspect of the game is made by people (Smith 2016). At first this observation is rather obvious, but Smith goes on to explain that one of the major barriers to creating diversity in games is that the efforts to do so often come in too late in the design process. From the first line of code, developers should be thinking of ways to challenge the assumptions and tendencies that are constantly reinforced in games. For example, creating racially diverse characters requires more than adding different skin tones to the game, especially if there are only European or white features available to choose from. Diversity and inclusivity will not spontaneously appear in games, instead they must be explicit goals of the creators from the beginning of the design process. This is especially difficult when the creators of games are generally a homogenous group who are notoriously characterized

as unconcerned, or oblivious, about social issues and other progressive agendas.

One common example that demonstrates the point that Gillian Smith is making is the tension between the alignment systems in *D&D*, and *Baldur's Gate*, and which are echoed in other games in the genre, and the colonial logic which dictates the core logic of the game. Kevin Schut called this logic the "Conquistador Complex" in which players are encouraged to explore the game world and are rewarded with gold, powerful items, and the furthering of the game narrative (J. P. Williams, Hendricks, and Winkler 2006a). Michelle Nephew points out that this colonialist logic is rewarded and considered moral when paired with the alignment system which allows the player to choose if their character is good, neutral, or evil (J. P. Williams, Hendricks, and Winkler 2006a). Good characters are still good if they kill, especially if they are killing evil creatures like goblins or orcs which are generally inhabiting the spaces the players are tasked with exploring.

Game Worlds

The settings of FRPGs are often pseudo-medieval; based on a cultural idea of a western European past with knights, castles, and not much in the way of racial diversity. For example, *D&D* and *Dragon Age* fall into this category, though other games in this genre of have expanded past their Tolkien-esque roots. *Call of Cthulhu*, which is based on H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos, is generally set in our world during any time period between 1890 to the present day.

The game world is the virtual space in which the game takes place, so in *Super Mario* this is the two-dimensional world which Mario runs and jumps through. In *Grand Theft Auto*, the game world is the virtual city that the player can explore and, in many cases, terrorize. Henry Jenkins argues that the game world is the important object of study (Jenkins 2004). Much of the storytelling in the game resides in the game world itself. Developers, he argues, spend much of their time creating levels and other aspects of the virtual space. And it is this space that the player must navigate through to play the game. The player interacts with the mechanics and narrative elements within the game, but all of this takes place within the game world itself. Game designers, he argues, are narrative architects as opposed to storytellers.

There have been many ways that game scholars have theorized the game world. One approach was to look at the game world as a simulation. Frasca, in his discussion of *The Sims* explores how the game is a type of simulation, but there are important aspects of human life

missing from the game. Frasca draws upon the popular Sims game to discuss the odd lack of certain realities of life, such as abuse and alcoholism, which do not make it into the simulation (Frasca 2001).

An important critique about FRPGs revolves around the way race is discussed and represented within the genre. It is common for fantasy races, such as elves, orcs, and dwarves to appear beside human characters, but many racial stereotypes and prejudices often make their ways into the games as well. Humans are often based on medieval European cultures and include only white faces among their ranks. Humanity, then, is depicted as white, European culture. Other fantasy races will generally use stereotypical voices and motifs of people of colour, for example Trolls in World of Warcraft are an “amalgamation of Rastafarian/Jamaican/African ethnic traditions” (Monson 2012, 62):

Troll villages are decorated with humanoid skulls both on pikes and in small piles, African style masks, cauldrons, witch doctors, and spears while the sound of drums beat in the background. NPCs are frequently found squatting on the ground or engaged in Capoeira style dances. They speak with a stereotypical Jamaican accent and utter such things as ‘stay away from the voodoo,’ ‘who be you?’ and ‘greetings mon.’ As part of the game’s coding, Troll player characters may tell jokes from a randomly generated list, such as, “If cannibalism is wrong, I don’t want to be right,” or ‘Da way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, but I go through the ribcage.’ ... Such characterizations could well have been ripped directly from the pages of Western colonial history (Monson 2012, 64)

World of Warcraft is by no means the only game to use racial stereotypes for their non-human races. This is an established practice across the FRPG genre which a number of scholars have criticized (Higgin 2009; Monson 2012). Stereotypes are often drawn upon by games even when they are depicting people of colour, and scholars such as David Leonard and Lisa Nakamura have described these representations as a type of virtual blackface and racial tourism respectively (D. Leonard 2003; D. J. Leonard 2006; Nakamura 2013). Virtual blackface refers to the practice of allowing white, or non-black players, the option to virtually represent themselves as a black person or character, and usually involves engaging in racial stereotyping. Racial tourism is a similar phenomenon where the player, or user if this occurs outside of a game, takes on a persona of a racialized person.

Despite the fact that FRPG games, including the *Dragon Age* games, take place in a fantasy realm they include real world prejudices, stereotypes, and oppressions. For example, Nathaniel Poor has discussed how elves in the fantasy games are the racial other of many of the fictional worlds they appear in (Poor 2012). In *Dragon Age*, the elves are an amalgamation of many marginalized and colonized peoples, in addition to the inherent otherness of elves as shown in folklore, Tolkien, and other popular depictions. Helen Young notes that

Tolkien's peoples are inherently and essentially superior to others; both his hierarchy and the underlying construction of human difference invoke race-thinking which created racial categories based on supposed biological differences, and assigned character traits to those races (H. Young 2016, 23)

The ways in which game developers simulate or recreate these systems of oppression is one of the aspects of games that I am interested in, as they have the capability to make arguments that can either help or hinder the player's understanding of these issues.

The Player

Throughout this thesis I will be conceptualizing the player according to two distinct perspectives. The first perspective comes from game studies, where the player can be thought of as a position or role in relation to the game itself. The second perspective is drawn from phenomenology and focuses on the player as an embodied subject and is focused on the individual that takes on the role of the player. This distinction is necessary to make, especially for this thesis, because individuals playing the game may take on the same role in relation to the game but have different reactions or understandings based on their own lived experiences. I am not trying to argue that game studies as a whole does not consider the player as an embodied individual, because that would be false, instead I wish to emphasize two ways the term player has been used and will be used in this thesis.

As I discussed above the player, or players, are an important aspect of FRPGs. It is the player that makes the game happen, whether they begin playing a tabletop RPG or start their favourite video game. Without the player the game will not proceed. Beyond the beginning of the game, the player provides agency to the character that they are controlling or inhabiting. The game setting and mechanics are all designed around the experience of the player, and "the player exerts their control over the game's elements by means of agency, which is conveyed via the

interface” (Fizek 2014, 10).

The second way of thinking about the player is as an embodied subject with a range of experiences, beliefs, and prejudices that effect how they think about and enjoy the game. As an embodied subject, the player will be socialized and oriented to the world, in part according to factors such as gender, race, age, social class, and sexuality. Iris Marion Young discussed the differences in the way that children are socialized about their bodies depending on their gender. Girls, she said, are taught to self-objectify themselves by being conditioned to be aware of their bodies as things to be looked at as opposed to a part of themselves. Their bodies are something to work against, to monitor, and to protect. Boys are taught that their bodies are part of themselves (I. M. Young 1980). Marion Young’s description of (white) femininity is important for understanding how the embodied subject is socialized differently based on gender.

Sarah Ahmed draws on Iris Marion Young and other phenomenologists to discuss how the embodied subject relates to the spaces, objects, and bodies that they encounter. It is in these moments of disorientation, Ahmed argues, that we are best able to determine our own orientations and examine them. Certain bodies experience, and cause, disorientation more often than other bodies. Colonization involves the restructuring of spaces so that they are in line with the ideals of the colonizer. They reorient the space so that it is in reach and accessible for white bodies: “If the world is made white, then the body at home is the one that can inhabit whiteness” (Ahmed 2006, 111). Bodies of colour are then forced to negotiate spaces that were not created for them, and then would find these spaces disorienting. Sexual orientation is often a factor in disorientation as our society is structured around the (white) heterosexual couple. Sarah Ahmed shares her own experiences as a queer woman of colour who was once asked by her neighbour about her partner, “Is that your sister, or your husband?” (2006, 95) Her queer relationship is then disorienting for others, as well as for herself.

Orienting the embodied subject is important for understanding the player, both as a role and an individual reacting to the game, as it can provide insights into how the game orients the player and where this orientation may not fit with the individual playing the game. While creating their game, developers may not realize that certain aspects of their game are racist or sexist because they have not experienced racism or sexism. Or they might make assumptions about how the player might react to situations in their game based on their own experiences as an embodied subject, but not take into account how certain things would be experienced by other

with vastly different experiences.

Characters

In FRPG video games there are three broad categories of characters: the player characters, non-player characters, and companions. Player characters or PCs are those characters in the game over which the player has control. Non-Player characters, or NPCs, are all the other characters in the game which the player does not control. Games may have several PCs that the player switches between as the game progresses, or just one who the player controls for the entire game.

In FRPGs the PC is how the player interacts with the game world, and the player can determine the personality of the character through their actions. The PC has no agency and it is up to the player to embody the character and interact with the world through them. The player's actions are mediated through the PC and the available actions may be limited by the PC. These limitations might be due to the type of character the player choose to play, such as a warrior versus a wizard, or by the gender of the character.

Companions are characters which the player has some control over. In *Dragon Age: Origins* the player has access to seven companions who they can choose from to form their party and take with them into battle. The player selects which weapons and armor the companions wear and chooses their abilities and levels them up as they do the PC. The companions also have their own personalities and agency within the narrative that the player is not able to change, "they have a name, a personality, and most importantly a voice that is not my [the player's] voice, and these elements make their otherness more apparent" (Jong 2012, 4).

NPC characters generally make up the bulk of the characters within games, and range from fully formed, complex characters to people in a crowd who the PC cannot interact with. Sonia Fizek draws from the three categories of NPCs proposed by Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. and Parsler: NPAs (non-player agents)/functional characters, Cast, and Stage (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 2013; Parsler 2010). NPAs/functional characters "perform general functions within the gameworld, such as trading with the PC, distributing quests and quest items, displaying dialogue options" (Fizek 2014, 11). Cast characters are "all the other NPCs who populate the gameworld and react to simple actions activated by the PC" (Fizek 2014, 11). Cast characters include enemies who the PC fights throughout the game. Stage characters are those

characters who cannot be interacted with and are meant to add to the atmosphere or area.

NPCs and companions play important roles in FRPGs. Carolyn Jong describes how the companions in *Dragon Age: Origins* play the role of ethical advocates (Jong 2012). The protagonist of *DA:O*, the Warden, does not have a voice or personality, so it is up to the player to develop one as the game progresses. By engaging in conversation with the companions, the player is able to form the Warden's character in relation to their companions.

NPCs also serve as narrative devices. Kristine Jørgensen argues that video game characters can be used “as carriers of narrative progression” (Jørgensen 2010, 316) to develop the plot of the game. Jørgensen uses the example of the interrupted wedding and subsequent rape of Shianni in the City Elf Origin in *Dragon Age: Origins*, which I introduced in the introduction of this thesis and will discuss in length in Chapter Two, to show how characters can be used to drive the narrative of the game and develop the personality of the Warden.

By being forced to witness to their cousin being raped, the PC faces the moral dilemma of either taking revenge on the nobleman rapist with the consequence of letting the elven community suffer, or letting the rapist go and taking a bribe. This choice is emotionally involving since the player must first witness a violation and then make an ethically difficult choice. But it is also experienced as more personal compared to a similar empathic situation in a film: in is the player who must make the moral decision, and the close relationship between player and PC makes the situation concern the player directly. In this situation the player's ethical perspectives are likely to bleed into the Grey Warden's ethical perspectives, creating a moral allegiance between the player and the PC (Jørgensen 2010, 320)

Characters can be used to give the PC motivation to continue, to develop the personality of the PC, or to provide quests and tasks for the PC to perform.

As the above example shows, video games can cover a wide range of issues and subject matter, including sexual assault. Sexual assault can be used to provide motivation to the PC, as discussed above, or as a way of creating tension which the PC then has to sort out. In order to delve more deeply into how sexual assault is represented in the *Dragon Age* games we must first come to an understanding of sexual assault itself.

Rape Theory

Rape was considered to be an abnormality in the 1950s and 1960s (Baxi 2014). Rape was committed by troubled individuals and thus fell under the domain of medical professionals. Susan Brownmiller changed the conversation, arguing that rape is a societal issue as opposed to a personal failing (Brownmiller 1975). Rape, Brownmiller argued, does not occur because the uncontrollable lust of an individual man drives him to force himself on an unsuspecting woman, little more than violent sex. Rape is about power, violence, and domination. It is a tool of the patriarchy which men hold over women in order to control them. Women live under the threat of rape that permeates our society, and this is a powerful tool of oppression. In putting forward this argument, Brownmiller helped make rape a feminist issue as well as one that had to be talked about by society at large and grappled with issues we are still thinking about today; for example, the effect of colonialism on sexual assault and the legacy of false reports by white women against black men.

Theories of rape have largely focussed on rape as a crime that is committed against women by men. This is due to statistics that show that women are more likely to be the victims of sexual assault and men are more likely to be the perpetrator, even if the victim is also a man (S. C. Government of Canada 2017). Women are also socialized to fear sexual assault and to take steps to avoid it happening to them, which has a profound effect on their embodiment and way of existing in the world (I. M. Young 1980). Western ideals of feminine purity and the oppressive laws that surround women have led to a history of struggle and marginalization for women who have been raped or sexually assaulted. Rape was long considered a crime against the husband of the woman who was raped, and those women who made it to the courtroom were treated as harshly, often more so, than the accused.

Despite the struggles that continue to face survivors of sexual assault and those that support them, the conversation surrounding rape has been able progress since Susan Brownmiller and other theorists have pushed the topic forward. One of the most harmful preconceptions that survivors face in reporting their crimes is the assumption that the survivor themselves are at some level complicit in the crimes against them. Laura Hengehold has described the questioning and disbelief that women experience in the courtroom and judicial process as a ‘second rape’, which can make it incredibly difficult for the perpetrator to be found guilty (Hengehold 1994) and increase feelings of stigma and risks of retribution for victims.

Many activists and scholars have worked to disabuse juries, judges, and the general public of this assumption of complicity by focusing on the argument that rape is not about sex, but instead about power and control. Brownmiller stated that “From prehistoric times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear” (1975, 12). Focusing on the violence and oppressive power of rape makes practical sense, both in the courtroom and out. Women, as has been shown time and time again, live with the threat of rape hanging over our heads. We are taught that we have to avoid going out after dark, constantly watch our drinks, and avoid the company of men of questionable character.

The onus of rape avoidance thus falls to women, and women often internalize the belief that their actions play a role in whether or not they are sexually assaulted. In cases where the question of whether the incident was rape or consensual sex, it falls to the victim to prove that they did all they could to show their attacker that they were not consenting to sex. The person on trial then, is effectively the victim of the crime.

Ann J. Cahill has proposed a definition of rape that includes sex in the discussion. Cahill defines rape “generally to be the imposition of a sexually penetrating act on an unwilling person” (2001, 11). She further expands her definition of penetration to include any orifice with any object, and not just limiting rape to forcing a penis into a vagina. Though she concedes that there are drawbacks to privileging penetration, Cahill argues that:

In emphasizing the significance of penetration, I am not claiming that non-penetrative acts are not sexual. These acts may well constitute sexual assault, but not rape. In my view, to penetrate the body of an unwilling other is by definition a more invasive, more destructive act than any that stops at the surface of the body. This in no way diminishes the horrific ramifications of other types of sexual assault. It is, however, to recognize that rape constitutes a significantly different position on the continuum of sexual violence than other acts (2001, 11–12)

Sexual assault is thus a broad category or continuum of sexual violence, and though rape is a form of sexual assault not all sexual assault is rape.

Cahill, as well as the other scholars I have come across, do not discuss the way being forced to penetrate another body and the affect it might have as a destructive act. For example,

men have talked about how they feel betrayed by their bodies because their penis became erect and ejaculated during a sexual assault (P. W. Cook and Hodo 2013, 9). Cahill and many of the other scholars who I have discussed describe at length how penetration and the fear of penetration is a part of how women are socialized. Men, in contrast, penetrate. This seems to be just as tied up in their embodiment as penetration is for women. This aspect of male embodiment is not considered in any of the works I have looked at, but I feel like it is an interesting area for further research.

Aside from her focus on penetration, Cahill differs from other scholars in that she is interested in thinking about how rape is a sexual act. Cahill argues that while there is merit in thinking about rape in terms of violence and oppression, the use of sex or sexual acts as a weapon or a tool of violence is a deliberate act that is worth investigating. One potential problem with thinking of rape as sexual is that it creates a range of possible scenarios that could be rape and makes defining rape and its effects difficult.

Embodiment provides a way out of this puzzle. It accounts for the multiplicity of experiences of rape by acknowledging that rape occurs to individual bodies, and that individual bodies are marked and constructed by larger discourses (although never in a wholly determinative way). By recognizing those discourses, we are able to construct the scope of harms that rape as an embodied experience may include. Every rape experience is unique, but each is bodily; therefore we are capable of locating the various axes of bodily meaning that rape affects (Cahill 2001, 9)

Cahill's definition is interesting in another way, primarily that she does not want to create a universal definition of rape. She is highly critical of such attempts to define rape as they are often too narrow to be useful, but they often were also used to dismiss the experiences of some women and privilege the experiences of others. In the case of laws and the justice system, many attempts are rape laws have been created by men in positions of privilege. These laws then often function merely to aid those same groups of people in cases of rape.

For Cahill, rape is a range of penetrative acts, and she focuses her discussion of rape as a threat to women specifically (Cahill 2001). She is deliberate in gendering her discussion because in her experience having a definition of rape that avoids gendering victim or rapist fails to accurately represent the fact that women are at a significant threat of being raped by a man. Even

if the victim is a man, statistically the perpetrator is likely a man as well. Additionally, often concern for male victims is used as a weapon against those that are trying to talk about the major issues that women experience as a consequence of rape and the variety of ways that women act before, during, and after cases of rape or attempted rape.

I have chosen to use Cahill's discussion of rape and its embodied nature, but I am trying to think about how the embodied approach would include male bodies as victims. I will be thinking about the power dynamics between rapist and victim, and the way the gender of each affects the way the act is framed by the game. In addition, just as women are taught that they must fear and expect rape, men are often socialized to believe that rape is not something that can happen to them. We see this play out in the media when a teenage boy is raped by his female teacher or another older woman in his life. These situations are often discussed as affairs, and many commenters discuss how lucky the boy is to be having sex with a hot older woman. Jokes about prison rape also proliferate our culture, again working to minimize the trauma of male victims of sexual assault. My aim in this thesis is to apply Cahill's definition of sexual assault as an embodied experience that involves penetration in a way that does not minimize the ethical wrongs of the act whatever the gender of the victim or rapist.

There is often a lack of support for men who are sexually assaulted because they often assume that sexual assault centres and hotlines are only for women (Campbell-Ruggaard and Van Ryswyk 2001, 293). We can think about the embodied experiences of men who experience sexual assault along similar terms that Cahill laid out. For example, the sexuality or perceived sexuality of a male victim is important to consider as the assault could be a case of gay-bashing if perpetrated by a heterosexual man (Campbell-Ruggaard and Van Ryswyk 2001).

One of the reasons Cahill's approach to rape resonated with me was that it allows for coercion and non-physical ways of committing sexual violence. By focusing on the victim and perpetrator as embodied subjects I find she is able to demonstrate how systems of oppression can lead to sexual assault. One such situation involves tourism, more specifically sex tourism. I am interested in the power dynamics between tourist and local, and how the gender of each changes these dynamics (I. Bauer 2008; I. L. Bauer 2014; Frohlick 2010; Phillips 2008). I examine the ways that 'romance tourism', where typically wealthy western women travel to exotic locations and find boyfriends among the locals, differs from sex tourism and whether it is less exploitative as romance tourists might claim.

I wanted to use Cahill's definition of rape because of the emphasis that it puts on the embodied experiences of the individuals involved. As Cahill states, "Every rape experience is unique, but each is bodily" (2001, 9). This is important for my thesis because not all of the victims that are part of my analysis are women, and not all of the instances of sexual assault conform to Cahill's definition of rape, but they all involve embodied subjects. My hope is that by taking sexual assault seriously, and equally, whoever is rapist or victim I can point out the ways that the patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, etc. are complicit or created the conditions for the rape. For example, thinking about how wealthy women are exploiting marginalized men of colour we can learn more about the oppressive systems we are living under. We might learn something new or interesting to see how these mechanisms can be used by predators of all genders.

Sexual Assault in Video Games

When one thinks of sexual assault in video games there are two examples that quickly come to mind: *Custer's Revenge* and 'A Rape in Cyberspace'. The former is an Atari game created by Mystique in 1982 and became infamous for allowing the player to control Custer as he dodges arrows to reach a tied up Native American woman. Upon reaching the bound, naked woman he rapes her. *Custer's Revenge* makes explicit the themes that other games hold and that I interrogate throughout this thesis. Colonialism, violence against women, the objectification of women's bodies, and the devaluation of Native American women are all on display in the 8-bit graphics in this disgusting game.

"A Rape in Cyberspace" by Julian Dibbell is well known in academic circles and is an important starting point for discussions of rape in video games. By looking at a case of a hacker who took control over the avatars of people in a text-based chatroom and role-playing space and then narrated sex acts performed by those characters, Dibbell raises questions of embodiment and what rape looks like in a virtual space (Dibbell 1994). I will continue these discussions, thinking about what happens when the player character is threatened with rape in a single-player game, and extending to think about what it means for the player character to step into the role of rapist.

Aside from these two examples, sexual assault has been widely discussed in game studies. One such discussion occurs in Brenda Brathwaite's book *Sex in Video Games* in which

she discusses *Custer's Revenge* and “A Rape in Cyberspace” as something of an anomaly in video games (Brathwaite 2006). According to her research and discussions with game developers, rape is a serious topic. They generally choose not to portray rape as it is inappropriate subject matter for video games along with sexual violence involving children and animals (Brathwaite 2006, 26, 33, 35. 203-205).

In my research I have come across many examples of rape being used as a plot device in games, such as the case studies in chapter two and three, and even as the butt of jokes such as in *Far Cry 3* (Ubisoft Montreal 2012). Megan Condis explores the use of rape as a metaphor in *Far Cry 3* to explore colonial violence, including in the leveling mechanic, which has “a metaphorical undertone of rape. Players augment their combat abilities by getting sacred tattoos. The island’s culture literally gets under Jason’s skin, penetrating him” (2018, 40). The first tattoo Jason receives is when he is unconscious, thus adding to the metaphor.

Other research into sex in video games generally focuses on interactions between players in MMOs, or massive multiplayer online games. Harvianian et al. argue that game studies as a discipline is still trying to figure out how to talk about sex and sexuality, and is stuck in a stage of puberty (Harviainen, Brown, and Suominen 2016). Ashley Brown has written about sexuality in roleplaying games and explores the effects of the roleplay on participants lives (Brown 2015). Zek Valkyrie explores the intersections of rape culture and online spaces, including sexual roleplay online (Valkyrie 2017). Other scholars studied how players reacted to taboo acts, such as murder and rape (Whitty, Young, and Goodings 2011).

My research interest is not in virtual sex between individuals, but instead on the representation of sex and relationships in single player games. Sex in the cases I am interested in is between the player character and a non-player character, and so all the interactions and options available to the character are scripted by the game developer. Throughout the *Dragon Age* games, the player is put in the position of adjudicator or dispenser of justice, in one case a potential victim of rape, and - as I argue in chapter four – a rapist. The *Dragon Age* games position the player to have to negotiate ethical issues, such as sexual assault, and allow the player to choose whether they wish to engage in selfish behaviour or help the victims at a potential personal cost. In these situations, I believe it is important to think about the complicity of the player and game developers in relation to sexual assault and its possible harms.

In thinking about the embodiment of the player, and how they also embody the avatar and

character they are controlling, I am interested in the complicity of the player when they choose options in the game that perpetuate stereotypes or other types of harms. In my case studies in subsequent chapters, the player can choose to help those in marginalized positions in society or harm them, either through inaction or by adding to that harm. By thinking about the ethics of the player as discussed by Sicart as well as the player's embodied experiences as discussed by Ahmed, I will think through the implications of these choices (Sicart 2011; Ahmed 2006).

Representations of sexual assault have been criticized for focusing on rape as an avenue of entertainment and less on the traumatic act itself (Alcoff and Gray 1993). Victims of sexual assault have been brought onto talk and news shows to discuss their experiences, and if they cry they are seen as too emotional. Doctors and other experts would be brought in to give objective opinions about the emotions displayed by the victims, mediating and pathologizing their reactions. Representations of sexual assault have often fallen short of treating the crime and victims with respect and dignity.

Methodology

Game scholars have employed a wide range of methods to study video games. Some have borrowed and adapted from other disciplines such as Sonia Fizek's Player Character Grid which draws from theatre theory (2014), while others have created new techniques more specific to the medium. Anthropologists who have studied video games or online virtual spaces have often employed the ethnographic method. Virtual ethnography was developed to help researchers adapt to the differences in studying communities of people in a virtual space. Tom Boellstorff argues that game studies would benefit from utilizing anthropological methods, particularly participant observation (Boellstorff 2006). Other scholars have followed suit and used ethnography to study games and their online communities (Kim 2014; Thornham 2016; Giddings 2008; Chen 2009).

When I approached this project, I knew that I wanted to use ethnography to study the *Dragon Age* games. As I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, I have long found the virtual worlds created by the developers to be fascinating and I wanted to try to study the worlds as a type of virtual culture. The virtual culture in question is make believe of course, but I thought that the values and ideas embedded into the game world would provide insight into the larger society that created and enjoyed the games. My first stumbling block in finding a similar

ethnographic method came when I realized that the ethnographic method is generally applied to multiplayer games or online communities, and not single player games as I was trying to apply it to. The one researcher proposing a similar method to what I wanted to apply is Kiri Miller who argued that the open worlds of the *Grand Theft Auto* (DMA Design and Tarantula Studios 1997; DMA Design 2001) series put the player in the position of both tourist and ethnographer:

players move beyond tourism to collaborative complicity with the avatar, a process that doubtless occurs in numerous games. But one of GTA's special features, highlighted by an ethnographic perspective, is that these games encourage players to cycle between participant-observation and analytical or ironic detachment ... Because Rockstar's game design always blends immersion-enhancing realism with immersion-disrupting parody and citation, these games keep each player in the liminal state that partially defines the classic fieldwork experience: not a tourist, but not a local; trying to act naturally while consciously storing away new knowledge; in the world but not of the world. (2008).

The player, Miller argues, explores the game world as both a tourist and an ethnographer, so they are cultural outsiders and need to explore and learn about the world they have entered, but they are doing so through the player character who is a local, or a cultural insider.

I found Miller's proposed method useful in determining my own methodology, and I further explore the idea of the player as tourist in Chapter Three of this thesis, but I still did not quite feel that her method was exactly what I wanted to do. Her ethnographic method is focused on the experiences of the player, and though she is the player in some cases she does not centre her own impressions and experiences in quite the same way that I had hoped to. My interest in embodiment and phenomenology led me to want to focus more heavily on my own impressions and experiences than Miller seemed to be doing in her own ethnography.

Focusing on one's own experiences as a cultural insider is essentially the defining feature of one form of ethnographic method: autoethnography. I was able to find an example of a game scholar, Kurt Brochard, using autoethnography to study single player games, specifically a comparative analysis of *Grand Theft Auto* and *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* (Brochard 2015). Brochard discussed his complicated feelings around his enjoyment of violent games like *Grand Theft Auto*, and how playing a game that seemed to celebrate the Columbine shooting further exacerbated those feelings. He found himself reflecting on the horror of Columbine while

acting out the massacre from the perspective of the shooter, and the cartoony graphics announcing a kill added to the feeling of horror.

Autoethnography was the best choice of method for this project because it allowed me to use my own feelings and impressions of the *Dragon Age* games as a player inform and guide my explorations as a researcher. I was then able to contextualize myself in relation to the games and account for myself in a way that might not have been possible if I was conducting an analysis grounded in the games as opposed to my own impressions. My research area of sexual assault makes autoethnography a reasonable choice because the way people experience sexual assault is subjective and this method allows me to explore the subjectivity of the topic.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a method that uses the ethnographer's own experiences as the object of study. Among the scholars who popularized it were Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, as well as Nathan Denzin (C. S. Ellis and Bochner 2000; C. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011; Denzin 2006). Autoethnography is part autobiography and part ethnography, and "when researchers do autoethnography, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity" (C. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011, 276). The researcher analyses these experiences or epiphanies and compares them to other scholarly research, cultural objects, or interviews with other cultural insiders, depending on what works best for the type of research they are doing.

My own autoethnography takes the form of coming back to a beloved series and using my past experiences with the games as well as my current impressions as a player. I experienced a number of epiphanies regarding the *Dragon Age* games, as well as video games in general, between my first time playing the games and sitting down to write this thesis. Some were born simply of growing up in a way that is not unlike re-watching films from one's childhood and understanding the jokes meant for adults as opposed to the kids. Others were due to my education and immersion into anthropology and gender studies. The process of playing the game as a researcher and not merely a player allowed me to gather these previous epiphanies, experience new ones, and create a narrative out of nine years of thought and introspection.

I am interested in the effect of the subject position of the player on the meaning embedded in the games, specifically what values about rape and sexual assault are assumed in

the player by the game developer. In order to study this, I have to be aware of my own subjectivity and the worldview, assumptions, and values that I bring to the game. This requires me to think reflexively about my work, as well as clearly situate myself within the thesis.

By interacting with the game, I am in a type of dialogue with both the game and the developers who made it. This dialogue will allow me to assess my own understandings or desires against those provided as options throughout the game. For example, a finite number of dialogue options are available in the game, and what might be the argument or larger message on the part of the developer in the choices that are and are not available.

One of the potential risks of autoethnography (Anderson 2006), which is taken up by Rossig and Scott, is that studying something that is important to or fun for the researcher may make that activity a responsibility and not recreation (Rossing and Scott 2016). This was exactly my experience when I started to study video games and not just play them. When I began studying video games, I found myself becoming ambivalent about them as I noticed more and more racist, sexist, and other ‘ist’ content in the games that I have long loved.

My ambivalence to games was in part a natural consequence of studying something that had previously been a leisure activity. By studying video games, they became work as opposed to play. Over time I became used to the shift in how I interacted with the games, but I was still having trouble accepting how much racism and sexism existed in the game that I was just beginning to notice. And once I noticed it in the Dragon Age games I would pick up on it in games that I still was playing solely for fun, such as *Elder Scrolls Online* (ZeniMax Online Studios 2014). With practice I became better at shutting off the critical ethnographic, feminist voice, but it has never gone away. Now I store my critiques in the back of my mind as a catalog of examples that I have readily available if one of my colleagues finds themselves in need.

Studying Up

Another important shift in ethnographic practice is Laura Nader’s challenge for anthropologists to ‘study up’ (Nader 1972). Nader discusses the trials and successes of her students who studied insurance companies, and other organizations within Western culture that tend to hold more structural power than the anthropologist. Studying up serves the purpose of disrupting the unequal power dynamics between anthropologists and their standard subjects in addition to providing valuable insights into the structures that shape society which the average

citizen has no control over.

What if, in reinventing anthropology, anthropologists were to study the colonizers rather than the colonized, the culture of power rather than the powerless, the culture of affluence rather than the culture of poverty? (Nader 1972, 5)

I have chosen to follow Nader in this by studying representations of sexual assault created by a popular game studio. By studying the representations of sexual assault, I can discuss what the player is learning about sexual assault and who can and cannot be a victim.

Though my own work is focusing on a product, in this case a game, I am in an indirect way studying the creative/production philosophies of a large corporation, specifically Electronic Arts, which has a large effect on the gaming industry itself. BioWare employs many people in Edmonton and Austin, as well as many contractors and people in other satellite studios across the globe. The games BioWare produces matter, and one way to study BioWare the company is to analyse the products that they generate.

I am also studying a cultural artifact that constitutes a solitary, shared experience by thousands of people who played this game. Though there are active communities who discuss the games, they still play the game as individuals before gathering to discuss it. By focusing on the single-player nature of the game and researching it in the position of a single-player I can better evaluate those arguments and values the games are imparting on their players. This will allow me to discuss a topic that has been talked around but not dealt with directly in game studies, specifically how sexual assault has been represented in single player games. The research that has discussed rape has looked at rape myth acceptance in relation to scantily clad female characters and virtual violence against women instead of looking at actual representations of sexual assault (Beck et al. 2012; Fox et al. 2015).

Ethnography of the Digital

My goal is to perform digital ethnography in a situation where there are no other people around, but instead where the researcher inhabits a virtual space where the inhabitants have been created by game developers with their own goals, perspectives, and prejudices. I am thinking of the game world of the *Dragon Age* games as a (virtual) space, just like one would write about the world of *WOW* or other MMOs. Though there being no people to interact with to make a

community of like-minded gamers, there are virtual societies drawn from high fantasy tropes and real-world societies. But, I think the fact that there are similar world building elements might make it enough of a place to think of the digital narrative and elements in such a way as one might think of a digital world or community. *Dragon Age* is a story that western game developers are telling western players, and the story is created in a virtual space rife with values, judgements, and arguments that can tell us about the society the games were created for.

Christine Hine argues that the internet can be studied ethnographically as a culture or a cultural artifact (Hine 2000). Participants are spread across space and time in virtual spaces, which can provide methodological problems. People bring their cultures and values with them into these spaces, but they also create their own rules and values.

Virtual ethnography studies people in virtual spaces. I cannot engage in the same form of ethnography because I am the only person in the game world or virtual space that I am studying. I draw on the work of Hine and Miller when thinking about virtual field sites, but my work is an autoethnography and thus different than they are describing. My focus is on my own experiences and impressions which I then expand from. Hine is interested in how groups of people come together and interact in a virtual space, and how they create virtual cultures as a group. In a single player game, the virtual world empty of other players and instead the virtual cultures that are being explored are created by game developers. I thus cannot conduct a virtual ethnography as Hine described. Instead, I am approaching the games as a solitary experience that players of the series share.

My Methodology

I played the games while talking notes about aspects that related sexual assault, and rape. Due to the sheer amount of sexualised language and harassment I had to limit my focus to sexual assault. I also paid attention to all of the sexual relationships available to the player character and their companions. I played through all of the games, saving at the beginning and end of each area that I entered. I backed these saves up on an external hard drive.

In total I spent approximately two hundred and fifty hours playing through the three games and their expansions and downloadable content. *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* each took one hundred hours to complete the games, and *Dragon Age II* took approximately fifty hours. Another ten or so hours was spent replaying sections of the various

games. I played the games on easy mode so that I could spend less time on battles. For *Dragon Age: Origins*, I played through its expansion *Awakening* (BioWare 2010a) and the following downloadable content: *Warden's Keep* (BioWare 2009c), *Stone Prisoner* (BioWare 2009b) and, *Witch Hunt* (BioWare 2010b). For *Dragon Age II* I played the *Mark of the Assassin* (BioWare 2011c) and *Legacy* (BioWare 2011b) expansions. And I played *The Descent* (BioWare 2015b), *Jaws of Hakkon* (BioWare 2015a), and the *Trespasser* (BioWare 2015c) downloadable content.

During the initial play through of the series I always chose to play as a female character. I chose to play as an elf in the first and third dragon age games, but *Dragon Age II* only provides the option to play as a human. I also romanced one character per game, choosing one of the elven love interests. In the first game I choose Zevran, an elven assassin who tries to kill the player character before joining their quest. In the second game I romanced Merrill, an elven blood mage who was kicked out of her clan and forced to live in the nearby city of Kirkwall. And in the third game I choose to romance Solas, an elven apostate who is only romanceable by an elven player character and ends up breaking up with the player character half way through the game.

Once I had save files for all the games I was able to go back and replay the sections that were most applicable to my thesis. I could then systematically choose all of the dialogue options and analyse their outcomes, as well as remake choices in the game that I had not picked previously. While going back over these scenes I took approximately ten hours of video that I could go back over for analysis.

In my notes while playing, I mentioned places where I had a hard time choosing the 'right' dialogue option or making the best decision. I also noted when I felt uncomfortable with some aspect of the game, or other impressions of the events as they played out. This was so that I could gauge my own subjectivity and orientation in relation to the game, so that I could keep track of the 'hat' I wore at each moment. Throughout my playthroughs my player hat and researcher hat are constantly switching and sometimes hard to keep track of.

One such example of 'hat' switching is between the points where sexual assault is likely to come up or be described. Long stretches of battle or exploration of maps were generally points where it was easy to fall into the role of the player because in the vast majority of cases rape comes up in cut scenes and conversation. So, I would find myself 'playing' the game for periods of time. I would then have to switch how I was approaching the game, often quite suddenly and jarringly, when there was dialogue of some kind. I also would run into puzzles or riddles in the

game that would slow or halt my progress as both a player and a researcher. There would be a weird tension between the two roles, because as a researcher I just wanted to get past the puzzle so that I could get to the interesting stuff. As a player I am not particularly fond of puzzles or even particularly good at them, which doubled the frustration.

After playing the games and choosing case studies that demonstrated important aspects of the game, I explored case studies in terms of my own embodiment and then considered ways that other embodied subjects may experience the case study differently from myself. In order to facilitate this, I broke the case studies into five orientations. I am drawing on Sara Ahmed's work when I discuss orientation, specifically the way that bodies are orientated toward other bodies or objects.

1. Protagonist to Game World
2. Player to Avatar
3. Player to Game World
4. Player to Mechanics
5. Developer to Game World

My method for deciding on these orientations was to think of the various parts of the game that the player is oriented toward, such as the game mechanics, the game world, and the avatar. The game mechanics include the actual controls that the player interacts with to affect the game, and the rules which dictate the way that the entire game itself functions. The game world is the constructed virtual space in which the game takes place and includes the lore and background information that the game developers provide the player through flavour text, quest information, and dialogues with non-player characters.

The protagonist is a raced and classed body within the game world, and so it is important to situate the avatar in relation to that game world. The gender chosen for the avatar has an impact on which characters are romanceable, what dialogue options are available, and even how other characters react to the protagonist. The type of character, such as warrior, mage, or rogue, as well as the background and race of the avatar impact how the character is treated by other characters and other important aspects to the game. By focusing on how the protagonist is oriented to the game world I can explore the ways race, gender, and class are constructed in the game.

My final orientation is to think about how the game developer is oriented to the game

world that they created. The game developer in this conception is an overarching concept or title as opposed to an individual. I am referring to the development team who made the game, the lead developers who made key decisions about the game, and also the game industry itself. I am thinking about how the choices made by the game developer seem to point to certain worldviews and reflect established prejudices which have been observed in the game industry at large. The intention of the game developers, and the politics of individual workers, is overshadowed by the games that they have produced.

Conclusion

The genre of Fantasy Role-Playing Games covers many video games, pen and paper games, and collectable card games. These games are different in where and how they are played, but they all have a system, setting, players, and characters. These attributes are similar to many concepts in game studies and can be considered in discussions of game rules, mechanics, game world and avatars. FRPGs also utilize many of the racist and sexist tropes that game scholars have long discussed, though sexual assault in single player games is less theorized than other topics such as sexual assault in MMOs or other multiplayer games. By drawing on rape theory and phenomenology I will use auto-ethnography to analyse three single-player FRPGs and explore their representations of rape.

Chapter Two: Player Embodiment, Orientations, and Playing the Victim

Introduction

This chapter looks at the way the embodiment of the player is crucial for understanding how they are oriented to the representations of gender, race and sexual assault within the *Dragon Age* series. My first case study represents one of the most obvious rape narratives in the game and is part of the City Elf Origin story in *Dragon Age: Origins*. I discuss how the embodied experience, or subjectivities, of both the player and the avatar affect the way the situation unfolds.

I introduce the work of Sara Ahmed, specifically what she terms queer phenomenology (Ahmed 2006). Ahmed is interested in the orientation of bodies in space, and how race, class, gender, among a myriad of other factors influence one's orientation. Queer for Ahmed takes on a meaning of difference or non-normative, though she refers as well to sexual orientation. Queer phenomenology thus refers to a phenomenology of difference that specifically centres itself on bodies that are not those of white, cis, heterosexual men in positions of privilege.

Drawing on Ahmed, I introduce Ann J. Cahill and her theory of rape as an embodied sexual phenomenon, which will be my primary theory of rape in this thesis (Cahill 2001). Cahill draws heavily on theories of embodiment to develop her own theory of rape, which can usefully be applied to video games and other digital media. I describe the definition in detail, and then discuss some critiques that other scholars have raised against the work and discuss my own reactions to these critiques. I will then address elements of Cahill's theory that I have issues with and how I resolved or reconciled them.

One challenge to Cahill is the ways embodiment changes in digital realms. I discuss digital, or virtual, embodiment and how this might impact Cahill's definition of rape. I talk about what other theorists have said about virtual embodiment and provide my own definition of rape that takes these factors into account.

I then use Cahill and Ahmed to analyze of some of the ways the player, the player character, and the game developer are oriented to the game world and mechanics. I look through my own orientation to the game and my own understanding of events, and then attempt to expand my own understanding by thinking of how different subject positions would influence the way players might understand instances of rape or racism within the game.

Dragon Age: Origins

Dragon Age: Origins (DA:O) was released in 2009 by BioWare, an Edmonton based company that had spent the previous seven years developing the game (BioWare 2009a). *DA:O* was released on multiple platforms and was widely considered to be a success. In subsequent years various special editions of the game were released, such as a Collector's Edition, Deluxe Edition, and Ultimate Edition, as well as various downloadable content (DLC) and the expansion *Dragon Age: Origins - Awakening (DA:O-A)* (BioWare 2010a).

DA:O was considered by its creators to be the spiritual successor to *Baldur's Gate* (1998), a popular RPG developed by BioWare which used *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)* rulesets, classes, races, and abilities, and was set in Faerûn, a realm of *D&D* (BioWare 1998). BioWare worked closely with Wizards of the Coast, the creators of *D&D*, when creating *Baldur's Gate* and its sequel and expansion.

It features combat against a variety of types of enemies, and the player directs the player character as well as up to three companions in battle. The player is thus able to develop strategies for dealing with various enemies. Companions have their own abilities and specializations, which can be important of the player to learn about and utilize against various enemies. This type of combat draws from *Baldur's Gate* as it requires the player to manage the entire party in combat. The game also has social elements where the player can engage in conversation with their companions and a host of other characters in the game world. The player can engage in diplomacy and try to solve problems with or without violence, as well as make decisions about the outcome of important world events.

Just as *Baldur's Gate* was influenced by *D&D*, *DA:O* was influenced by both of its predecessors, as well as other elements of the fantasy genre. One notable similarity is that all three series allow the player to choose the gender, race, appearance, and class of their character, as well as provide a wide range of options for how to approach problems and interact with the characters that inhabit the game worlds. Though these features are hardly unique to these games, BioWare is known for creating story heavy games with moral choices and memorable companion characters that are influenced by the choices that the player makes throughout the games.

In many ways *Dragon Age* is classic high fantasy fare, filled with magic, elves, dragons, and a quest to save the entire kingdom, interspersed with side quests ranging from hunting down

rogue mages to fetching medicine and bringing it to a commoner's sick mother. All three games in the series fall into this genre, though they take place within different realms in the game world and focus on the exploits of different protagonists. *Dragon Age II* takes place in a single city over the course of six years, whereas *Dragon Age Inquisition* spans both Ferelden and Orlais, and it is the entire world which is at stake as opposed to just one realm.

The feature that sets *Dragon Age: Origins* apart from its sequels is the inclusion of origin stories, or variable beginnings to the game based on choices the player makes during character creation, as a part of the narrative. Often even those games that allow the player to choose the race of the protagonist will start the game in the exact same place in the same circumstances despite the race the player chose, and this is true of both of *DA:O*'s sequels. The race of the character will have little effect on the game world or experience of the player, aside from the bonuses or skills that are associated with that race. Race is an aesthetic and mechanical change, with very little social implications. The *Elder Scrolls* series, which boasts similar levels of player choice in character creation, includes some NPC dialogue about the race of the character, but race does not have an effect on the overall narrative or options available to the player.

In *DA: O* the choices the player makes while creating their character determine what the first couple of hours of game play, a fraction of the seventy to one hundred hours of content available in the game and will impact the narrative of the entire story. The opening story is what sets the tone for the entire game, and the time when the player is either hooked or sets aside the game. The race of the player, as well as whether the player chooses to play as rogue, warrior, or mage, are thus highly important to the game - not just in an aesthetic sense, or in terms of game mechanics, but because of the origin of the character and how the player is oriented to that world.

There are six origin stories: human noble, dwarven noble, dwarven commoner, Dalish elf, city elf, and mage, which is the same regardless of a human or elven character. Dwarves do not have access to magic and cannot be mages. All of the origins have a similar structure. We are introduced to the protagonist and their family. The player is allowed to explore their home and talk to their neighbours, and generally get a feel for the place that they live. It is at this stage of the origin that the player is instructed in the basic game mechanics as the origins play the role of tutorial. The protagonist will then meet Duncan, the Grey Warden who is looking for recruits. Duncan is generally already interested in the protagonist, either because he has already heard of

their skill and is there to recruit them, or due to the demonstration of abilities that inevitably takes place within the narrative. The protagonist will typically have the chance to either express interest or apathy toward joining the Wardens, and Duncan is respectful of their wishes, promising to discuss recruitment at a later date.

After meeting Duncan in all the origins things start to go horribly wrong and the protagonist is forced to fight for their life. In the human noble origin, a visiting noble, who is an antagonist later in the game, betrays the protagonist's family's hospitality and slaughters the entire household. The protagonist is the only survivor, until they run into Duncan and agrees to join the Grey Wardens. In all the origins the protagonist is forced into combat by the narrative, and at the end of the conflict they have been backed into a corner by the new circumstances of their life as a result. In every case they face death, saved only by Duncan's renewed offer of joining the Grey Wardens. The pair journey to Ostagar, a war camp far to the south which is where the origins all converge, and the main story begins.

Should the player choose to play *Dragon Age: Origins* as an elf, they will experience the full racism of the Ferelden population and be subjected to numerous types of oppression and prejudice. The player has the option to play as an elven mage, a Dalish elf, or a city elf. The elven mage will experience the same beginning of the game as those who start as a human mage, with the added bonus of being asked about their heritage and hearing about the natural affinity for magic that graces the elves. The Dalish elves reside in nomadic tribes that wander the lands seeking the knowledge of the ancient elves who once ruled from their cities amongst the trees.

There are two quests within the game that include sexual assault as part of the issue that needs to be solved. Aside from these two quests sexual violence permeates the game world. I will explore the first such quest, which I have previously discussed in this thesis as my case study. The other quest involves a clan of Dalish elves. The clan's leader, Keeper Zathrian, has two children. The children were found in the forest by human bandits. Zathrian's son was murdered, but his daughter was raped and left for dead. Zathrian nursed her back to health, but when she realized that she was pregnant she took her own life. Zathrian cursed the bandits using ancient magic and turned them into werewolves. The curse infected the descendants of the bandits, though they slowly learned control. Zathrian's life was tied to the curse, and so he lived for over a century. Eventually the werewolves began to attack his clan, which is when the Warden encounters the clan. Only Zathrian knows of the origin of the werewolves, and his clan

fears the attacks. Zathrian asks the Warden to stop the werewolves, though he does not share his knowledge or personal connection. The Warden learns the truth and must decide how to resolve the conflict, either by killing all the werewolves, siding with the werewolves and killing all the elves, or releasing the werewolves from their curse and brokering peace.

Case Study One: A Wedding Interrupted

The protagonist of *Dragon Age: Origins* is generally referred to as the Warden within the game as well as in discussions by fans, so I shall use this title in my case study. I have also decided to use “they/them/their” to refer to the Warden to show which parts of the narrative happen regardless of gender and I will use “he” or “she” for the gender specific parts. The gender specific parts are generally dialogue that changes depending on the gender of the Warden. For example, the city elf Warden is only captured by Vaughn in this case study if the player chose to play as a female Warden. When talking about the Warden being kidnapped in this case I would thus use ‘she.’

The city elf begins the game in Denerim, the capital city of Ferelden. The elvish inhabitants of the city are contained within the alienage, a walled off ghetto which exist in every major city across the various realms within the game world. The Warden awakens on their wedding day, which they will share with their cousin Soris. Both their future spouse and Soris’ come from an alienage in a different city, and they will not meet until the day of the wedding. The player can explore the alienage and talk to friends and family while they wait for the ceremony to commence.

The alienage itself is a walled and gated ghetto in which the elves are confined. It is made of ramshackle huts and decrepit buildings, with beggars sitting at the two gates leading to the rest of the city. In the centre of the alienage is a large tree, the Vhenadahl or “tree of the People”, representing the ancient elven homeland. Often the roots and lower trunk of the vhenadahl are painted and decorated, and it serves as the meeting point for social gatherings as it sits in the heart of the alienage beside a stage where weddings and other ceremonies take place.

While exploring the alienage, the Warden can stick to the boards laid across the puddles of dubious origin to create a path through the mud and filth. Sitting near the gate is an old elven man asking for aid. Upon talking to him the player can learn that he was a laborer who was, like the other elves on the crew, forced to do the most dangerous jobs for the least amount of pay. His

leg was caught between two ships and crushed. Instead of getting him medical attention, his boss threw him in the alley to die. He would have if some other elves hadn't found him, but now he is unable to work.

Wedding guests are gathered around the Vhenadahl, including an older couple who introduce themselves as friends of the Warden's mother, Adaia. They talk about how much they are reminded of Adaia looking at the Warden, and they give a wedding gift of gold coins that they have been saving for this day. Among the other guests is a family packing up their cart to leave. When asked the father says that they are traveling to Ostagar to work in the army camps. They must leave Denerim because their landlord decided to raise the rent on their apartment and sell the whole complex to someone else and the family cannot afford to live anywhere else. Despite protests by the Warden that it isn't right for them to leave, he is adamant about his decision. After he returns to packing, his daughter asks for help, explaining that he is too proud to accept charity. She is scared about going to Ostagar, where there will be an army's worth of bored human soldiers who haven't seen a woman in months. It is worth noting that there are female soldiers in the army, but her point is well taken. The Warden can give her part of their wedding present, so they can stay, or they could give them a bit less so that they could join a caravan to go to another alienage where they have family.

The player can continue to explore until they find Soris, who is unhappy about getting married. Despite his misgivings he follows the Warden to continue mingling with the other guests. One such guest is a friend of Soris' who apologizes that his brothers are not there. They had wanted to be at the wedding but chose to run off and join the Dalish elves. Many of the alienage elves think that they are a myth while others assume that they are no better than bandits.

The mingling is interrupted by three human men, the leader is Lord Vaughn, the son of the Arl of Denerim. The men seem to have decided to crash the party and enjoy the festivities. Vaughn's opening declaration, "It's a party isn't it? Grab a whore and have a good time. (laughs) Savour the hunt, boys. Take this little elven wench, here ... so young and vulnerable" leaves the player with little doubt of the nature of the 'good time' awaiting the women. While Vaughn and the nobles are talking to Soris and the Warden, Shianni grabs a bottle and clubs Vaughn in the back of the head. He is knocked unconscious and carried away by his friends, seemingly ending the confrontation.

Duncan arrives soon after and is welcomed by the alienage's elder and leader. He

indicates that he would like to discuss something important with the Warden but agrees to wait until after the ceremony. The wedding party gathers, and the ceremony begins, only to be interrupted by Vaughn's return this time accompanied by city guards. Vaughn cuts in, saying The guards and Vaughn's noble friends grab the women in the wedding party, including Shianni who Vaughn asks for specifically: 'where's that bitch who bottled me?' One of the other humans grabs her and she resists, to which Vaughn adds "Oh, I'll enjoy taming her". After the women have been gathered Vaughn approaches the Warden, saying either "such a well-formed little thing" or "the uppity runt that thinks he's worthy of speaking to me. Don't worry. I'll return whatever's left in time for the 'honeymoon'". It is at this point that the gender of the Warden changes how the story unfolds.

If the Warden is male, he wakes up to a discussion amongst the alienage trying to figure out what to do about Vaughn. Valendrian, the Elder, says "stories I've heard about the Arl's son and his appetites are...most disturbing" The crowd is undecided about what action to take, and most agree that they should just wait until Vaughn gives the women back. There is no legal recourse for the women as Vaughn is the son of their liege. Soris and the Warden have a different plan, arguing that they should go rescue the women themselves. The Elder and Duncan agree, and Duncan even lends his sword to the pair. Valendrian allows them to go, arguing "They shall try, for their own honor and the honor of the women. We must trust in the Maker".

Soris and the Warden make their way to Vaughn's estate in the city and are given servant uniforms by one of the elven women who work in the kitchens. They make their way around the back of the estate to the kitchen door. Once inside the kitchens they find a small room where the women were held empty except for the body of one of the stolen elven women. One of the kitchen servants informs Soris and the Warden that the women were taken to Vaughn's rooms and that they should probably hurry. They fight their way through the estate and arrive at Vaughn's room.

If the Warden is female she is taken with the rest of the elven women. She wakes up in the small room off the kitchen and listen to the rest of the women discuss their situation. Guards arrive and round up the women, taking them to their lord's chambers. One of the women panicked and prayed, too upset to respond immediately to the guard's demands, and so the guards murdered her. Once rest of the women are taken out of the room the guards turn towards the Warden who takes up a fighting stance. Behind the guards Soris appears and slides a sword

to the Warden. The Warden picks up the sword and attacks, Soris joining into the fray. Soris explains that he had come to the estate with the Warden's betrothed who had gone ahead. The Warden and Soris find him as he is murdered by another group of guards. "See, I told you there'd be more. Elves run in packs, like rodents". Eventually Soris and the Warden arrive outside Vaughn's door.

Inside they find Vaughn and his two friends standing over Shianni who is crying on the floor. Seeing the door open Vaughn's friends move to fight, but Vaughn tells them to stop as the Warden and Soris are obviously covered in the blood of all the guards between his room and the door. Vaughn proposes instead of fighting that they make a deal, he pays Soris and the Warden and they go away with the understanding that the women will be returned in the morning. He argues that the elves are already going to have to pay for the death of his guards, and it will only make it worse if nobles are hurt as well. The Warden can accept this deal or kill Vaughn and his friends.

The Warden and Soris return to the alienage with or without the women they set out to rescue and explain the situation to the elder and Duncan. Almost immediately more city guards arrive responding to the violence at Vaughn's estate, and they threaten to arrest Soris and the Warden. Duncan stops them and invokes the rite of conscription for the Warden, explaining that he has been looking for recruits to bring to Ostagar. The guards are angry, but they have no choice but to let the Warden go with Duncan. The Warden can go and say goodbye to their father and their friends in the alienage before joining Duncan to begin their journey and their adventure.

Introducing Orientations

Before I delve further into an examination of my case study, I must first introduce the tools with which the examination will take place. For the purposes of my research I have decided to borrow a theoretical lens from phenomenology. More specifically, I am drawing on Sara Ahmed's discussions of orientations and the way that our perspective of the world is dependent on a myriad of factors, including our race, gender, and sexual orientation (Ahmed 2006). I argue that Ahmed's discussion of orientations can be expanded to apply to video games and their players, creators, and even in-game characters.

Phenomenology is a concept in philosophy which studies the way that people occupy and interact with space and objects. Edmund Husserl was concerned with how we perceive the

objects around us and where those objects are in relation to the body, but he was also interested in “the zero point of orientation, the point from which the world unfolds and which makes what is ‘there’ over ‘there’” (Ahmed 2006, 8) (Husserl 1970, 2012, 2013) Husserl has been taken up and challenged by many other disciplines from both within and without of philosophy. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s text *Phenomenology of Perception*, which was influenced by the work of Husserl, was taken up by many of the theorists I have drawn on. Merleau-Ponty suggests that the body is the point where perspective begins, or the ‘zero point’, and so the body is the starting point of phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty and Smith 1996). Study of the body is not just about the body itself, but ‘where’ the body dwells:

the ‘here’ of the bodily dwelling is thus what takes the body outside of itself, as it is affected and shaped by its surroundings...Bodies may become oriented in this responsiveness to the world around them, given this capacity to be affected. In turn, given the history of such responses, which accumulate as impressions on the skin, bodies do not dwell in spaces that are exterior but rather are shaped by their dwellings and take shape by dwelling (Ahmed 2006, 8–9)

Sara Ahmed is in dialogue with Merleau-Ponty throughout her book *Queer Phenomenology*. Ahmed draws upon various theorists who have engaged with Merleau-Ponty, such as Judith Butler (Ahmed 2006; Butler 1988; Nayak and Kehily 2006). Butler states that there is no universal body or orientation, a criticism taken up by Ahmed in exploration of a queer phenomenology.

Queer Phenomenology is a book about queering phenomenology. Ahmed is paying attention to the orientations that many philosophers have held and discusses how these positions are by no means neutral. She talks about orientations and disorientations, and how it is only in moments in disorientation are we able to see and understand the ways we are more comfortably oriented. When approaching orientations, we must try to pull back the layers of meaning. At its most basic, orientations are about objects, and finding one’s place in relation to those objects. For example, knowing where one is while walking through the University of Alberta campus is an example of being oriented. Knowing *when* we are is another important factor in orientations, thus they are both spatial and temporal. Ahmed states that:

orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and

others. Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation, as well as ‘who’ or ‘what’ we direct our energy and attention toward. (2006, 3)

This energy and attention which we are directing could be set upon our work, or our home, or any of the other people, objects, and spaces that we encounter. When we focus our energies on the space tasks over and over, our bodies become used to the task and the task begins to feel effortless, or at the very least the work our body does to complete the task becomes invisible. To draw upon Iris Marion Young’s famous example, for those who have spent a fair amount of time completing a repetitive task, such as throwing a ball, eventually the work needed to convince one’s body to throw the ball becomes invisible (I. M. Young 1980). One stops focusing on making various limbs and other parts of the body to work in concert to propel the ball through space toward an intended target. Instead the focus is on the task of throwing the ball at the target, knowing that the body will do what is needed. It is not until it is time to focus on changing one’s technique or if the body is injured in some way that the limbs once again are given attention.

What does orientation mean for the purposes of this thesis? To address this question, I turn to Sara Ahmed, as well as the work of Iris Marion Young, and Ann Cahill (I. M. Young 1980; Cahill 2001; Ahmed 2006). All three are concerned with the body, more specifically the feminine body, and the relationships bodies have with the objects around them. For these authors, humans are embodied subjects interacting with other embodied subjects.

Those tasks to which we become accustomed begin to shape our bodies, making those tasks easier. If one becomes proficient in throwing a ball the corresponding muscles will begin to become more developed and strengthen. Our bodies respond to the things we do, and we are shaped by the things we do often. We become comfortable with these tasks and perhaps tend toward them more than those that are less familiar and thus uncomfortable. This tendency, this relationship we have with some objects over others, becomes part of our orientation within the world.

These tendencies and proficiencies that we develop are not inherent to our bodies or ourselves but are instead learned behaviours that are often linked to societal expectations and oppressions. Iris Marion Young describes the differences in the socialization of boy and girl children, how boys are taught to see their bodies as tools and extensions of themselves (I. M. Young 1980). Girls, in sharp contrast, are taught that their bodies are something that they must

contain and order. Their bodies must be arranged in certain ways when sitting or walking, they must ensure their bodies do not get dirty, and most importantly for Young, young girls are taught that their bodies must not take up too much space. Girls learn to work against their bodies and thus tasks that require the parts of the body to work in concert become difficult and uncomfortable. The way girls and boys exist and are oriented to the world is thus gendered and learned.

Space and the right to take up space is important for Young, and she describes the cone of space that women learn to fit within, as opposed to their male counterparts who have no such limits. The fear of violation and rape is always present, as girls are taught from a young age that their body is something that they need to protect and monitor. From the time that they are very young, girls are taught that their body is something separate from themselves. The body must be controlled and contained, the body must look aesthetically pleasing and as a result is not a tool to be used to accomplish one's will, but instead an obstacle to overcome (I. M. Young 1980). The body is thus a site of struggle fraught with danger and cultural expectations. Women are taught that there is a specific way that they should act so as not to draw undue attention to themselves and make themselves a target of violent acts. Women are taught to view themselves as objects, or think of themselves as objects.

But let us think more deeply on Young's observation that girls are not allowed to take up space in the same way that boys are. Girls, she says, generally try to stay within the tight cylinder of space that their bodies take up, and avoid extending too far beyond that. Outside of the cylinder there is the promise of threat and violence. As girls grow up they are taught that their personal space is in danger of penetration, and that their own bodies are at risk of penetration. Girls are taught that if they do not behave in the correct ways, if they do not keep their bodies contained or venture into the wrong spaces, then they are at risk of rape and attack. Thus, for girls, the body is a means through which others can hurt them, a liability as well as a burden.

Ann Cahill takes up Marion Young's discussion, pointing out that what Marion Young describes is not the socialization of femininity so much as it is the socialization of *white* femininity, the idealized femininity of the upper class (Cahill 2001, 153). This raced and classed version of how a woman must move and live becomes the impossible standard that women are faced with and expected to live up to. Women of colour and lower-class women are already disadvantaged when they are faced with the ideal femininity, not because of something inherent

about them as individuals, but because femininity was defined in such a way as to exclude them, or at least exclude elements of them.

Race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and other factors are thus crucial to how one is oriented. There is no neutral or natural orientation; instead, all orientations are dependent on social values that are embedded in the very construction of the spaces in which bodies must become oriented within. Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus*, "systems of durable, transposable dispositions" (Bourdieu 1977, 72) The way that our bodies inherit properties based on our family and upbringing is an important aspect of habitus. As Ahmed explains, "what bodies 'tend to do' are effects of histories rather than being originary" (2006, 56) Our bodies are comfortable while doing that which they are accustomed, which is based on the history of one's body, and expanding beyond that history can produce moments of discomfort or disorientation.

Ahmed is interested in the moments of discomfort in response to objects or other bodies. These moments of discomfort or, as she terms them, disorientation is as or more important than the moments we are oriented because they show the social values and constructedness of the spaces we are in. For students are often supremely uncomfortable standing in the front of the classroom. Part of this discomfort is most definitely the weight of the eyes of our peers watching and judging our every move. But we are also aware that the front of the class is where the authority in the room stands, in fact the front of the class lends authority to those who stand there, and this authority clashes with the student's very identity as a student. The teacher stands at the front of the class, the class sits facing the teacher and, ideally, pays attention and learns. Students at the front of the class break this order, or at least call attention to the fact that there is no reason inherent to the room itself that provides weight and authority to those who stand in certain spots.

Disorientation is important for thinking about the ways our spaces and lives are organized and constructed. Bodies themselves can be disorienting, both for those who inhabit the body and for those that interact with it. Ahmed argues that queer bodies, as well as bodies of colour, are often disorienting bodies. Queer bodies draw attention to the unnatural 'natural' order of the world that we live in. Ahmed shares an anecdote about a neighbour's question about the woman she lived with, her partner: "is that your sister, or your husband?" (2006, 95) The neighbor wanted to make sense of the women who lived next door, and in doing so assigned family relations and then a heteronormative one. Ahmed uses this anecdote to show how lesbians are talked about and

erased, the relations between women are ‘straightened out’ by assigning heterosexual understandings to a queer relationship. But this anecdote also shows how queer bodies can disorient those around them by drawing attention to previously unnoticed or unquestioned orientations of one’s own body.

Ahmed is useful in discussions of video games because game developers have their own orientations, and they build orientations into the game. In fact, the orientations are made explicit in a way that non-virtual spaces are not. Virtual spaces are intentionally designed with the player in mind and the camera angles that make up the player’s view point are deliberately placed. So, the way the player is oriented is in dialogue with, or heavily affected by, the orientations of the developers in charge of the creation process of the video games. Orientations are additionally useful for thinking about video games and the experience of the player because even though the player is playing a game, they have their own orientations and experiences that they are bringing to the game. Thinking about orientations allows me to think about the embodiment of the player and the way they might react to various elements of the game.

The experiences of the embodied subject are an important part of understanding and theorizing about rape and sexual assault. The ways that the player is oriented in relation to the objects in question, more specifically the NPCs who rape, talk about rape, or are depicted as being raped, is constructed based on the orientation of the game developers.

Origins and Orientation

As I discussed above, the origin stories are the way that the game introduces the player to the game that they are about to play. They thus serve to orient the player to game world and their place, through their avatar, within it. Within the City Elf Origin racism and oppression are brought to the player’s attention from the moment the game begins. The player is forced to interact with that oppression and the entire narrative of the origin depends on the subjugation of the elves by the humans to make sense.

While exploring the alienage the player immediately runs into the two exits to the compound, both sporting large metal gates that could easily block off the escape of those inside. In fact, later in the game, the protagonist, or Warden as they are later known, learns that the Denerim elves began rioting as a result of Shianni and the other women being taken. The gates were closed, and the elves were locked in as a result.

Sexual violence is introduced early in the origin as well. During a conversation with a young elven woman, who is a childhood friend of the protagonist, we learn that the woman and her family are moving away as they can no longer afford rent in the alienage. She will go with her parents to Ostagar to work in the war camp, but she admits that she is worried about her fate as a woman surrounded by bored and lonely soldiers. The player can choose to help her, either by paying for passage to a different city where they can live with relatives in the alienage there, or to give her enough money so that they can stay in Denerim. Alternatively, the player can just shrug off her fears and wish the family luck on their travels to Ostagar, saving their money.

Soon after this interaction Vaughn and his cronies show up, supporting the young woman's fears, and establishing beyond a doubt that there are very little protections for elves. It is in this dialogue that we learn the slur 'knife ear' which is a favourite derogative thrown at elves throughout the series. It is during the wedding ceremony itself that we begin to see the way that gender plays a part in the game, and the impact that it has on the narrative and tone of the story. The protagonist is knocked out during the scene, and the location where they wake up is dependent on their gender. A female protagonist will awaken in the Arl's estate and needs to be rescued, whereas a male protagonist awakens in the alienage to find his fiancée and the other women have already been taken away.

After the women have been taken the remaining elves discuss what they are going to do. Some lean toward waiting and hoping that the women are sent back in the morning as Vaughn had apparently promised. During the debate we learn that an elven woman living outside the alienage was taken, and later found dead. Rape was implied in the statement. Soris and the protagonist decide to go after the women, pausing only long enough for Duncan to provide them with weapons.

Already in the game gender roles are being defined and reinforced. Women are under threat of rape and kidnapping, and they rely on men to save them. Even though the female protagonist is able to fight her way through the estate in an identical fashion to her male counterpart, the game still forces her to be rescued first. Soris provides her with the blade to fight the guards and escape.

After fighting their way through the estate, the player is asked to make another choice. Vaughn offers to pay the protagonist if they walk away, leaving the women to be raped by him and his friends. He promises again to return them home in the morning. If the player rejects the

offer he attacks, and the player kills the three men.

Rape and the threat of rape are imbedded in the story being told. We learn that rape is a gendered threat based on who is kidnapped and who is left, but what does that mean for individuals in situations of rape? We have thought about orientations and the way bodies and objects and space relate to one another, but before we go further into the discussion of the case study I want to look more closely about the individual body and embodiment.

Orientations and Embodiment

The individual origin stories in *Dragon Age* serve to ‘orient’ the player and the player character ‘to’ and ‘within’ the game world. They also provide information on the embodiment of the player character, such as providing important context about how the character exists in the world. Now that I have talked about the way that characters within the games are oriented in the world, I am going to talk about the ways that these concepts apply to rape. As indicated in my previous chapter, the subject of rape and sexual assault has not always been easily discussed. Western ideals of feminine purity and the oppressive laws that surround women have led to a history of struggle and marginalization for women who have been raped or sexually assaulted. Rape was long considered a crime against the husband of the woman who was raped, and those women who made it to the courtroom were treated as harshly, often more so, than the accused.

Despite the struggles that continue to face survivors of sexual assault and those that support them, the conversation surrounding rape has been able progress since Susan Brownmiller, Catherine Mackinnon, and other theorists have pushed the topic forward. As discussed previously, one the most harmful preconceptions that survivors face in reporting their crimes is the assumption that the survivor themselves is at some level complicit in the crimes against them. Laura Hengehold has described the questioning and disbelief that women experience in the courtroom and judicial process as a ‘second rape’, which can make it incredibly difficult for the perpetrator to be found guilty (Hengehold 1994).

Many activists and scholars have worked to disabuse juries, judges, and the public of this assumption of complicity by focusing on the argument that rape is not about sex, but instead about power and control. Brownmiller stated that “From prehistoric times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear” (1975, 12). Focusing on the

violence and oppressive power of rape makes practical sense, both in the courtroom and out. Women, as has been shown time and time again, live with the threat of rape hanging over our heads. We are taught that we have to avoid going out after dark, constantly watch our drinks, and avoid the company of men of questionable character.

The onus of rape avoidance thus falls to women, and women often internalize the belief that their actions play a role in whether or not they are sexually assaulted. In cases where the question of whether the incident was rape or consensual sex, it falls to the victim to prove that they did all they could to show their attacker that they were not consenting to sex. The person on trial then, is effectively the victim of the crime.

Cahill's definition is interesting in another way, primarily that she does not want to create a universal definition of rape. She is highly critical of such attempts to define rape as they are often too narrow to be useful, but they often were also used to dismiss the experiences of some women and privilege the experiences of others. In the case of laws and the justice system, many attempts at rape laws have been created by men in positions of privilege. These laws then often function merely to aid those same groups of people in cases of rape.

Rape as an Embodied Experience

For Cahill, embodiment is an important aspect of understanding rape.

“I developed an analysis of rape as an embodied experience, an analysis that sheds considerable light on the phenomenon of rape, its gendered and sexual meanings, and its role in the production of gender hierarchies. By emphasizing the significance and nature of embodiment while refusing a determinate model for the body itself...my theory does not reduce rape to either violence or sexuality, but presents it as an assault that includes both elements...my theory will blur those lines by arguing that the particular violence of rape is sexual, and that the sexuality inherent in it is violent” (Cahill 2001)

So, Cahill is proposing a theory that embraces both the violence and sexuality of rape and defines it as a type of attack on the selfhood of the victim. Rape is an individual type experience, so just saying that only certain situations are rape does not work particularly well. It could be a friend, husband, or total stranger at a party that rapes someone. There are particulars in all of these cases, but because there is something embodied about rape we can conceptualize it as a

bodily matter.

This will also allow us to think through the realities of rape without having to conceptualize it as an all-encompassing thing that is the most important aspect of a woman's life. The bodily experience of being raped is the type of experience that can have a powerful impact on the woman, though it is only one type of experience. That is to say that not every person who is raped acts the same way after and does the same things and feel the same things. Cahill differentiates rape from sexual assault. She sees the instance of penetration as the delineation between rape and other forms of sexual assault. She links this decision back to discussions like those of Marion Young who discusses the violation of physical space as a threat that women are constantly aware of and socialized to fear.

One thing that is important to note for my thesis is that embodiment in digital spaces is different than embodiment of a real-life body. Penetration or rape would be more cognitive in the case of the video games. By that I mean that the trauma of the rape is not a physical property, but instead it is something that the player has to imagine or feel in a way that is not necessarily connected to the real world.

Miguel Sicart states that "the player as subject is a body-subject; it does not have a full body, real or simulated, but it does have some qualities of embodiment" (2009, 78). This body-subject is a subidentity that the player uses to interact with the virtual world; "playing is putting on the player-skin and experiencing the game world within it" (Sicart 2009, 79). The subjectivity and identity of the player affect how they interact and interpret the game world, but the player is simultaneously in dialogue with the values and morals of the game world they are visiting.

As players, we have the ethical capacities to interpret the game and the decisions we make in it as part of the process of creating our subjectivity. This means we will understand the game as a simulation, as a process in which our values relate to the values encouraged by the game. (Sicart 2009, 104)

The player as subject creates an identity while they play, an identity through which they explore the game world, but they do not leave their values and culture behind. Instead they view the game world through their experiences as embodied subjects in the physical world.

Another important aspect in the discussion of virtual embodiment is thinking about the interaction between human and technology. Brendan Keogh laments the focus on player immersion in games over the creation of the cybernetic circuit that is created through the

relationship between player, game, and the controller (Keogh 2014). Video games provide the player with an embodied experience by virtue of requiring the player to manipulate the controller and look at the screen or listen to the audio. This embodiment is even more important for video games as they require effort or interaction that necessary for engagement in a text or object as part of a literary experience, which Espen Aarseth termed ‘ergodic literature (Aarseth 1997). The interaction between player and game is necessary not just to make the game do things, but also to the way the story itself is told. Keogh goes on to state that “A cybernetic understanding of videogame play, then, does not leave the player’s body back in the real world while focusing on the events of an insular virtual world, but focuses on the meshing of materially different bodies into a single, cyborg body through which the player perceives the game” (2014, 16). Video games thus involve a physical and cognitive component to creating an embodied experience for their players.

Rape in Cyberspace and Cahill

Perhaps one of the most well know articles describing rape in an online space is Julian Dibbell’s article “A Rape in Cyberspace” (Dibbell 1994). He describes an early case of rape in a virtual space, more specifically in a MOO [MUD (Multi-User Domain) object-oriented] that was made up of rooms and text chat. A user who went by the screen name of Mr. Bungle created a script, or voodoo doll as he called it, which allowed him to take control of the avatars of other players. One night, with no provocation, he used his voodoo to cause other player’s avatars to do sexual things to themselves and others. During this time the other players had no control over the selves that they had created. The community was shaken by the occurrence, and Dibbell reflected that “To participate, therefore, in this disembodied enactment of life's most body-centered activity is to risk the realization that when it comes to sex, perhaps the body in question is not the physical one at all, but its psychic double, the bodylike self-representation we carry around in our heads” (1994, 476). For the victims of Mr. Bungle, having their agency within the virtual world taken from them was traumatizing. As Cahill stated “In the act of rape, the assailant reduces the victim to a nonperson. He...denies the victim the specificity of her...own being, and constructs her sexuality as a mere means by which his own purposes, be they primarily sexual or primarily motivated by the need for power, are achieved” (2001, 192). Even though Mr. Bungle used virtual bodies as opposed to physical ones, he used the victims to satisfy some need that he felt. He turned the avatars of fellow players into game objects that he then used for his own

purposes.

Framing rape as an embodied experience allows me to think about the ways that virtual rape, be it in online games or single player games, actually affects its victims. Of course, Cahill's definition is too narrow for my purposes in that she defines rape as penetration and does not extend her discussion to the virtual. But her definition is a useful starting point for me to think of my own method for defining rape and discussing it in the context of single player games. The body of the player forms a cybernetic circuit with the game, but it is also an important point of reference for how the player interacts with the world at large. The way our bodies are oriented to the spaces we enter affect how we interpret, interact, and feel in those spaces. By bringing a theory of the body into a virtual space I am to account for the affect of my own body and experiences on my understanding of the virtual.

Applying My Method

To aid my discussion and unpacking of the case studies I am looking at, I decided to think through the various orientations between player, avatar, game world, and developers. I will discuss five orientations. I have numbered them, but they are in no particular order.

1. Protagonist to Game World
2. Player to Avatar
3. Player to Game World
4. Player to Mechanics
5. Developer to Game World

Thinking about these orientations I shall delve into my case study.

Protagonist to Game World

For this section I want to think about the way that the protagonist is oriented in the world of the game. As I mentioned previously, the race, gender, and class (in both the RPG definition and social class) are choices available to the player when they are creating their avatar of the player character. Those choices effect game play, depending on whether the player chose warrior, rogue, or mage, as well as dialogue for both the player and other characters in the game. Race matters for this as well, but the colour of skin the player chooses has no effect upon the game at all. I will look at the way these choices the player made affected the game. I have

decided to think of this as the orientation of the protagonist to the game world.

This case study relies on embodiment and social position of those involved in order to tell the story. Vaughn was confident enough in his power and privilege to kidnap women from a wedding in front of the whole alienage, including a human Chantry Mother who has power in her own right. From the moment that the protagonist awakens it is clear that they are not wealthy. Their home is small and dingy. After talking to their father, we learn that elves are threatened by humans but have very little recourse when they are threatened.

As discussed above, the gender of the Warden affects how the incident plays out. When Vaughn first arrives and tells his men to “Grab a whore” his dialogue with the Warden changes depending on gender. To the female Warden he says “What’s this? Another lovely one come to keep me company?” compared to “What’s this, the two grooms come to welcome me personally?” which he directed to the male Warden. Women are under threat of rape whereas men are not, though both are under threat of physical and systemic violence.

The way other characters act in response to the threat to the Warden is also determined by their gender. Soris, the Warden’s cousin, tries to protect the Warden and warn of Vaughn if the Warden is a woman. He does not do the same if the Warden is male. The female Warden is rescued by Soris before she has a chance to fight as he is the one who provides her with the sword she uses to fight the guards who are holding her. The male Warden, in contrast, is put in the position to fight for and protect the women in the alienage.

The alienage itself drives home the plight of the elves. The elves are shown to have no systemic power outside of the alienage. They are treated like disposable workers and only have access to the dangerous or unwanted jobs. There is also a lack of information about elves outside the alienages, for example Dalish elves are considered a myth or little more than bandits if they do exist. There is a communication system between the different alienages, and families use matchmakers in order to find suitable marriage partners for their young people. Not all can afford a matchmaker and have to settle for whomever they can find, and this shows that there is stratification between the alienage elves.

Before the humans came, the elves were the dominant culture of the land and had magical capabilities beyond those of the humans at the time and in the present era. Little is known about the culture of the elves however, and they were defeated and enslaved by the humans soon after they came into contact. After many generations of slavery, a human woman named Andraste

revolted against the Tevinter Imperium, the dominant human empire, and started the Chantry, which became the major religion the player interacts with. Among her many great deeds was granting freedom to the slaves in the Imperium, and Andraste granted the freed elvish slaves a new home called the Dales. Unfortunately, the Dales was eventually invaded by humans and elves were once again brought under human rule, but the Dalish clans try to live according to the traditions of the Dales and that which came before.

Despite Andraste's work slavery still exists in some countries, and it is not unheard of for Ferelden elves to disappear and end up as slaves. A later quest in the game reveals that in the aftermath of the wedding the alienage is locked down after the elves revolt. Soon after elves begin to fall ill and are treated by human mages who agreed to set up a hospital and help. Elves that enter the hospital begin to disappear and the Warden discovers that mages were selling the elves as slaves.

The world is a patriarchy, though the Chantry is run by women. Women are under threat of gendered violence. For elven women this oppression is compounded as elves are under threat of racial and systemic violence. There are many racial slurs leveled at the elven Warden. Knife ear is the favourite, though Vaughn refers to all elves as animals. Elves cannot join the city guard or the army. They are labourers and servants. They are the last hired and the first fired.

The gender of the Warden is important as it determines whether they are under threat of rape, or whether they are expected to protect women from rape. The elves in the alienage are systemically and racially oppressed, and humans are able to treat them cruelly with little repercussions. Vaughn takes advantage of his power over the elves as both a human and a noble.

Player to Avatar

The player is inhabiting the role of the Warden and gets to make choices for the protagonist based on a variety of factors which depend largely on the player, but they are ultimately limited to the choices that the developers provided. Some players, for example, might choose to roleplay the character to the best of their ability based on what information the game has provided about their personality and motivations. Some players like to be as good and moral, or as ruthless as possible, which as discussed earlier in this chapter are both common paths that are available and quantified in many BioWare games.

The player is able to control, within the allowances of the game, what the player

character looks and sounds like. The player has chosen to be an elf, and they are told already that the character lives in poverty. This is an experience that they are choosing to have. By choosing to embody a character who lives in poverty the player could be argued to be engaging in a form of tourism, which will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Three.

The player is able to make the moral choices of the avatar and essentially determine their personality. This includes whether they are selfish or generous, and whether they will leave women in the clutches of rapists. Choosing to leave the women with Vaughn was incredibly difficult for me, even though I have never chosen to do so in my own playthroughs and the only reason I did so was for the sake of this research. Even when I played this section as a teenager and did not understand all of the implications of leaving the women I never chose this option. Part of this is because I do not like to play the mean or 'bad' characters in games, often going back and replaying sections if I choose an option that harmed innocent people or if I was accidentally rude to another character.

The player experiences racial slurs, though the slurs are mediated through the avatar. I, for example, have never been the victim of a racial slur so the first time I was called knife ear I felt indignant and righteously angry. I was angry at the racism of the characters around me and was able to feel good about myself as a result. I know that racism is bad, and now I am experiencing it for the very first time. This experience would not be shared by people of colour as racial slurs, and racism in general, are ubiquitous. This would thus be a mirroring or continuation of abuse that extends from the real world into the game world.

The avatar that I am playing is a young woman who superficially looks like me. We are both able bodied, we are both shorter than lots of people that we encounter, and in the case of this avatar we are both white. The hair style options for the avatars are all white hair styles. There is one example of dreadlocks, a black hairstyle, that is available to the player, and it does show up during the game. Additionally, the player is able to change facial features, and whether the character wears makeup or has facial tattoos. The female character is always assumed to be 'beautiful' or 'lovely' in the dialogue of the game, even if the player goes out of their way to make their character less attractive.

There are only two gender options and the male body is always taller than the female bodies. Female bodies are thinner and less muscled than their male counterparts, and the elven bodies are the thinnest of all. The male elves do not have options for facial hair, though the

humans and dwarves do. There is no option in the game to change the body shape of the Warden. The bodies of the elves and humans are important to think about in this case because throughout the three games elves are described as unusually beautiful. Beside the humans, the elves are slight and almost childlike.

The player is able to choose their character, including the ability to play as a member of a marginalized group. The elves are thin, beautiful, and child-like in appearance, and though there are customization options that allow the player to give their elven Warden darker skin and dreadlocks these are only cosmetic changes.

Player to Game World

The player is meant to understand the systemic racism that permeates the alienage and the politics of Denerim. The arrival of Vaughn and his lackeys works to emphasize the plight of the elves as a disadvantaged group. As the player explores the alienage their interactions with the elves drives home the point that the elves live in poverty, from the beggar who was injured in a work accident and left to die by his human boss, the family forced to go to Ostagar to work in a war camp even though they face sexual violence, to the very walls that isolate the alienage from the rest of the city, locking them in.

As the player runs around and make choices within the game world the characters around them react to those choices. At the end of the origin Duncan recruits the protagonist into the Grey Wardens, and ultimately approves of everything that the character has done up to that point. If the player chose to save all the women Duncan approves because the protagonist is a hero and selfless. If the player chose to leave the women, then Duncan approves of their dedication to getting the job done, saying “You did what you had to do to accomplish your mission. We need people like you”. Results are all that Duncan cares about when finding his Grey Warden recruits.

The world of Thedas is very recognisably based from a fictional version of Europe. Fereldens speak with an English accent, Orlesians speak with a French accent, and there are very few people of colour. Instead people of colour are represented by the different races in the game, though mostly the elves are the sole stand in for all people of colour. Elves are a grab bag of all oppressed peoples and colonial evils. Dwarves speak with American accents and have a strict caste system, though I did not have time to delve into the Dwarves in this thesis.

Player to Mechanics

Large games like *Dragon Age* are complex systems that require teams of people to spend countless hours to create. Developers are thus necessarily constrained by the time, resources, and technology that they have available to create the games that they do. Constraint means that no game will ever have all the features that the developers may have wanted to implement or that players wish for, and it also means that choices will always have to be made in the development process. For example, in order to provide the player with agency regarding the narrative, *Dragon Age* provides the player with a wide variety of dialogue options that may lead to differences in the narrative the player is experiencing. In one playthrough the player might decide to give money to their childhood friend, so the family can stay in Denerim, while choosing to wish them a good journey to Ostagar when they next replay the game. These conversation options allow the player to develop their character, as well as create the feeling that they are an agent within the world they are experiencing. Dialogue options and narrative choices available to the player may seem to have a wide range of repercussions, and on a small scale this is true. If the player does not give their childhood friend money the family disappears, and they are never encountered again by the player. If they provide an alternative, such as money to stay in Denerim or enough to buy passage to Highever where they have family they will either attend the wedding or leave immediately respectively. This choice has an impact to the player experience as the family will either remain or leave depending on one conversation and the options selected.

Small choices are important in *Dragon Age*, as well as many other games, but the main narrative of the game remains the same regardless of the choices that the player makes. It does not matter to Duncan how the player chooses to deal with Vaughn and escape the Arl's Estate, he will always recruit the protagonist and begin the journey to Ostagar and the rest of the game. Developers use branching narratives and conversation trees to provide these experiences of small-scale choice while following the path through a largely static story. Just as Duncan will always bring the protagonist to Ostagar, the Warden will always have to follow the same general path throughout the narrative in order to complete the game. The player is able to choose the order of the tasks they complete, and many quests are optional to merely complete the main storyline, but the overarching narrative remains the same.

Branching narratives and conversation trees are able to create variation in the details of the story, but they can also lead to problematic messages or implications as a result. As I have

previously discussed, Duncan will always conscript the protagonist into the Grey Wardens whether or not they decide to rescue Shianni and the other women from the Arl's son. Additionally, Duncan approves of either action that the player makes. Leaving the women in the hands of Vaughn is just as acceptable as saving them.

This decision on the part of the developers makes sense in terms of the conversation trees and structure of the narrative. Duncan is the leader of the Grey Wardens in Ferelden and is mentor to the protagonist. Duncan is positioned as an ally to the Warden, and this relationship would be strained if he expressed anger towards the Warden so soon into their relationship. He would be positioned as a critic or rival as opposed to saviour. And his reaction could not be so severe that he chose instead to leave the protagonist behind as opposed to taking on the type of person who leaves women with their rapists. Having Duncan react negatively to the Warden early on might also mean that he would need to have more dialogue written and voice acted later in game in order to avoid inconsistencies later.

Developer to Game World

This is a rather large and nebulous type of orientation. One of the characteristics of the elves in *Dragon Age* is the extent to which they are subjugated within the games. Players have long discussed the possible inspiration for the elves, noticing similarities to Romani, Jewish, and indigenous peoples. David Gaider, a head writer for *Dragon Age*, wrote in a post in the *Dragon Age* Forums that these similarities are not unintentional. Early in development, he explains, the game was supposed to be inspired by medieval Europe, and so the elves were to be similar to the Romani. As the game grew however, the elves began to encompass many other oppressed peoples across history, including indigenous North Americans among others.

What might it mean for the developers to create a race, the elves, who are a grab bag of the oppressed? We know that the North American game industry is overwhelmingly white, male, and Western (D. Williams et al. 2009). There is a certain privilege in creating a culture within one's game that is drawn from the actual lived experiences of people from all over the world, though this is by no means uncommon within the fantasy genre.

How, then, are the developers oriented toward race? It is something distinct and tangible. Race provides inherent capabilities and limitations. It is something that can be added to a game for fun. This is not to say that BioWare has done anything new in their treatment of race. In fact,

there has been much written about the problematic way that race is handled, which will be explored in Chapter Three.

Elves are not without their own baggage. Within Tolkien and beyond elves have inhabited the stories and minds of peoples. They have long been depicted as the Other, something not quite understood and different to humans. The Other is that which we compare and contrast ourselves against in order to determine our own identities and values. Elves in Tolkien were separate and aloof, but still represented the Other (Poor 2012).

Elves in *Dragon Age* carry the history of Tolkien's elves and the Other. They are also Romani, the Dalish wagons, or 'aravels' as they are called in the game, are recognizable enough. They were enslaved and freed, yet still treated like they are sub-human. This is not unlike the experience of the freed slaves in the United States. The Elves have also lost their culture due to encroachment and colonization by the humans, and they hold on to the shred of knowledge that they have left, searching for more about their ancestors. This is the reality for indigenous peoples around the world.

Rape is also brought up by the developers, though it is left as a moral quandary for the player, as well as a way of creating tension in the world, as opposed to something that the player can actively combat. Rape and sexual violence are just facts of life in the game world, though it is also only a threat to women. Men do not have to worry about being raped themselves, they only have to worry about the women close to them being targeted. This conception of rape in by no means unique to the game world, and in fact points to the dominant way that rape was, and often still is, talked about at the time the game was made.

Discussion

This case study exemplifies the precarious position that elven women are placed in Ferelden. Gendered violence and racial oppression are shown to be constant threats under which they are forced to live. But this case study foreshadows some of the larger issues in the game world that the Warden, and by extension, the player will face.

The gender of the Warden is important to the game and changes options available to the player, for example who they can romance, and affects how other characters react to the Warden. The female Warden is complemented for her appearance and is called pet names like 'my dear', by Duncan. This is not the same for the male Warden.

Rape, this case study shows, is only a threat to women. In this case elven women are under threat, but human and dwarven women are at risk later in the game. For example, the Warden meets Bella, a human barmaid, who is constantly sexually harassed by her boss. The Warden can choose to help her or ignore her.

The experience of the player toward the rape could be different based on the subjectivity of the player. The same could be said for the entire case study and game. For the white player, like me for example, the case study is a representation of racism and systemic oppression. It is easy to label it as wrong and just play the game. However, for people of colour the case study recreates the same systems of oppression that they themselves may encounter in their everyday life, or are close to those that have deeply impacted their lives in some way. I used the example of racial slur knife ear, which in the game is used against elves.

In the end, no matter what the player chooses to do with Vaughn the Warden will still be recruited by Duncan. The choice does matter in terms of worldbuilding and creating a personality of the Warden. Shianni's rape is thus used as a plot device for character development and to create a situation for the player to navigate and deal with. For players that have experienced sexual assault they are forced to deal with a situation may be triggering for them, or if they are playing as a female Warden they are forced to live through the threat of rape once again. For those men playing the game who are themselves survivors of sexual assault, the game inherently argues that men are not the victims of rape. Their experience is erased and this in and of itself may be traumatic for the player.

Though it diverges from the scope of this paper, it is also worth mentioning that non-binary players are also erased from the game from the moment they are asked to create a character that is either male or female, and the only place trans characters exist in the game are in the Denerim brothel working as prostitutes. Bodies that differ from those available to the player are also important to think about. Fit, able bodies are the only ones represented in the game which could be disorienting and upsetting for player's whose bodies do not conform to these standards. I want to mention these other ways that the player may be disoriented by the game because I think they are incredibly important and worth considering, but they were out of scope for this thesis.

This case study exemplifies how women, elven women especially, are under the threat of rape by human men. As a larger whole, elves face discrimination and threat of violence. This

origin orients the player to the rest of game by showing how their elven Warden grew up and how they can expect to be treated for the rest of the game.

Conclusion

The player character is the vessel through which the player interacts with the game world and other characters. By thinking about how the embodiment and orientation of the player we can systematically analyse the arguments that the game is making. This is especially important to think about when it comes to sexual assault as the embodiment of the individuals involved is important for understanding the cultural implications and understandings of the crime. The embodiment of the player is important because it can let us think about how players might react or be affected by the way rape is represented in the game.

Chapter Three: The Tourist as Judge, Jury, and Executioner

Introduction

In the previous chapter I looked at how the embodiment and orientation of the player, player character, and game developer relate to video games and sexual assault within video games. I discussed race as one aspect of embodiment but did not delve into the subject. This chapter looks specifically at the use of race in video games and how this relates to the human protagonist in BioWare's *Dragon Age II*. By exploring fantasy races in games, including the elves in *Dragon Age*, and the tendency to ascribe racist stereotypes to these races I will look at the use of colonial narratives within such games. I will then explore the complicity of the player in cases where they are able to make choices in games. I provide an analysis of a quest in *Dragon Age II* where the player is asked to decide the fate of a human noble with a history of kidnapping and murdering elven children. I end by considering this case study in the context of prominent Canadian court cases, Canada's use of residential schools, as well as other related recent events in the context the game exists within.

Dragon Age II

Dragon Age II (DAII) has many issues as a AAA title, though it is my favourite of the series. The development cycle of the game was rushed, and one of the issues fans were most disappointed with was the reuse of major map assets when creating areas. Only a handful of dungeon areas were created, meaning that every cave, dungeon, hidden crevice, and pathway were the same cave, dungeon, hidden crevice, and pathway over and over again. To add variety the developers blocked off doorways and changed the routes through the areas, but the base area was always the same.

BioWare limited some customization options for the player, limiting the player character's race to human. The protagonist of *DAII* is referred to by their surname Hawke, and later the Champion of Kirkwall after they thwart the enemies of the city the game is set in. The player can choose Hawke's gender, appearance, and class. As in the previous game the player can choose between three classes: warrior, rogue, or mage. For most of this chapter I use they/them to discuss Hawke as a general character as the player can choose Hawke's gender

during the character creation. In cases where I discuss specifically male or female Hawke I switch pronouns for greater clarity.

Hawke and their family begin the game as refugees from Ferelden, the country in which *DA:O* was set, fleeing the Blight which resulted in their village being overrun by invaders. Hawke and their family end up in the city of Kirkwall, one of the city states in the Free Marches. *Dragon Age II* takes place over a period of six years, during which Hawke rises in social status from a refugee to a noble and aids the city through uprisings and invasion.

The Hawke family includes the protagonist's mother, Leandra, and their younger twin siblings Bethany and Carver. Leandra was born to the noble house Amell in Kirkwall, but was out after she married an apostate mage, Malcom Hawke. The couple moved to Ferelden to start a family. Bethany was a mage like her father, while Carver missed that gift and instead trained with a sword becoming a warrior.

Hawke's personality throughout the game is what the player makes them, though there are three basic personality types that Hawke generally falls into: diplomatic, humorous, and aggressive. These are the three main dialogue options that the player can choose from, though there are other emotional responses when the situation demands it. Diplomatic Hawke tends to be fair and just. Aggressive Hawke is ruthless and impatient. Humorous Hawke also tends toward fairness and justice, but pokes fun at the situation before getting to the fairness and justice part. In my playthroughs I generally play the humorous Hawke with a moderate amount of diplomacy mixed in. I fall into the category of player who dislikes being mean to fictional characters, specifically those who are lower status than my character, sometimes to the point of going to a later save and re-doing a conversation if I was accidentally rude. This does not apply to those characters that are higher status and use their power against those lower than them, which is when I enjoy the sarcastic or witty dialogue options.

For the most part the Diplomatic and Aggressive personalities for Hawke are the most different from each other. Christopher Patterson describes BioWare's choice systems in their games as having competing values, usually focusing on the community versus the self (Patterson 2015). Diplomatic Hawke is generally concerned with aiding the larger community, whereas aggressive Hawke tends more towards selfishness.

Dragon Age II takes place in a prologue, three acts, and an epilogue. The prologue begins with Hawke and their family escaping from Lotharing which had been destroyed by the Blight.

The events of the prologue occur midway through the timeline of *Dragon Age: Origins*. While the family escapes they meet up with Aveline and her templar husband, Wesley. Before the group manages to escape Wesley and one of Hawke's siblings are killed. Whether Bethany or Carver dies depends on the class of character the player decided to make. If the player chose to play as a mage then Bethany dies. If they chose a rogue or warrior, then Carver is the one who dies.

The remainder of the Hawke family, along with their acquaintance Aveline, escape to the city of Kirkwall where they find themselves just another group of Ferelden refugees. Unfortunately, Kirkwall has been closed to refugees and they must go elsewhere. Leandra, who was a noblewoman in Kirkwall, insists to the guards that if they get word to her brother Gamlen Amell, he could prove that they belong in the city. The Hawke family is disappointed to learn that Gamlen managed to lose the Amell family's fortune and place in the city hierarchy in the years since Leandra left and does not have the power to get the family inside. Gamlen uses his contacts in the city's underworld instead to make a deal, so Hawke and their sibling instead must sign on with either a mercenary band or a group of smugglers for a year who will then provide the appropriate bribe money to admit the family into the city.

The first act of the game begins a year after Hawke's arrival in the city. Hawke is approached by a Dwarven merchant, Varric, who is looking for investors for an expedition into the Deep Roads. The Deep Roads were created by ancient Dwarves before they were overrun with corrupted creatures and are generally unusable. Hawke agrees to invest in and accompany the expedition, and the Act is spent raising enough money to earn their place. It is during this act that Hawke meets their companion characters who they fight besides, socialize with, and in some cases even romance. The player is also introduced to the socially stratified city of Kirkwall, where most of the citizens live in poverty, with the exception of the wealthy elite. Ferelden refugees make up the poorest group of people in the game, and many of the inhabitants of Kirkwall actively look down upon them.

The second act begins two years after the first and focuses on tensions between Kirkwall and another group of refugees, the Qunari. The Qunari are a race of large, grey, horned, humanoids who follow a strict doctrine called the Qun. Between the prologue and first act, a ship carrying a large group of Qunari was shipwrecked near Kirkwall and they were given a compound in the Docks district of the city. No one is able to learn why the Qunari do not leave,

only that they are waiting for something. The Qunari leader, the Arishok, grows increasingly more disturbed over the rampant crime and injustice within Kirkwall. Hawke, who is newly wealthy from the results of the expedition, is asked to aid with relations between the Arishok and Kirkwall. Unfortunately, the tension reaches a breaking point and the Arishok decides that the best thing for Kirkwall is for the city to be taken over and ruled according to the Qun. Hawke manages to save Kirkwall from the Qunari threat and ends the act as the Champion of Kirkwall.

In the final act Hawke has become a powerful person in the city and is again asked to aid in a time of crisis. The mages, who are kept locked in towers away from the rest of the population under the supervision of the Templars, a religious order charged with protecting the Chantry, began to chafe under years of abuse and mistrust. The First Enchanter Orsino and Knight-Protector Meredith, the leaders of the mages and templars respectively, ask Hawke to side with them in the growing tensions. Though Hawke tries to keep the peace, again violence erupts, and the city is thrown into chaos.

DAI has four quests in which the conflict is the result of sexual assault. One involves a templar who rapes mages who have been made tranquil, which is essentially a magical lobotomy. Another quest involves Hawke being asked to rescue a woman from bandits, who she says were arguing over who would rape her first though she was saved by another man before Hawke arrived. The climax of the second act is triggered by elven men killing a guard who raped their sister, and the fourth case is discussed in my case study. As in the previous game, gendered and racialized violence are major themes throughout the game even when rape is not explicitly involved. For example, Hawke's mother is murdered by a mage who tried to recreate his lost wife by assembling the body parts of women who her share physical features. Hawke's mother could have been the woman's twin and so she was killed last so that he could use her head and face. This case is disturbing as it involves the extreme objectification of women, but does not quite fall into sexual assault.

DAI is a game in which the drama arises from class and racial struggles and misunderstandings. Kirkwall is a stratified city, so much so that the city sections are named Hightown and Lowtown, and the slums are built under the city in the Warrens. Powers among the elite in Hightown and the criminal syndicates in Lowtown and the Warrens fight each other to acquire even more power. This is a story where inequality and oppression are the driving forces for change and chaos, and Hawke is left trying to put out fires in a city that insists on

setting itself alight.

Race, Embodiment, and Video Games

Dragon Age II differs from the other games in the series in that the protagonist is only able to play as a human character. In the previous chapter I discussed how the race that the player chose for the protagonist influenced the way the character was treated in the game, including racial slurs and insults being used against the protagonist. Hawke, in contrast, must be human. Hawke's humanness is an important aspect of their identity and the way they navigate the struggles they and the player are faced with. Despite their initial status as a refugee, or a 'Ferelden' as they are often referred to by NPCs they interact with, Hawke is still able to climb the social ladder and become a powerful figure within the city. As in *DA:O*, the player can choose from a variety of skin colours when creating Hawke, but these choices have no influence on how Hawke is treated within the game.

Humanness in *Dragon Age* takes the place of Whiteness in Western society. It is assumed to be a default. I touched upon Sara Ahmed's discussion of race in my previous chapter, but I focused primarily on the way that she argued bodies of colour are both disoriented and disorienting bodies (Ahmed 2006). The orientation of the player in relation to the game may be uncomfortable for the player depending on their own embodiment and personal history. In the previous chapter I focused most heavily on how this relates to sexual assault, and how people will experience sexual assault differently based on their own embodiment and orientation. Sara Ahmed's book *Queer Phenomenology* does largely focus on those bodies that deviate from the expectations of the white, heterosexual, and male norm of the world that we live in, she does devote time to thinking about the way whiteness itself is an orientation. Just as whiteness is often thought of as a non-race, because the western world is oriented with Whiteness in mind it is easy to forget that white bodies also have an orientation. Ahmed states:

To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins. One fits, and in the act of fitting, the surfaces of bodies disappear from view. White bodies are comfortable *as they inhabit spaces that extend their shape*. The bodies and spaces "point" toward each other, as a "point" that is not seen as it is also "the point" from which we see. (Ahmed 2006, 134–35)

White bodies often exist in spaces that were made for white bodies by white bodies, and the spaces have been stretched and extended to be comfortable within those bodies. The way white bodies are oriented in these spaces is the orientation of the space, and because it is comfortable it disappears from view, becoming invisible for those who occupy that position.

In order to talk about Whiteness as an orientation we have to think about how it was constructed, and that requires us to think about the history of colonialism. Sara Ahmed, when discussing the work of Fanon, says: “Colonialism makes the world ‘white’, which is of course a world ‘ready’ for certain kinds of bodies, as a world that puts certain items within their reach. Bodies remember such histories, even if we forget them... In a way, then, race does become a social as well as a bodily given, or what we receive from others as an inheritance of this history” (Ahmed 2006, 111). Once an orientation becomes comfortable it falls into the background and becomes unnoticed for those who fit within that orientation. Therefore, it can be so difficult for people to notice the ways in which we are privileged. We have an easier time recognizing orientation in moments of discomfort or disorientation, Ahmed says.

Because the world is built with white bodies in mind, it is easy for people to assume that white bodies are better suited to some tasks and people of colour are less suited. “Phenomenology helps us to show how race is an effect of racialization, and to investigate how the invention of race is as if it were ‘in’ bodies shapes what bodies ‘can do’ ” (Ahmed 2006, 112). The distinction between what bodies ‘can do’ and what they can actually do is important for video games. It is common in games, including *Dragon Age*, for different races to have bonuses to different attributes like strength and dexterity based on stereotypes, and these choices by developers often naturalize race and racial stereotypes. One such example is the Redguard race in Bethesda’s *The Elder Scrolls* series. The Redguard are a race of desert peoples with dark brown skin. They are the only race with black people in the game, though the other human races can have darker skin. In *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* the Redguard have bonuses to strength and endurance, but they have a penalty to intelligence and willpower, the stat for magic use, and are described as superstitious and wary of magic (Bethesda Game Studios 2006). The important part for thinking about whiteness ties back to not having to think about the ways the world is laid out because the world is laid out with a white body in mind. It also is appropriate when thinking about how the elves in *Dragon Age* are ‘a grab bag of oppressed peoples’ and how colonialism brings certain items, bodies, and experiences closer so that they can be accessed by white bodies.

Video games also are built with white bodies in mind and are oriented so that certain experiences are more attainable. For example, many games involve violence as is common in first person shooters. Ansh Patel has argued that games like *Far Cry 2* and *Far Cry 3*, which ask the player to kill ‘savage’ enemies in order to take over their territory and acquire their resources are reenacting imperialist narratives (Patel 2016). This is compounded by people of colour being placed in the role of the enemies who the player must kill indiscriminately with the purpose of gaining territory. The very mechanics of first-person shooters, Patel argues, are reinforcing an imperialist agenda. Johan Höglund has also written about how many first person shooters have their roots in orientalist ideas of the other in creation, particularly an American neo-orientalism bolstered by the Military Industrial Complex (Höglund 2008).

Dragon Age is not free from such imperialist and colonial themes, and it is in the third instalment of the series that these themes are especially apparent. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* takes place during a time of civil war, infighting in the Chantry, and outright war between Templars and Mages. In order to confront the main enemy of the game, the Inquisition led by the player character, aptly named the Inquisitor, must bring peace to the region before creating a unified front. The Inquisitor then goes through the land solving disputes, gathering allies, and claiming strongholds for the Inquisition. One of the main game mechanics involves finding landmarks in the game world and ‘claiming’ them for the Inquisition. There is even a related animation where the Inquisitor drives an Inquisition flag into the ground near, or sometimes directly on top of, the claimed landmark. Often these landmarks date back to the ancient elves who once ruled the land before they were defeated and enslaved, or the Avar barbarians who live in the mountains. The Avar worship spirits, shun outsiders, and often use mud for clothing and armour, all while being looked down upon by the ‘civilised’ peoples in the lowland nations such as Ferelden and Orlais. Colonization thus becomes a game mechanic as well as a theme.

The player can choose the skin colour of Hawke, but this does not change Hawke’s status as a human. Though the character creator includes options for darker skin, these changes to the avatar have no effect on the way Hawke is treated in the game, which is consistent with the other *Dragon Age* games. Race is instead hidden behind fantasy stand-ins, such as non-human races like the elves and qunari. The use of fantasy races in games is quite common, as is its use in other media such as books and television. This does not mean that racism is left behind, only obscured.

Race in Video Games

Race and video games have always had a fraught relationship, and studies have consistently found that people of colour are under-represented within games and the teams that make them (D. Williams et al. 2009; Chan 2005; Dietz 1998). This is partially a genre issue as science fiction and fantasy often draws upon the same racist and sexist tropes and stereotypes. J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis are particularly known for creating fantasy versions of European culture that relied on White supremacist ideas (H. Young 2016). David Leonard and others have discussed the prominence of ‘digital or high-tech blackface’ in video games (D. Leonard 2003, 5). In his discussion of the Grand Theft Auto series Leonard describes how players are able play out racist stereotypes and fantasies within the game.

Melissa J Monson, Tanner Higgins, as well as many other games scholars have discussed the influence of Tolkien and Lewis in world-building in games and the continued use of racial stereotypes being assigned to fantasy races. Monson is especially concerned by use of race-based societies, pointing specifically to *World of Warcraft*, which has Orcs, Trolls, Taurens, and Humans among the available races for players to choose (Monson 2012). Humans in Warcraft can have both light and dark skin tones, but their culture draws heavily from European fantasy settings. Taurens are a race of herbalist, nomadic warriors who live in long houses and conform to stereotypes of Native American cultures. Trolls live in a tropical jungle, speak in Jamaican accents, practice voodoo, and wear bones as jewelry and decoration. Monson relates these portrayals of racial stereotypes to Galloway’s ‘Jar Jar Binks’ problem, where he refers to the alien in the *Star Wars* prequels:

This is what one might call the ‘Jar Jar Binks’ problem of fantasy representation: the more one seeks to extricate oneself from the mire of terrestrial stereotyping, the more free and flexible the bigotry machine becomes, able to repopulate one’s racialized imagination with ‘aliens,’ but aliens that conveniently still stick to the gangly comic relief of the blackface minstrel complete with exaggerated facial features and a Jamaican accent. (Galloway 2007, 97)

In fact, Monson states “over and over again, it becomes plain that rather than rejecting real world conventions of race-based societies, many fantasy realms have embraced essentialism, cultural allegory, and White supremacy” (Monson 2012, 55).

Higgins is specifically concerned with the lack of black options or experiences within

MMORPGS, arguing that though players might engage in playing out a fantasy when creating their character, those fantasies are limited by the game itself. A player engaging in a fantasy works within the confines of the game and character creator, as well as “the attributes, history, context, and culture given to the races by the game itself. Consequently, when blackness has no preset qualities to influence role-playing...the player is completely free, if not encouraged, to indulge in dominant fantasies of blackness and enact a form of virtual minstrelsy” (Higgin 2009).

Tourism

Video games can be thought of as a form of virtual tourism, which brings with it all of the baggage and colonialist tendencies bell hooks and others have long been concerned with. Just as tourism has been critiqued for creating conditions where those from wealthy countries are able to travel to exotic locales and experience a commodified, performative version of the local culture, video games allow players similar experiences from the comfort of their own home. Tourism, black face, and minstrel shows are all tied up in a long history of exploiting the experience of people of colour (D. Leonard 2003). Video games is just one aspect of our entertainment industry that utilizes this tradition for the purposes of telling stories and creating virtual worlds.

Tourism can often be colonial in tone, especially when it is occurring in places that had been colonized in the past by the very people who make up most of the tourists. The tourists often take a position of power and shape the place to their expectations of what life is like as opposed to the actual lived experience of the locals. Tourism is a physical manifestation of the phenomenology of whiteness as described by Ahmed, as the white tourists are positioned to be able to easily reach the countries where they can vacation because of the history of colonialism that has constructed those conditions. But at the same time there are restrictions in place so that those in the colonized places cannot as easily go to the countries of the tourists, either to visit or to live due to restrictive and racist immigration rules.

Video games do this as well, but the tourist is not as restricted by their own wealth. Virtual tourism is only restricted by whether the tourist is able to afford the game and game system, which is a much lower bar than airfare and hotel costs. Virtual tourism through video games allows players to visit other places that are constructed by the game developers, and these constructions are often made to the expectations of those making and playing the game as

opposed to reality. Virtual tourists are also able to interact with the space in a way that has little consequences to themselves, and so they can do horrible things without worrying about how it will affect them.

Coloniality and Player Complicity

The colonial project of constructing the world in such a way that it is in reach of certain types of people can be understood in Quijano's concept of coloniality of power. In his description of how coloniality manifests in Canada, Brian Noble states: "the idea that the very disparities of modern power are structured by colonizing processes." In thinking about the embodiment and orientations of the game developers to their existence in relation to a colonial state, I argue that they are perpetuating colonial narratives and inequalities through their creation of game worlds. Coloniality is one of the conditions that allow game developers, as well as other media producers, to use the images and histories of some people as entertainment for others.

Dragon Age takes place in a realm that has experienced war, slavery, and colonial conquest. The game world thus teaches the player about these things through the avatar, and through the codex and other in game text. Rape is tied into the social fabric created by the above conflicts. The developers are drawing on their own societies to create their game worlds, and thus embedding certain values into the game world. Coloniality can thus help us think about the structures that are at play in the creation of the games, as well as those ideas that are recreated in the fictional world.

Player Choices and Ethics

Dragon Age often puts the player in the position to mediate disputes and decide on the appropriate method of justice in a wide variety of situations. BioWare often creates these situations within their games, and they are far from the only company to do so. I want to take a moment to think about the way that the embodiment of the player may influence the choices that can be made in the game. How might the interpretation of a choice change depending on the embodiment of the player? Could the available choices add to the disorientation of the player, and how specifically might it do that?

In his discussion of BioWare's other popular series, *Mass Effect*, Christopher Patterson notes that the player is asked to take up the role of not only managing "multicultural identities

into a culturally determined division of labor but also to assume the imperial role of the multiculturalist umpire who sets the parameters and casts monocultural others as villains” (Patterson 2015, 209). The various races in *Mass Effect* have specific talents that are inherent to their culture, similar to *Dragon Age*, and Humans occupy a ‘Jack-of-all-Trades’ position. The human protagonist, Shepard, in *Mass Effect* is put in a position to manage their multicultural team so that they can use the specialized labour of their non-human teammates and must convince those teammates to put aside the individual issues of their peoples in order to serve a greater multicultural purpose. One example of this is when Shepard is forced to either kill their squad mate Wrex, who is one of the violent and warlike Krogans, or convince him to help destroy the cure to the genophage, a disease that has made his people almost completely infertile. For Wrex, his people face a slow death, compounded by the fact that the genophage is synthetic and was caused by another race that thought the Krogan were too dangerous to live. Patterson points out that during the conversation to convince or kill Wrex “Despite the player’s intention’s in these dialogue wheels, the script continues to place Wrex as plagued by his own ethnic interests, a brute whose violent passions must be kept in line (or on the battlefield) by a multiculturalist umpire” (Patterson 2015, 219). This is but one example of Shepard having the ability to commit genocide or uphold an in-progress genocide within the trilogy.

Hawke is similarly tasked with solving problems that they are questionably qualified for. Hawke is asked to solve problems around the city and make crucial life and death decisions, but they have very few qualifications to make such decisions. Hawke is not a member law enforcement, part of the criminal justice system, or trained in dispute resolution; they are a mercenary who made their fortune by investing in an expedition, who people insist on asking to solve their problems. This is especially troubling when the issues Hawke is solving resolve sexual assault or racialized violence.

Colonial Narratives

One important thing to think of when talking about how the *Dragon Age* games portray culture is to consider the colonial states that the games are created within and the logics that permeate the logics of the game. As I have argued, *Dragon Age* creates a world in which colonialism is the norm and it allows the player to participate in that process.

What does this mean for *Dragon Age II* and what does this mean for sexual assault in

video games? Through Hawke, the player is able to interact with a world that is drawing heavily from a rich history of racist and sexist stereotypes which often translates into problems that need to be solved. As is typical in games, the protagonist is the only one who can solve these problems and provide a voice of reason for the inhabitants of this virtual world. Due to their position as a human, Hawke is able to navigate the literal and political battlefields to become the Champion of Kirkwall. In order to get to that position, they are called upon to become the arm of the law, as well as the judge, jury, and executioner in a number of disputes that they have no true stake in or really even any relevant qualifications.

One such dispute is between a human noble and the father of a kidnapped elven child. The noble has a history of kidnapping and murdering elven children, claiming that he cannot help himself because they are so beautiful. Though it is never stated in the dialogue or narrative of the game, I argue that this case can be read as a pedophile stealing and murdering children as it is similar to portrayals of such in television and other media. Hawke is called in to decide the fate of the noble.

Case Study: The Human Noble and Elven Child

On the surface, the incident that I am looking at is a case of corruption in the criminal justice system. Hawke, the protagonist of *Dragon Age II*, is asked by a magistrate to capture an escaped criminal hiding in a cave outside the city. When Hawke and her companions arrive at the caves, they encounter the city guard and an elven man. The elven man is angry as the criminal has kidnapped his daughter, who is just the latest victim of the kidnapping and murder by the trapped criminal. The father insists that the only way to stop the violence against elven children, as only elven children have been taken, is to kill the criminal. The guards, the father claims, have ignored the murders of the children up until this point and no one else has cared enough to step in.

Hawke enters the cave and finds the child who had been taken. She explains that Kelder, the man who kidnapped her, told her to run so that he would not hurt her. She begs Hawke not to kill him as he just needs someone to help him.

Hawke continues further into the cave and encounters Kelder himself. He begs Hawke to kill him, explaining that no one can help him get rid of the demons in his head. He insists that killing the children has not been his choice, instead he was forced by the voices. His father, he

continues, even brought him to the Mage Circle to deal with the demons, though they claimed that Kelder was not under the influence of demonic forces and refused to help any further. Killing him, Kelder says, is the only way to keep him from murdering more children.

Hawke informs Kelder that they were sent by the magistrate to capture him. It turns out that the magistrate is Kelder's father and has been covering up the crimes of his son for years. Though his father has tried to keep him contained, Kelder has always managed to escape and continue with his crimes.

Once the player has exhausted all of the dialogue options and learned all they can about the situation they presented with a choice: kill Kelder or give him back to his father. It is implied that his father lacks the ability to contain Kelder, and thus it is likely that the crimes will not stop. The magistrate refuses to send his son to prison or to lock him up just because "I am not going to lose my son because a handful of elves make up ridiculous stories". If the player kills Kelder they will not get paid by his father but will be putting a definite stop to any more murders. Hawke's companions agree that Kelder should die, and one goes so far as to offer to kill Kelder himself. If Hawke opts to let him live, all of the companions disapprove and gain rivalry points which begin to impact their relationship with Hawke if enough are gained.

Kelder's choice to target elven children is not a matter of opportunity so much as obsession. He describes his awe and frustration with elven children, stating that they are so beautiful, and 'no one has the right to be that beautiful'. Kelder keeps the children for an unspecified amount of time before killing them. It is these facts that lead me to think that the developers are strongly suggesting that Kelder is a pedophile as well as a murderer. I have thus decided to think about this instance as one that falls into my criteria for rape.

This quest tells the player in no uncertain terms that there are systemic issues in the way crime is handled in Kirkwall. This quest is mirrored later in the act when the Arishok, the leader of the Qunari, decides that there is too much oppression in Kirkwall to be allowed to continue under its current ruler. He comes to this decision after two elven men come to him for sanctuary after they had murdered a city guard. They had committed the murder because the guard had raped their sister and they were unable to pursue justice for her in any other way.

The player has two choices in this quest: Kill Kelder or give him to his father. This choice is similar to other times when the protagonist is asked to pass judgement on a rapist. Other cases include Shianni's rapists in the city elf origin story discussed in the previous chapter

and choosing whether to help a bar maid in Redcliffe who is constantly harassed by her boss. The player is asked to pass judgement on those who reacted to the rapes as well, such as the case with the elven men who killed a guard mentioned above, and in *DA:O* a powerful elven mage who turned the bandits who killed his son and raped his daughter into werewolves. These cases exist beside similar ones where the player passes judgement on murderers, thieves, smugglers, and runaway mages. Choosing the fates of others is one of the main tasks Hawke is forced to make, and the Warden and Inquisitor in *DA:O* and *DA:I* respectively are put in the same positions. Despite the ubiquity of these choices in general throughout the games, it is worth asking how asking the player to make a judgement about a sexual assault differs from other crimes.

In what follows I analyze the case study by examining some of the ways the player, the protagonist, and game developers are oriented to the game and this quest in particular. I have broken the quest into five different orientations, drawing on phenomenologist Sara Ahmed and rape theorist Ann J. Cahill who both discuss the relationship between the individual subject, gender, race, class, etc., and how these factors affect how the individual experiences the spaces which they inhabit (Ahmed 2006; Cahill 2001). Orientations are the relationship between bodies and the spaces that they inhabit, and spaces are constructed with certain bodies in mind. Bodies are more comfortable in the spaces created for them. By looking at each orientation separately I can think through ways that the embodiment of those experiencing different orientations may be impacted differently by those orientations.

Rape, Cahill argues, is an embodied experience between subjects, and everyone experiences rape differently based on the embodiment of who is involved. The social context in which the rape occurs is also important in understanding how those involved will understand and conceptualize the experience. For example, if a white man rapes a woman of colour it is important to take colonial histories into account when considering both how the individuals experience the rape, as well as how those on the outside might react to the crime. The same must be considered if a white woman is raped by a man of colour, as there is a long and racist history of portrayals of men of colour being a sexual threat to white women. This history and the fact that white bodies are valued more highly than bodies of colour means that each of these rapes will be treated differently because of the subjectivity of those involved.

Protagonist to Game World

Hawke is a human who grew up in a marginalized family. Hawke's father and sibling, and potentially Hawke, were apostates, mages who were living outside of the Circle of Magi. This status means that they could be captured and taken away, or perhaps killed if they are noticed by Templars. Hawke and their family arrived in Kirkwall as refugees and worked their way up through the hierarchical structures. This means that Hawke is no stranger to oppression, and throughout their journey they have run into many examples of power's ability to corrupt those who hold it.

But, Hawke is also a human. Despite being treated badly because of their status as a Ferelden refugee, Hawke still has a certain amount of privilege by virtue of their race. This is evident in the lack of racial slurs used against Hawke compared to those experienced by an elven Warden or Inquisitor in the other games, or even compared to the many elves that Hawke meets around the city. In all three of the games, elves are referred to as 'knife-ears' and have a decreased access to well paying jobs and opportunities to advance. The Warden and Inquisitor experience this as well, in part because they are called knife-ear from time to time throughout the story. Another example of the way elves are treated occurs at the beginning of *DA:O* when the elven Warden tries to talk to the Quartermaster in Ostagar, and the Quartermaster becomes angry that an elf he presumes is one of his servants is wearing armor. Many of the people in Ostagar assume that the elven Warden is a servant and treat them accordingly, at least until they learn that they are speaking to a Grey Warden recruit.

Hawke essentially has white privilege due to the use of humanness as default. If Hawke sides with Kelder and his father, Hawke is siding with an oppressor over people of colour. This would mean that Hawke is complicit in any murders that Kelder commits later in life, though Hawke is never made aware of any more elven children going missing. Hawke was built as a white person, and this quest line reinforces this orientation. For example, it is worth considering whether the magistrate would have contacted Hawke to help with this problem if Hawke had been an elf? He assumed that because Hawke was a Ferelden refugee who was looking for money, and had previously worked as a mercenary or smuggler, that they would not be concerned about the specifics of the job. In contrast, there are quests where the Inquisitor and Warden are asked to choose between elves and humans, but those quests are written with the fact that the protagonist could be an elf and the dialogue often reflects this. In addition, many of those

choices are borne out of necessity, meaning the protagonist happens upon the incident that leads to the choice. This differs from the Kelder quest significantly because the magistrate contacts Hawke asking for help. Hawke has not heard of Kelder or the missing children until after the meeting with the Magistrate. The magistrate asks Hawke to bring the criminal into custody and, although he does not mention Kelder's crimes, he probably knows that Hawke will learn the specifics upon reaching the cave. He just assumes that Hawke will side with him against the 'lying' elves. The magistrate is assuming Hawke will choose humans over elves, men over women and children. This quest would not make sense if Hawke was an elf.

Hawke's gender is also important in thinking about this incident. We know from Young and Cahill that women are socialized to fear and protect themselves from rape (I. M. Young 1980; Cahill 2001), so what would it mean for a woman Hawke to leave a murderer and pedophile in a position to continue hurting people. Hawke would be taking the position of a white woman. She would be protecting the freedom of a white man over the lives of children, specifically children of colour. A male Hawke would be in the position of one white man protecting another white man from the consequences of his crimes.

Hawke's humanness grants them privilege in Kirkwall and leads the magistrate to assume that Hawke will choose human over elf. Hawke's gender is important in this case as it changes the situation from a white man protecting another white man, or a white woman protecting a white man. The magistrate assumes that Hawke holds the same values and prejudice as himself, making Hawke's humanness key to the quest being offered.

Player to Avatar

The player is the one to decide how Hawke reacts to this situation, as they have been able to do throughout the game. The player is thus able to decide if Kelder will be able to steal more children or to grant Kelder his wish. Hawke's humanness avoids the digital blackface discussed earlier in the chapter but could fall into the role of a white savior.

As a white woman playing through this quest I find myself reflecting on the ways that white women have generally sided with white men against women of colour, and reminds me of bell hooks assertion that:

White women and black men have it both ways. They can act as oppressor or be oppressed. Black men can be victimized by racism, but sexism allows them to

act as exploiters and oppressors of black women. White women may be victimized by sexism, but racism allows them to act as exploiters and oppressors of black people. Both groups have led liberation movements that favor their interests and support the continued oppression of other groups. Black male sexism has undermined struggles to eradicate racism just as white female racism undermines feminist struggle. As long as these two groups, or any group, defines liberation as gaining social equality with ruling-class white men, they have a vested interest in the continued exploitation and oppression of others (hooks 2000, 16)

Admittedly, this choice in a video game is decidedly lower stakes than those hooks is describing, but the quote feels relevant in the larger context of the games and beyond. If I, as a player, were to save Kelder, I would be contributing to the perpetuation of violence in a virtual space as I have the opportunity to do in my real life. As hooks says, as a white woman I have a vested interest in maintaining racial oppression. And though it may be silly to use this quote in the context of a video game, this is what I keep coming back to. I feel that by siding with the magistrate I would be perpetuating or reinforcing a colonial narrative and committing a racist act.

The same would be true of a white man playing through this quest and choosing to side with the magistrate. If he uses a male Hawke to save Kelder then he is upholding the narrative of men, specifically white men, placing the desires of other men above the safety of all others. If the player decides to play a female Hawke, then he is naturalizing white woman's racism.

As a white woman I do not know what this quest is like for people of colour, but I will still try to point out some of the ways this orientation might be disorienting for people of other races. We know from Sara Ahmed that disorientation or discomfort occur when people are in spaces or situations that were not constructed with their bodies in mind. Moments of disorientation are useful for studying orientation because they are the moments when one's orientation becomes apparent. This quest could result in disorientation for people of colour, or people who have been affected by similar violence.

D&I is asking its players to embody a white protagonist, and this is by no means new for the video game industry and players of colour. This is also not the first time that games have asked their players to play through racist tropes and histories. But it really seems uncomfortable

to ask people of colour, or victims of abuse, to embody a white person who has to decide what to do about another white person. And the choice is either do what the criminal wants or let them go.

The player is put in a position to mediate a dispute between a white murderer and children of colour. For white players choosing to side with the Magistrate they are upholding white privilege and protecting a white man from the consequences of his actions. For those players who have experienced similar situations in their own life, they are being asked to adjudicate a dispute of a traumatic moment in their life.

Player to Game World

The way the player is oriented to the avatar differs from the way the player is oriented to the game world itself. Though the player interacts with the world through the avatar this does not mean that they only experience the game world only through the avatar. The player is able to replay the game with different avatars, for example choosing a different gender for Hawke or playing the character in a different way than in other playthroughs. This is separate from the way the player thinks about and experiences the game world. They can also think about the game world in the context of their own lives, much like I am doing in this thesis.

Setting Hawke aside, the player is still confronted with the quests and general storyline of the game. At its core this quest is a case where a child of colour is stolen by a privileged white man whose father is actively protecting him from punishment for his many crimes. This is by no means unheard of today. There have been many news stories in recent years regarding white men and boys being protected from consequences of their crimes or given lenient sentences when they are punished. In terms of sexual assault, Brock Turner from the Stanford rape case caused public outrage when he was only given six month jail sentence for sexually assaulting an unconscious women, of which he only served three months (Roberts 2017). Additionally Canada is still in the midst of the crisis of missing and murdered indigenous women where indigenous women are much more likely to face violence than their white counterparts (Hansen 2014).

This situation would have a very different meaning depending on the embodiment of the player. It is possible to think of Kelder as a murderer but not as a pedophile depending on the cultural cues the player is used to. As a white, middle class player I see a case of definite injustice and a failure of the justice system, but I have a hard time seeing myself or people like

me at risk of being placed in a situation like this, where the officers of the law refuse to acknowledge that children are going missing. Conversely, for a person of colour, this might not be as removed from their own experience. Canada is still feeling the effects of its residential schools where indigenous children were taken from their families and sent to institutions where abuse and sexual assault was not uncommon. The last residential school was shut down in 1996, so it is reasonable to think that people who attended a residential school or knows people who did would play this game, or other games with similar themes or tropes (J. R. Miller 2017). For example, in *The Elder Scrolls Online* there is a quest where the protagonist must visit a reform school run by High Elves teaching Khajiit, the race of anthropomorphic cats, and Wood Elves, who are considered savage by High Elf standards, that their cultures are wrong and that those who are not High Elves have no worth (ZeniMax Online Studios 2014).

Players with a history of sexual abuse, specifically those who were victims of pedophilia would also have a different reaction to this quest line. There is no warning to the player at the beginning of this mission about the themes that this quest will deal with. This is not a required quest, so the player can choose not to complete it, but then they would be leaving a, fictional, pedophile unpunished which may not sit well with some players.

For those players with personal experience with the themes of this quest, the fact that it is possible to get more rewards from this quest in terms of gold and experience points by letting Kelder live than killing him may be hard to stomach. Hawke is paid whether Kelder lives or dies, either by the magistrate or the elven father, but it is possible to blackmail the magistrate for more in exchange for Hawke's silence about Kelder. More experience points are possible because, if the player chooses to let Kelder live, he will escape which triggers a combat with undead further in the cave. Kelder escapes during the battle but having to combat the additional enemies will result in more experience points than the player receives when Kelder is killed.

Dragon Age II uses real world inequalities in order to create the conditions for this quest but does not necessarily consider that those who have experienced said inequalities would play the game. Deciding whether Kelder lives or dies is treated as an ethical choice for the player, but the ethical choice involves a pedophile and a child who has been coded as a child of colour. Sexual assault continues to be a challenging issue of the Canadian justice system, and Canada is still coming to terms with its use of residential schools.

Player to Mechanics

The player only has two options, kill Kelder or allow him to be taken by his father. Even if Aveline, who at this point is in the Kirkwall guard, is with the player-character, there is no option to release Kelder into her custody. There are secondary choices, such as accepting Kelder's father's bribe money to return Kelder to him. The player can also blackmail the magistrate, threatening to tell people about the crimes of his son if he does not give Hawke more money to pay for their silence.

This is a case where the mechanics severely limit the ways that the player can resolve the situation. One solution could have been to turn Kelder over to Aveline so that she could make sure that Kelder is tried for his crimes. Though there are technical and practical restraints from allowing the player too many options, in this case the choices for dealing with Kelder are stifling and awkward. This is compounded by the fact that Kelder begs Hawke to kill him, so that the only way to protect the elven children is to follow the wishes of their potential abuser.

As I mentioned above, letting Kelder live provides the player with more gold and experience points than killing him. This rewards the player more for letting Kelder live. The money and experience points might be meant to be a trade off for the rivalry points acquired by letting Kelder live, but there are many opportunities to obtain these points so, in the long run, this choice is not particularly important either way. The father of the elven child will give Hawke one gold piece for saving his daughter, whereas the magistrate will pay two or three gold depending on whether Hawke blackmails him about his son. One to three gold is worth very little to the player by the time they get to this quest in relation to the gold they have already acquired and compared to the price of items the player may want to buy. This quest is more a world-building choice for the player to demonstrate how just or unscrupulous their Hawke is.

Developer to Game World

For the developer, the case of Kelder and the elven children is a way to allow the players to experience first hand the inequalities of Kirkwall as well as provide a moral decision of the player. It occurs within the second act where the injustice in the city is one of the key issues that drives the Arishok to action. This case closely mirrors the inciting incident for the climax of this act. A couple of elves murder a member of the Kirkwall guard because the guard raped their sister, and nothing was done to punish him. The Qunari take the men under their protection as

they feel their actions were justified.

This use of violence against children of colour is reminiscent of Sara Ahmed's discussion of white phenomenology, where she states that whiteness puts objects and experiences in reach while hiding itself from those it is orienting (Ahmed 2006). Colonialism is the process of putting the rest of the world within reach of the colonizer, making it easier to acquire luxuries from abroad as well as making those places more comfortable for colonial bodies. When orientations become comfortable they become invisible and spaces that were restructured become the natural way of things. The bodies of the colonized are also placed in reach of the colonizer, either for the purposes of labour or for a variety of violent purposes. Using the experiences of people of colour to provide entertainment for other white people is not unique to *DAIL*, and it is inline with the way whiteness operates and orients the world. The colonial experience is within reach to the developers of *DAIL*, and so they took it and applied it to their narrative of the game which seeks to entertain.

As I have discussed previously, the majority of game developers are white and/or male. This means that many game developers feel comfortable in the assumed orientation of the white male player. They would not feel many of the moments of disorientation that women or people of colour might experience as they play this or many other games. This is obviously not the case for all individual game developers, but as a group they tend toward a certain colonial orientation that is exemplified by Kelder and the elven children.

Discussion

For me this case study is related at least in part to player complicity. Despite the fact that Kelder and the elven children are fictional characters, allowing Kelder to continue to harm elven children reinforces stereotypes and cultural narratives that can have devastating effects in society. Kelder stands in for the pedophile, but he is also a more general figure of a powerful man shielded from the consequences of his crimes. Harvey Weinstein, Larry Nasser, and Jerry Sandusky are just a few such men (Kantor and Twohey 2017; Associated Press 2017; Levenson 2018). Kelder's choice of victim is important as well. Elves, who I have discussed, are taking the place of colonized peoples, specifically people of colour. In Canada, for example, indigenous women and girls are at an increased risk of violence. This quest is a political statement on both the part of the game developer and the player, this is in addition to the inherently political nature

of video games as well as all media and entertainment.

It is also worth questioning how these case studies reinforce the oppression of women of colour, specifically women of colour. Hawke is a human coming in to a racially charged situation and is able to choose to protect people of colour or uphold the status quo which in this case is the murder of children. Hawke faces no consequences for choosing either side and is rewarded by the game for choosing to let Kelder go. In the aftermath of the death and subsequent trials for Colton Boushie and Tina Fontaine in Canada, and the deaths of children like Tamir Rice in the United States, it is dangerous for game developers and the media in general to treat children of colour, or stand ins for children of colour, as disposable for the sake of entertainment. And elven children are treated as disposable and unimportant, which is why Kelder chose them.

This quest line does not seem to consider that the player may have a personal connection to the subject matter, such as a history of sexual abuse or apathy by law enforcement. The player is assumed to have a similar orientation to both the game developer and, as I have argued, Hawke, which makes this case even more troubling. When games like *Dragon Age*, *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) inscribe fantasy races with real world racial stereotypes, they allow players to engage in digital blackface and play through racist fantasies, or they allow the player to decide to un-self-critically uphold colonial injustices or become a white savior.

Conclusion

Video games have a history of using racist stereotypes as part of their world building, often applying those stereotypes to fantasy races. Hawke's humanness is a key part of their character as they are able to draw on privileges not extended to elves or other non-human races that represent people of colour. Hawke's humanness is akin to white privilege and they are able to uphold whiteness or try to work against it. The orientation of the player is important to consider when thinking about cases where Hawke is asked to protect other white people as opposed to those hurt by whiteness.

Chapter Four: Who's Got the Power?

Introduction

In this chapter I am exploring the possibility of the player being put in the position of rapist within the *Dragon Age* games. I begin by returning briefly to discussions in the previous two chapters where I looked at definitions of rape and how colonialism and power factor into consent and sexual assault. After introducing the plot of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare 2014) I briefly look at romances within *Dragon Age*, as well as point to those in BioWare's other popular series *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007), to show a pattern of unequal relationships within the games where consent is assumed, but as I point out, is questionable at best. I compare such relationships to female sex tourism, where women travel to exotic countries and find boyfriends among the locals. I conclude with an in depth look at a relationship in *Dragon Age: Origins* (*DA:O*) (BioWare 2009a) which exemplifies many of the questions raised in this thesis.

Colonialism and Consent

In Chapter Two I discussed Ann J. Cahill's work on sexual assault, and her definition of rape which is "the imposition of a sexually penetrating act on an unwilling person" (Cahill 2001, 11). Furthermore, rape "reduces the victim to a non person ... denies the victim the specificity of her ... own being, and constructs her sexuality as a mere means for his own purposes" (Cahill 2001, 192). Due to the way women are specifically socialized to be conscious of, and fear, the threat of rape as part of their socialization Cahill focuses on women as victim and men as rapist in her definitions. This focus is emphasized by her argument that rape is an embodied experience between subjects. She states that "Embodiment is precisely the site of the possibility and necessity of difference; as such; it constitutes both that which is most shared by subjects qua subjects and that which differentiates subjects from each other. Precisely because all subjects are embodied, all subjects are embodied differently" (2001, 113). This difference between subjects is what allows Cahill's definition to avoid the pitfalls of universal approaches of rape which focus on specific acts, outcomes, or templates for what does and does not constitute rape. I used a case study from *DA:O* to illustrate this definition, and the importance of focusing on the victim and perpetrator as subjects. Cahill emphasizes the importance the subjectivity of all involved in the

rape, as this can change the meaning of the rape as well as how it is interpreted by society at large.

I expanded on Cahill's discussion of subjectivity by introducing Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* in which she talks about the ways subjects and their bodies are oriented, or disoriented, in space (Ahmed 2006). The subjectivity of the body is a crucial factor in determining how that body is oriented to the spaces they inhabit, but also in how they are oriented to other bodies. Cahill and Ahmed are important to understanding instances of sexual assault which may not fit the stereotypes or the 'easy' definitions which I have explored in my previous two case studies and those that are often portrayed in popular culture. These 'easily' defined rapes are those that are achieved through violence, such as kidnapping, physical force, and threats of death. But in this chapter, I am thinking about the 'unwilling' aspect of Cahill's definition and her discussions of coercion, and the ways that coercion manifests.

Cahill calls into question the usefulness of consent, discussing both the way coercion undermines one's ability to give consent as well as the inequalities in society which place some subjects in more or less powerful positions than others. Consent, Cahill explains, assumes that both parties are in an equal position to make the agreement in question (Cahill 2001, 169–87). It does not consider that, for example, a woman may consent to sex with her husband because she is worried he might become dissatisfied by the marriage if she does not meet his desires, whether or not he has explicitly expressed such ideas. The structural inequalities in our society are a key component of our subjectivity and must be considered when thinking about consent:

In approaching rape as an embodied experience, we reject any easy distinction between the political realm and the personal, while simultaneously refusing to view individuals as merely and utterly obedient replications of models in political discourse. From this perspective, because rape is both a political phenomenon and an individual experience of the embodied subject, the wrongs of rape have everything to do with the socially constituted body and everything to do with sexual difference and sexual politics (Cahill 2001, 187)

I realized when I was reading this section of Cahill's work that I had always conflated discussions of sexual consent with those discussions concerning research ethics and informed consent. The sources Cahill worked from were contractual law which seems to have different concerns than university ethics boards. Informed consent "must be conducted before the

individual agrees to participate. This process must be free of social pressure and coercion” (Whiteford and Trotter II 2008, 66). My ideas of consent are bound up in research ethics and the aim of respecting participants and avoiding harm. Inequality, social pressure, and coercion are important factors to consider while determining if one’s research is ethical, and I will apply these same principles to thinking about sexual consent.

In addition to my own conflation of sexual consent with other ethical frameworks, organizations such as Planned Parenthood and Sexual Assault centres, including the centre at the University of Alberta, define consent in a way that addresses many of the issues Cahill raises. Planned Parenthood defines consent as freely given, reversible, informed, enthusiastic, and specific and uses a broad definition of sexual assault: “Often, people will use the term ‘sexual assault’ to refer to any kind of non-consensual sexual contact, and use the term ‘rape’ to mean sexual contact that includes penetration” (Planned Parenthood n.d.). The Sexual Assault Centre at the University of Alberta uses the following definition of sexual assault:

At the Centre, we define sexual assault as any form of sexual contact without voluntary consent (adapted from the Criminal Code of Canada, Sec.270).

- Kissing, fondling, vaginal or anal penetration, and oral sexual contact are all examples of sexual assault if they take place without voluntary consent.
- Consent obtained through pressure, coercion, force, or threats of force is not voluntary consent.

Acquaintance sexual assault is sexual assault where the survivor knows the person who committed the sexual assault. The offending acquaintance may be someone the survivor hardly knows (e.g. a friend of a friend) or someone the survivor is close with (e.g. a partner). (Sexual Assault Centre n.d.)

They also provide a definition of coercion that I find useful:

Coercion refers to using pressure, threats, and/or intimidation to force another to give in or submit to sexual activity. Some examples of coercion are:

- Constantly putting pressure on someone or refusing to take no for an answer;
- Making someone feel guilty ("If you love me, you'll...");
- Threatening to withhold something or do something to make someone comply ("I'll break up with you...", "I'll tell everyone you...");

- Being emotionally manipulative ("I can't live without you...", threatening to harm one's self);
- Using physical or verbal intimidation to force someone into submitting or complying (not allowing someone to leave, previous or implied threats of violence). (Sexual Assault Centre n.d.)

The cases of rape and sexual assault that I have discussed in my previous two chapters have been framed within the games as sexual assault, or at the very least a crime. Cahill's definition of rape, though limited, could be usefully applied to those cases. The cases I discuss in this chapter do not necessarily fall into what Cahill considers rape, and they are not framed as rape within the narrative of the game either. I chose Cahill for this thesis because her exploration of the embodied nature of sexual assault was useful for this thesis and paired well with Sara Ahmed's phenomenological approach. Though I will continue to draw upon her discussion of the embodied subject, I will leave Cahill's definition of rape behind for this chapter and use the definitions utilised by Planned Parenthood and my local Sexual Assault Centre.

In the previous chapter I used the case study of the human noble and the elven children to discuss the ways that Hawke's privilege put them in the position of arbiter in a conflict they otherwise had no part in. Using this discussion of power, I want to explore the coercive aspect of sexual assault by looking at a variety of relationships in *Dragon Age*. I will first provide context for *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and the problematic relationships I wish to discuss.

Path of the Inquisitor

Dragon Age: Inquisition begins months after the events of *Dragon Age II*, which had led to the breakdown of the Mage Circles and threatened the rule of the powerful religious organization, the Chantry. Mages in *Dragon Age* are required to live in segregation from the general population, under the eye of the Templars who act as the military branch of the Chantry. Those mages who live outside of the Circle are branded apostates and risk imprisonment or death at the hand of the Templars should they be discovered. *Dragon Age II* ends with the mages rebelling against the Templars after a long history of abuse, suffering, and oppression. Divine Justinia, the head of the Chantry, called for peace talks between the mages and Templars and leaders from the two factions gathered to negotiate for peace. The power of the Chantry covers many kingdoms, and so people from across the continent attend the talks.

The protagonist of *DA:I* is sent as a representative to the talks, and who they are representing depends on the race and class the player chose at the beginning of the game. As was the case in *Dragon Age: Origins*, the player can choose the gender, race, and class of the protagonist, though in addition to three races available in *DA:O* – human, elf, and dwarven – there is a fourth race available, qunari. The classes dictate abilities and items available to the protagonist for use, such as weapons and armour, and remained relatively similar from the first two games; warrior, rogue, and mage. Though there are only two genders available for the player to choose from, some of the options for customization are slightly less binary than in the previous games. For example, regardless of gender the player can change the size of the Adam's apple on their character, and female dwarves have some options for facial hair though this is largely limited to stubble and very short beards and not the long or bushy beards that are available for the male characters. I will refer to the protagonist with gender neutral pronouns to reinforce that the protagonist can be either gender. Gender specific pronouns will only be used in those places where the gender of the protagonist effects the conversation, choices, or potential outcomes in specific circumstances.

The protagonist is sent to the peace talks, either as delegate, spy, or extra protection against those who might wish to disrupt the proceedings. Their purpose depends on which race and class the player chose for them, though it does not much matter in terms of how the talks play out. The game begins with the site of the peace talks detonating. Everyone within is killed in the blast. Everyone, that is, except the protagonist who finds themselves in the Fade. The Fade is a separate place where spirits reside and only mages can influence and enter, though people are able to reach the Fade in their dreams whether they have magic or not. The Fade is not a place where one can physically enter, instead only one's consciousness or spirit enters leaving the physical body behind. Upon finding themselves in the Fade the protagonist is ushered to what appears to be a rapidly closing doorway out of the Fade by a glowing figure with a woman's voice. As the protagonist makes their way to the door they are attacked by strange creatures and are forced through the door without the figure who aided them. As the protagonist collapses outside of the still smoking temple which had hosted the peace talks they are found by soldiers investigating the explosion before they once again fall unconscious.

Once the protagonist regains consciousness they find themselves being interrogated by Cassandra, the Right Hand of Divine Justinia, and the same woman who interrogated Varric as

he narrated *Dragon Age II*. Cassandra is soon joined by the Left Hand of the Divine, Leliana, who was a companion in *Dragon Age: Origin*. They explain that Justinia, along with the other higher-ranking members of the Chantry, died in the explosion and any hope for peace is gone with them. To make matters worse, rifts in the barrier between the Fade and the world are forming and demons are coming through and wreaking havoc on the survivors of the peace talks. For unknown reasons the protagonist is able to close the rifts when no one else can and is recruited to help once their innocence is established.

The main plot of the game is dedicated to learning who caused the explosion and stopping their plot to gain the power to step physically in the Fade with an ancient elven device. Corypheus, the primary antagonist, is an ancient mage who is sowing turmoil across the Ferelden and the Orlesian Empire, to both gain power so he can attain his ultimate goal and to keep all those who could rise against him too distracted to focus on his movements.

Cassandra and Leliana ask the protagonist to join their cause to bring order to the land. They reveal that Justinia had grown concerned about the upheaval and chaos caused by the mage rebellion, and the civil war that had started in Orlais. Justinia's solution was to call for an Inquisition which would operate independently of all governments and the Chantry, with its own soldiers lead by a former Templar named Cullen and diplomats headed by former bard and Antivan ambassador Josephine, to bring order to the continent. With the death of Divine Justinia the Inquisition gained an additional directive; kill Corypheus.

The protagonist joins the Inquisition and is chosen by the leaders of the Inquisition – Cullen, Cassandra, Josephine, and Leliana – to become the Inquisitor, the head of the whole organization. Cullen stayed as the commander of the armies and military advisor, Josephine the political advisor and chief diplomat, and Leliana continued as spymaster of the Inquisition. Cassandra happily maintains her position on the front line away from politics and in the action as one of the companions the player can choose to bring in their party to fight alongside them during the game. The Inquisitor makes major decisions, such as who the Inquisition backs in the Orlesian civil war, or whether they will ally themselves with the mages or the Templars in order to end the war between the factions.

For the majority of the game, the Inquisitor is travelling to locations in Ferelden and Orlais to root out agents of Corypheus, as well as to address small-scale local disputes or issues that have not been dealt with by the governing body responsible. Sometimes because the

governing body has been corrupted by Corypheus, the governing body are all dead, or because the problem is too big for a single town mayor or noble to fix. When the Inquisitor goes to a new location they begin at an Inquisition camp and are given the lay of the land by Scout Harding, a cheerful dwarven woman, who describes the important local sites and the primary reason the area is of interest to the Inquisition. The Inquisitor then explores the area and claims landmarks for the Inquisition, this claiming mechanism includes an animation of the Inquisitor driving a flag into the ground beside the landmark in question, which often includes town centres, keeps, and sites important to the ancient elven cultures that had occupied the area before being driven out or killed by the human population. Camps are also established, which decreases the number of enemies in the vicinity thus bringing order to the environment. When old keeps, castles, or other fortified locations are found they can be occupied by the Inquisition which aids in spreading the Inquisition's influence and securing its political and military power. The Inquisition is creating an environment of subjugation, aiding people and then expecting help in their battle against Corypheus in return. It is in this environment that I want to explore the way consent and romantic relationships are represented within the game.

In a very real way *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is a game about colonization and imposing order under the banner of a religious order, and ultimately consolidating power for that order. It was an uncomfortable position to find myself in as a player, as I have studied the harmful effects of colonization and am critical of large religious organizations taking power, but the game does very little to critique the premise it has laid out. The term inquisition itself and the historical baggage of it brings with it is set aside and the Inquisitor is regarded as a hero. Even in gaming culture, inquisitors are generally represented as fanatics for their cause such as the Sith Inquisitor in BioWare's *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (BioWare 2011d).

This theme of colonization leads to a shift in how oppression is shown in the games. In the previous two games gendered and sexualized violence were commonly used to depict oppression. Race was important as well to these themes, but gender was more salient in showing which groups of people were oppressed and by whom. *DA:I* changes this script to focus on racialized violence and colonial violence. Elven history and details of how they were conquered and enslaved, as well as the state of their magical devices and knowledge, are vitally important to the narrative as opposed to being relegated to side plots or used in addition to gendered violence as was common in the previous games.

Unlike in *DA:O* and *DAII*, there are no storylines explicitly about rape within *DA:I*. Instead sexual violence is obscured, such as the Hunter becomes the Hunted side quest where the Inquisitor finds a series of camps, letters, pages of a journal written by a woman being pursued by an ex-lover who has turned violent. The quest ends with the discovery of the ex-lover left dead after a failed ambush and the woman finally free to move on with her life. One in game reference to rape is a joke made by the Inquisitor. While searching the Orlesian Winter Palace the Inquisitor hears someone calling for help from inside Empress Celene's room. They find a naked man tied to the bed. They interrogate him, while he is still tied down, and learn that he thought he would be 'rewarded' by Celene if he betrayed Duke Gaspard by telling her of the Duke's plan to attack the peace talks, but she beguiled him and left him tied up instead. The Inquisitor can either let him go so that he can provide evidence against Celene, free him but tell him to stay quiet about what had happened to him, or they can "Leave him to...whatever fate". Rape in *DA:I* is not discussed or represented as it was in the previous games, instead it is conspicuously absent amidst the inequality that permeates Thedas.

There are mentions of rape in the game codex, where background information, stories, game tips, and quest notes are unlocked as the player explores the game world. I chose to focus on the game play and did not review all such codex entries, but I did notice examples of rape within the flavour text for certain objects as a method of world building. For example, an excerpt from the codex for one of the constellations:

the constellation Eluvia is commonly referred to as 'Sacrifice.' During the Glory Age, folklore told of a young woman saved from a lustful mage by being sent into the sky by her father—after which the mage killed him (hence the sacrifice). The daughter became the constellation, depicted as a seated woman with her head in the clouds ("Codex Entry: Constellation: Eluvia" n.d.)

Though there are no quest lines directly involving sexual assault it does show up in the world building aspects such as the codex.

Despite the absence of explicit mentions of rape there is a theme of oppression within the game, and the inequalities that thrive in such an environment. There is some discussion about the abuses suffered by the mages in some circles by the Templars; this was an issue brought up in *Dragon Age II* as well, where a templar, Ser Otto Alrik, took advantage of his position to rape mages who had been made tranquil, meaning their emotions and connection to the Fade had been

stripped away. It is in this context that I believe we need to examine the relationships within the narrative and interrogate the ways that power can complicate the nature of sexual consent. Returning to Cahill's definition, sexual assault does not need physical violence to occur. Coercion is included, and structural violence and unequal power dynamics between individuals can lead to coercive effects whether that is the intended result or not.

A powerful example of the way that sexual violence is treated in *DA:I* is in the permissibility of homosexuality in Tevinter, another nation in Thedas that the Inquisitor must negotiate with but never visits. Tevinter is a slave owning nation ruled by powerful mage families and had been the empire that had originally subjugated the ancient elves. Darion, one of the Inquisitor's companions is the son of one of the powerful ruling families but is estranged because he refuses to renounce his homosexuality. Kim Johansen Østby discusses the treatment of homosexuality in Tevinter in dissertation on homosexuality in *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*. Østby explains that:

Homosexuality in Tevinter is only considered deviant in the context of noble-noble relations, whereas it is *actively encouraged* with favored slaves. Is homosexuality only deviant in one situation, but not the other? There are implications of a type of rape culture here. Homosexuality is really only "normal" if it is conducted with slaves. Sexual relations between a slave and a slave master are not necessarily automatically rape per se. Their diametrically opposed relationship, however, causes complications. While such relationships might be seemingly consensual or even romantic, it is also feasible to think that the slave does not have much of a choice in these matters because the master has much more power, owning the slave/object in question. Sanctions and punishments are likely enacted on slaves who are unwilling to offer up themselves to their masters' sexual lusts. In Tevinter, then, homosexuality is acknowledged as real, but it is expelled from the public sphere and instead encouraged to find expression in the private sphere by taking advantage of those that are already robbed of their freedom and confined to lives in servitude. We can view this as an attempt to make Tevinter even more unsympathetic to the player. Tevinter is rarely portrayed as a nation the player should support. At the same time, familiar and depressing tropes of homosexuality as perverse and

abusive are used for this gritty purpose and are thus perhaps only a more domestic version of the prison rape trope (Østby 2017, 312)

DA:I uses slavery to show the oppression of homosexual characters, but it does not explicitly discuss how the slaves are mistreated in the same way.

A crucial part of the Inquisitor's quest is gathering allies to fight against Corypheus, and this often means settling the pressing issues distracting potential allies. The Orlesian civil war is one such dispute which the Inquisitor is forced to solve. Orlais neighbours Ferelden, the setting of *Dragon Age: Origins*, and until just decades prior had counted Ferelden as part of their empire. The Orlesian peoples speak French accented English and the wealthy live in ornate palaces and villas and wear masks to better facilitate courtly banter and deception. The empire is ruled by Empress Celene, a savvy politician who had out maneuvered her cousin and heir apparent to the former emperor to take the crown for herself. Her cousin, Duke Gaspard, was supported by the military, but he was unable to sway the courtiers and gentry to his cause. Gaspard declared war on Celene and the country has been locked in a bloody civil war for months and the fighting has resulted in a deadlock. The elves in Orlais also threatened uprisings, adding to the strife. A grand ball held in the beautiful Winter Palace was proposed by Gaspard's sister as a venue for peace talks between Celene, Gaspard, and the elven leader Briala.

The Inquisitor learns of a plot by Corypheus to murder Empress Celene during the ball, and the only way they can keep the plan from succeeding is to attend the ball and attempt to foil the plot before the peace talks are interrupted. Before leaving for the ball, the advisors to the Inquisitor discuss the potential outcomes of the talks and how each candidate would impact the goals of the Inquisition. Josephine advocates for Celene to remain as ruler, both because she is the rightful leader and because she is better equipped to convince the nobility to help the Inquisition. Cullen respects Gaspard for his military prowess and argues that he would be the best choice to lead the Orlesian armies against Corypheus. Leliana suggests that Gaspard could become Emperor but with Briala behind the throne pulling the strings, revealing that Briala had been Celene's servant and spymaster before the two became mysteriously estranged. The advisors suggest that while the Inquisitor is looking for clues as to who is Corypheus's agent in the palace and thus behind the assassination plot, they should also look for material to blackmail the candidates for the throne which would then be used to end the civil war with the Inquisition chosen ruler sitting on the throne.

While searching the palace the Inquisitor finds proof confirming rumours that Celene had indeed had an affair with Briala. In addition, they save an elven servant and spy who claims to be a critic of Briala as she remembers when Briala was little more than Celene's pet. The relationship between Briala and Celene can be used to blackmail both women. Celene would be ridiculed for sleeping with an elf, whereas Briala would lose her position as an advocate for elven rights and the similar political power she has gained.

Patrick Weekes even wrote a novel, *Dragon Age: The Masked Empire*, about Celene and Briala which in part focuses on the relationship between them (Weekes 2014). It is worth thinking about how much less power Briala would have had in the relationship than Celene, and the fact that Celene as empress would have had life or death power over her subjects. Briala left Celene due to her responding to an uprising in an alienage, a walled off section of a city where elves are forced to live in poverty, by burning the entire alienage to the ground.

I have always found *DA:I*'s treatment of Briala uncomfortable as the quest requires the player to use her questionable past relationship against her, either by convincing her to reconcile with Celene and have them work together again, having her sent away in disgrace, or by setting her up as the true power behind Gaspard's throne but beholden to the Inquisition. This use of her past relationship has always seemed similar to blaming the victim to me, as she was not in a position to refuse any advances by Celene. It also implies that activists are not allowed to grow from their pasts, even though one of the reasons Briala left Celene was because of a dispute about Celene's treatment of elves.

This case follows similar patterns seen in the case study of the previous chapter. The Inquisitor, like Hawke, is asked to decide the fate of those involved in a dispute, putting the player in the position of adjudicator. Additionally, this case echoes the racial and class inequalities noted in the case of the human noble and elven children. Celene is one of the most politically powerful characters in the game, and though Briala gained political power during and after the relationship she is far from Celene's equal. Such inequality between individuals is common throughout the series, including between the player character and their various potential romantic partners.

The Player as Rapist

In this chapter I want to delve more deeply into the relationships that the player

characters are able to enter into throughout the games and the way this relates to the embodiment of the player and player character and whether these embodiments call the implicit consent in these relationships into question, and how the racism within the games compounds these issues. Part of my challenge is that as a society we tend to focus on the most obvious cases of sexual assault in our media, which is generally those assaults committed by a stranger, even though the vast majority of sexual assaults are acquaintance rapes; cases where the perpetrator is known to the victim. Sexual assaults within relationships can be difficult to prosecute, in part because there may be little physical evidence, misunderstandings about what constitutes consent, and the way rape cases focus on proving that the victim did or did not invite the incident in some way. With the #metoo movement which has sparked conversations about cases where people have used their positions of power there seems to be a shift in how sexual assault is conceptualized by the general population, specifically in emphasizing coercive conditions and power imbalances, but this does not change the fact that there continues to more work that needs to be done.

I will briefly discuss the power relations between the player characters of the *Dragon Age* games and the companions they are able to have romantic relationships with. I argue that in many of the relationships the player character has power over the companions in question, which calls into question the inherent argument the games are making that the relationships are consensual. My argument is not that each of these relationships are automatically sexual assault, just that the pattern of power inequality taken as a whole is troubling and worth examining.

Troubling the ‘Yes’

The relationship between Celene and Briala is just one example of problematic relationships within the *Dragon Age* games, and in BioWare games in general. Similar relationships in *Dragon Age: Origins* include the casteless dwarven women who become concubines to higher caste Dwarven men with the hope of providing the men with sons, as children take the caste of their same gender parent. Casteless women who bear sons for higher caste men are provided with the means to raise the child, which ensures a better life for the mother. In the *Mass Effect* series Shepard, the protagonist who like the *Dragon Age* protagonists can be a man or woman and so I use they/their/them pronouns, is able to enter into romantic relationships with members of their crew, including those directly under them in the military command structure (BioWare 2007, 2012). For example, Ashley Williams, Kaiden Alenko,

Steve Cortez, and Samantha Traynor are all Shepard's subordinates in the military and are romanceable. This is different from other crew members who belong to alien species and militaries or agree of their own volition to join Shepard on their mission.

The inclusion of romances between members of the military is troubling in light of the high numbers of sexual assault within the Canadian military (N. D. Government of Canada 2014, 2015). Though *Mass Effect* takes place in the future, and there is an assumption that many of the issues of the present day have been resolved, it does not change that fact that the player is coming from a context where rape in the military is a persistent issue. It is troubling that Shepard is able to flirt with and ultimately sleep with their direct subordinates, many of whom refer to Shepard as Commander.

Similarly, *Dragon Age* includes romance options which involve the protagonist and people with less power or in a subordinate position. The Warden in the human noble origin story has the option to romance the maid of a visiting noble woman, and the Dwarven noble origin includes a concubine if the Warden is male. Dwarven society is organized into castes, and children are part of the same caste as their same-sex parent. Casteless women will act as concubines to men of the noble or warrior castes with the hope of providing them with sons. If they have a son they will be taken into the father's household to raise the child, thus escaping the poverty which is the lot of the casteless.

Many of Hawke's companions occupy marginalized positions in Kirkwall's society throughout *Dragon Age II*, and though Hawke begins the game in a similar position they end the game as a wealthy noble. Romances between Hawke and many of their companions are troubling because of the power Hawke holds in society compared to their love interests. Merrill, for example, is an elven apostate mage who was banished from her Dalish clan for dabbling in forbidden magics. She joins Hawke's party and moves into Kirkwall's alienage and suffers from intense culture shock. Anders, another companion, is also an apostate mage and is involved with the rebel mages in the city who are acting against the Templars. Both Anders and Merrill would be punished by the Templars if they were caught or lost the protection their association with Hawke provides. Alternatively, Hawke would have enough power later in the game to call the Templars down upon them without suffering significant trouble themselves. The other love interests in the base game are Isabella and Fenris, a pirate captain with no ship and a price on her head and escaped slave who has no memories of his past life. Sebastian, the final companion,

was added as downloadable content (DLC) who is a Chantry Brother and is a member of the royal family in a neighbouring city. Sebastian is arguably the only romance option in the game with equal power to Hawke, but he is not only DLC, but his Chantry position include a vow of chastity and he is only available as a romanceable character to a female Hawke. All the other romanceable characters can be romanced by either the male or female Hawke. The only companions of Hawke's that have relatively equal power within Kirkwall are Varric, who is a wealthy merchant, and Aveline, who is the Captain of the Kirkwall Guard, and neither are able to be romanced.

There are reasons given in the game for why Aveline and Varric are not available as romance options. Varric is uninterested in romance and it is hinted at that he is in love with someone he can never be with. Our only clue to her identity is that he named his crossbow Bianca and that he promised the namesake that 'it is the one story he will never tell'.

Aveline lost her husband during the prologue of the game, and during the later acts she is besotted with a fellow guardsman named Donnic. During the second act, Aveline, who is now the guard captain, asks Hawke to help her woo Donnic. Aveline explains that her problem is that she is only confident when she is performing her duties as a guard. Once she tries to interact with Donnic as a regular person and not a fellow guard she becomes awkward and flounders to comedic effect. One plan Hawke and Aveline hatch is to have Hawke invite Donnic to have drinks at a local tavern under the guise of inviting all of the guards but inviting no one else. Though the plan was to have Aveline show up to the outing she backs out before Donnic has a chance to notice her arrival at the tavern and Donnic politely leaves early in the evening. She also tries giving him preferential patrol routes which garners him negative attention from the other guards and to give him gifts. Eventually she decides to go on patrol with him, and Hawke goes ahead and deals with any issues that may require the guards' attention. By the end of the patrol Aveline is able to relax enough to talk to Donnic and they end up getting along very well. At the beginning of the third act it is revealed that they were married. Aveline's relationship follows the same trends that I have been discussing in terms of Hawke's romantic options. Aveline uses her position of guard captain to attempt to gain the favour of her subordinate.

Inquisition runs into similar problems as *DAII* and *Mass Effect*, in that the Inquisitor is the head of a military command and has significant structural power over those under them. Though there are romance options that have similar levels of power within the Inquisition, such

as Cassandra, one of the founders of the Inquisition; Cullen, the commander of the Inquisition's forces; and Josephine, the political mastermind running the Inquisition. Cassandra, Cullen, Josephine, and the spymaster Leliana, are the primary leaders of the Inquisition early in the game and are the ones to choose the player character to become the leader of the Inquisition. Though the Inquisitor becomes the leader of the Inquisition, these four have similar if not more power within the organization and beyond, and so though there is a discrepancy in the power dynamics of their relationships it is less pronounced than others within the game.

The remaining love interests in *DA:I* are Iron Bull, the captain of a group of mercenaries the Inquisition hires; Solas, an apostate mage and expert on ancient elven magic and culture; Sera, a thief and practical joker; Blackwall, a fugitive masquerading as a Grey Warden; Harding, an Inquisition scout; and Dorian, a Tevinter mage. The Inquisitor recruits many of these people to the Inquisition, with the exception of Solas and Harding, and in the case of Sera can ask her to leave the Inquisition at any time during the game. The Inquisitor can flirt with many of the love interests, as well as other characters, during the game, including those that are not available to the Inquisitor based on gender or race. Solas, for example, can only be romanced by an elven, female Inquisitor, Sera and Blackwall can only be romanced by a female Inquisitor, and Cassandra can only be romanced by a male Inquisitor. Flirting with the characters often elicits positive feedback or approval from the characters whether or not they can be romanced. Eventually the character will either reject the Inquisitor or provide the option to start a relationship, and if the Inquisitor does start a relationship with that character it cuts off potential relationships with other characters as the Inquisitor can only have one romanced character in a game.

Blackwall's conversation regarding the romance is interesting in this regard as he tells the Inquisitor that "I am fond of you, it's true, but we can't let this go any further. This...whatever you want this to be, is impossible", and the two dialogue options that are available to the player are to respect his wishes and end the flirting, or to ask, "why not" and continue flirting. The procedural rhetoric of this section exemplifies the issues that are prevalent throughout *Dragon Age* and many other BioWare games, and the ways that player driven romances can distort how sexual consent is portrayed. Relationships are chosen by the player, and thus the person actively pursuing the romance, and not the person being asked. The only barriers to the relationship are those written in the game's code and some choices that the player makes.

In the *Dragon Age* games there are seventeen romanceable companions and nine of them are lower in organizational, political, or social power. Leliana, who is romanceable in *DA:O* is arguable as she is othered in the game, but she still has a fair amount of personal power. Of the remaining seven characters all but two have similar power as the protagonist. The exceptions are Morrigan from *DA:O*, a witch who joins the Warden for her own undisclosed reasons, and Solas in *DA:I*.

I have decided to include Morrigan as a more powerful person because of a choice she presents at the end of the game. It is revealed to the Warden that the only way to destroy the Archdemon, the primary enemy of the game, is for a Grey Warden to strike the killing blow which will result in their death. At this point in the game there are three Grey Wardens: the protagonist, Alistair (or Logain, as Alistair will abandon the Warden if he is recruited), and Riordan who provides this information and ends up dying shortly after. The protagonist must choose which Grey Warden will be sacrificed, a choice made more difficult as Alistair may have been selected to become the King of Ferelden or the love interest of the Warden. Morrigan comes to the Warden with a solution to this moral quandary, suggesting instead a ritual that will save the life of the Grey Warden but comes at a high cost. She explains that the Archdemon is a corrupted Old God, and with the ritual the soul of the Old God can be captured in a new body and contained. The ritual requires that Morrigan become pregnant with the child of a Grey Warden, and the fetus would be the vessel to contain the soul of the Old God. If the Warden is male, he can choose to sleep with Morrigan or ask the remaining Warden companion to do so. The female Warden is only able to ask Alistair, who could very well be her lover, or Logain to go through with the ritual. If the ritual is completed it comes with a cut scene of the chosen Grey Warden lying on the bed looking a bit unhappy and Morrigan walking seductively to the bed before giving a small smile which the man returns. They embrace and the screen fades to black.

Morrigan is an edge case because she has similar power to the Warden, but the Warden makes all the decisions though she and Alistair give their opinions and suggestions. It is this ceremony that gives her life or death power over the party, but this is by no means a wholly ethical situation. This ritual was the entire reason she joined the party and if the Warden chooses not to allow her to perform it Morrigan leaves, abandoning the party before the final battle. Morrigan is one of the two mages in the party, depending on the class the player chose, and is one of the main characters that players use throughout the game.

Solas is also an edge case because he appears for the majority of the game to be an elven mage with a vast expertise in the magic and history of the ancient elves. He is only romanceable by a female, Dalish elven Inquisitor, though he is highly critical of the Dalish elves for their uninformed and inauthentic reproduction of elven culture. Even while romancing the Inquisitor he is disparaging of the Dalish, and the Inquisitor can either defend her people or agree with her lover. If the Inquisitor is romancing Solas, he will ask to go someplace special to talk late in the main quest line. He reveals that the face tattoos the Dalish wear as a proud part of their culture were actually slave markings forced onto the elves by the false gods the Dalish now worship. Solas offers to remove the markings with a spell he knows specifically for that purpose. The Inquisitor can agree or argue that whatever the markings once meant they have become an important indicator of Dalish identity and choose to keep them. Whichever decision the Inquisitor makes Solas decides to end the relationship.

After the events of the main quest he leaves the Inquisition and disappears for two years. The Inquisitor does not learn why he left until the events of the *Trespasser* DLC (BioWare 2015c) where they learn that what Solas had claimed about the elven gods was true. They were not gods but incredibly powerful mages who enslaved other elves and warred amongst themselves. One mage, Fen'Harel, worked to free the slaves and removed the slave tattoos from their faces. Fen'Harel was eventually added to the pantheon of elven gods, known as the evil god who killed or banished all the other 'good' gods. At the end of the game the Inquisitor learns that Solas is Fen'Harel and in his quest to free the elves created the veil between the Fade and the real world, which caused the elven civilization to collapse, leaving them vulnerable for the humans to enslave them.

Solas is problematic as a romance option because he is so much more powerful than the Inquisitor, and because the Inquisitor can never truly consent to entering into a relationship with him. He is literally the great evil of her culture, the boogie-man from her childhood nightmares. One cannot freely consent to the romantic relationship because she does not know what it is she is consenting to. The removal, or offer of removal, of the face tattoos is another moment that could arguably be rape. He removes, destroys, her connection to her cultural and her people. And then he abandons her. And his disdain for Dalish culture as a whole could be seen as a form of manipulation and abuse that lead up to this choice, which the Inquisitor could feel compelled to make to keep her lover happy.

Morrigan and Solas are the sole examples of relationships where the player character has less power than their romantic partner, and both are extremely ethically questionable. I am not arguing that all of the relationships that are unequal throughout the games are sexual assault, just that they are unequal, and that inequality is in itself problematic. All of the above relationships are unique and have different endings, for example some are ended by the companion as opposed to the player. But the specifics of the romances are not as important as the overarching problems that many of them share. For example, what is the implicit argument being made in DA:I that a way to build rapport with one's companions, or co-workers, is to flirt with them despite their sexual orientation or status in relation to oneself. As I mentioned, the romance options in DA:I generally result in approval by companions and at worst they do not disapprove.

BioWare has a pattern of creating unequal relationships in their games, as evidenced by *Dragon Age*. Most romanceable companions have less power than the protagonist, and those that do are still controllable by the player throughout the majority of the gameplay. This is in addition to the position that the protagonist is in as party leader in all of the games who makes decisions for themselves, their companions, and sometimes for the entire realm. The questionable consent does not just apply to the companions however, as Morrigan and Solas are examples of the player not allowed to properly consent to relationships or sex acts. Representations of ethical sex and consent are problems throughout the *Dragon Age* games, and though the player is sometimes in the position of victim they are most often in the position of perpetrator of sexual harassment or assault.

Is Everything Rape?

While writing this chapter and spending so much time thinking about all the relationships that I was calling into question, relationships that I had often found compelling and delightful in my own playthroughs, a phrase began to rattle around my head: 'all heterosexual sex is rape'. This idea is often credited to both Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon, and it has been the basis of many assaults upon their work (P. W. Cook and Hodo 2013, 26). By stating that Dworkin thinks all sex is rape and all men are rapists, generations of people have turned her into a joke among anti-feminists, misogynists, and regular folks alike. I heard the critique before I heard her name, but the backlash to Andrea Dworkin was one of the reasons I myself was hesitant to take up the mantle of feminist all those many moons ago when I was in my second

year of university. But when I began this thesis I ran into her supposed assertion again, that ‘all heterosexual sex is rape’, and I began to think about this idea a little bit differently.

In my discussion above, I showed how some ways of thinking about consent can fail to consider the inequalities between individuals. If one individual holds more power, either structural power in the form of wealth and status or power over the object of their desire, then even agreement in the moment is suspect because of the imbalance between the individuals involved. I began to think about the ways that women are socialized, specifically how we are treated and treat ourselves as objects for the male gaze and for male consumption. I think about the ways that men feel entitled to women’s bodies and how women are expected to put up with and even avoid hurting the feelings of those who feel such entitlement. In popular culture women’s roles are most often as reward for the male characters. We are expected to get married to men and have sexual relationships with men. For many women spousal rape became a crime within their lifetimes. Even factors such as the pay gap contribute to the oppression of women, and this oppression is compounded when one considers race, class, ability, and a myriad of other axis of oppression. With all of this in mind, I found myself asking if Andrea Dworkin isn’t on to something here? If we teach girls that they are objects for boys to consume, will they really be able to truly consent to sex?

Of course, upon further investigation I learned that Andrea Dworkin never actually said that all men are rapists and that all sex is rape. Instead she was critical of many of the power relations and representations of sex and women. One of her responses to the above charge was “Penetrative intercourse is, by its nature, violent. But I’m not saying that sex must be rape. What I think is that sex must not put women in a subordinate position. It must be reciprocal and not an act of aggression from a man looking only to satisfy himself. That’s my point” (Shelden 2000) and at another time she addressed the position by stating:

No, I wasn't saying that and I didn't say that, then or ever. There is a long section in *Right-Wing Women* on intercourse in marriage. My point was that as long as the law allows statutory exemption for a husband from rape charges, no married woman has legal protection from rape. I also argued, based on a reading of our laws, that marriage mandated intercourse--it was compulsory, part of the marriage contract. Under the circumstances, I said, it was impossible to view sexual intercourse in marriage as the free act of a free woman. I said that when

we look at sexual liberation and the law, we need to look not only at which sexual acts are forbidden, but which are compelled (Moorcock 1995)

Dworkin's work is unquestionably provocative, and I am sure that I will find points to disagree with her, but she is not the boogeyman I was taught to revile. And her concern about sex being a way for men to possess women is similar my own concerns. In her book, *Intercourse* she states "The normal fuck by a normal man is taken to be an act of invasion and ownership undertaken in a mode of predation: colonializing, forceful (manly) or nearly violent; the sexual act that by its nature makes her his" (2009, 79–80). She analyses the works of Tolstoy as well as the Bible and the Law to show that men are preoccupied with owning and possessing women. This idea continues to be pervasive, even if it has become more subtle as laws and public discourse change (Dworkin 2009).

Even though Dworkin did not actually assert that all sex is rape, perhaps there is value in this assertion. What would discussions surrounding sex look like if we started from the assumption that it is rape, or unethical in some way, and then worked to make it ethical or consensual? Instead of requiring victims to prove that the sexual encounter was rape, what if we put the onus on the perpetrator to show what they did to make sure that it was not. Assuming that one's sexual partner is as engaged and willing would no longer cut it, instead both partners would need to communicate their feelings openly to decide whether to have sex. This of course is supposed to be what happens, but there is still an inherent idea that the act is consensual unless proven otherwise. Reframing the act might provoke discussions about all the implicit inequalities that might exist between individuals. Game developers and game scholars might also find this reframing useful when creating relationships between characters. If the onus is on them to show what they have done to make a relationship or encounter consensual it might have avoided situations where the power dynamics make consent questionable.

Games as Virtual (Sex-)Tourism

In the previous chapter I briefly discussed how games can be similar to tourism in that they are often reorienting a colonized space in order to better accommodate western tourists, according to the expectations and ideologies of those tourists. Tourism then can be a method of exploitation because "Those who travel are searching for authentic encounters with exotic Others. The natives become the spectacle" (Wilson and Ypeij 2012, 6). Games, David Leonard

argues, have opened up the availability of tourism to a wider range of classes by allowing those who could not necessarily afford an expensive vacation but can afford a game system to experience virtual tourism (D. Leonard 2003, 5). Drawing on the work of bell hooks, who stated that “Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture” (bell hooks 1992, 21). hooks goes on to state:

When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other (bell hooks 1992, 23)

Video games are an extension of tourism, but are they a form of sex tourism as well?

Sex tourism is generally discussed in terms of white, western men travelling to ‘exotic’ locales for the express purpose of having sex with ‘exotic’ women (Wilson and Ypeij 2012; Kempadoo 2001). There are a range of ways that sex tourism manifests, for example it might take the form of one sexual encounter or one-night stand, a relationship that lasts the duration of the trip, or a relationship that spans years and ends in marriage (Wilson and Ypeij 2012). Women as well as men are known to engage in sex tourism.

One major difference in female sex tourism is in the way the local men are seen as boyfriends to the women, and they often deny that they are engaging in any form of sex work. This is known as romance tourism. There is more of a focus on the relationship as opposed to the sex acts the pair engage in. The focus on the relationship can have troubling implications as the power imbalance between the two individuals is often ignored. One researcher found that the men who were boyfriends to tourist women were looked down upon in their communities and could have trouble finding an alternative income. Consent becomes problematic in cases where one person holds more power over the other as I have discussed above. Beverly Mullings stated that “while these relationships do not reproduce the power relations of male dominance and female subordination, they do perpetuate other power relations, namely between First World and Third World nationals and between whites and people of color” (Mullings 1999, 76).

Female sex tourists see themselves seek to both fulfill heterosexual gender roles by ‘attracting’ a ‘real man’ and thus personify ideals of femininity and heterosexuality, and “without losing control and becoming a real woman in the sense of being a social and political subordinate

or risking becoming rejected and humiliated” (Taylor 2006, 49). Despite wanting to have power over their lover, women who engage in romance tourism generally do not see their lovers as prostitutes or themselves as engaging in sex tourism. The same women who travel to exotic places for sex will often condemn men who do the same thing.

Dragon Age has parallels to both male and female sex tourism within the games. In *Dragon Age: Origins* the Warden is asked to visit a brothel for a quest, and brothel becomes a location where they can return to as often as they wish throughout the game. While at the brothel the Warden is able to hire a sex worker, and they have three general options; they can hire either a cis-male or cis-female sex worker, or a trans woman sex worker. It is worth noting that this is the only time in *DA:O* where there are trans people. The option to hire sex workers is absent in the other games in the series.

Many of the relationships in *Dragon Age* are similar to romance tourism, with the main exception being that the player and player character is not limited to one gender. There is a focus in the games on providing relationships with an array of characters, and though the game will focus on the relationships as consensual and ethical this is not always the case, or at the very least the consent may be over stated or assumed. The relationship between the characters is emphasized, just like in female sex tourism or romance tourism, but the troubling power dynamics are often ignored or deemphasized.

In effect, video games are inexpensive version of sex tours to Southeast Asia or the Caribbean because they offer a virtual sampling of the ‘dark continent’ and dark bodies. The popularity of video games not only reflects the ability to consume the “other,” to occupy the unknown, and visit the dangerous, but it also speaks to the power garnered through this relationship of domination. (D. Leonard 2003, 5)

Case Study: Zevran

For this final chapter I have chosen a case study that pulls together all of the threads that I have been discussing throughout this thesis into a single example, the Warden’s relationship with their companion Zevran in *Dragon Age: Origins*. Zevran first appears in the game during a cut scene featuring two of the primary antagonists in the game, Arl Howe and Loghain the current regent of Ferelden. The two men are worried about the Warden’s movements in Ferelden and

decide to hire an assassin to take care of their problem. They hire an assassin from Antiva, a neighbouring country, more specifically they hire the Antivan Crows, a powerful group of assassins based in Antiva. The assassin they meet is an elven man with a Spanish accent which differentiates him from the English accented Fereldens, and he introduces himself as Zevran (Goorimoorthee et al. 2019).

Zevran appears again in a later cut scene, this time appearing to the Warden. As the Warden and their companions are travelling through Ferelden they are stopped by frantic woman asking for help as a tree has fallen in front of her cart. The Warden agrees to aid the woman and follows her, only to discover that they have been led into an ambush. Zevran orders the attack and the Warden is forced to defend themselves against the group of attackers. After the Warden and their companions win the battle they find that Zevran is not dead, but unconscious and they have the choice to kill him immediately or wake him up and question him.

Upon waking Zevran immediately gives up the names of those who took out the contract on the Warden's life, claiming that his allegiance was to the Crows not those who hired them. Unfortunately for Zevran however, the Crows do not accept failure on the parts of their agents and they will assume that he was killed in the attempted completion of the contract. Should they learn that he did not perish, they would rectify the situation by killing him themselves as a lesson to the other Crows. Zevran suggests that he would be useful to the Warden, promising to help the Warden in whatever task they are undertaking that would justify a contract being taken against them.

Zevran: "Why? Because I am skilled at many things, from fighting to stealth and picking locks. I could also warn you should the Antivan Crows attempt something more...sophisticated... now that my attempts have failed. I could also stand around and look pretty, if you prefer. Warm you bed? Fend off unwanted suitors? No?"

Warden: "Bed warming might be nice."

Zevran: "See? I knew we would find a common interest. Or two. Or three. Really, I can go all night. So what shall it be? I'll even shine armor, You won't find a better deal, I promise."

After questioning Zevran the player can choose whether to kill him or allow him to join or let him go. It is heavily implied that letting him go would in itself be a death sentence. If Zevran is

allowed to join the Warden, he agrees to meet the Warden at their camp and can be found waiting by the fire as promised along with the other companions the Warden has collected along the way. At camp the player is able to talk to their various companions, and it is here where the majority of romances within the game occur.

Zevran is a romance option for both male and female Wardens, and one of two romanceable companions that is available to both genders. The other is Leliana, a human Orlesian bard turned Chantry sister the Warden meets in Lothering. Alistair, the former templar who joined the Grey Wardens is only available to female Wardens, and Morrigan, the apostate mage can only be romanced by male Wardens.

Throughout the rest of the game the Warden is able to learn more about Zevran's past, and if the player chooses certain dialogue options when talking to companions the companion gains approval or disapproval points similar to the friendship and rivalry in *Dragon Age II*. Additional approval can be gained by giving companions gifts, which are items specifically designated gifts for this purpose. Companions have milestones with the approval and disapproval scores, so they start at neutral and then once their approval is high enough they are warm, etc.

The Warden learns that Zevran was born to a Dalish woman who fell in love with an elven man in Antiva and the pair eventually got married. Unfortunately, her husband died and Zevran's mother was forced to work in a brothel. Zevran was born in that brothel and raised by the 'whores' after his mother died. When he was seven he was sold to the Crows and forced to train to be an assassin.

There are two main ways to sleep with Zevran. The first is to proposition him at camp after his approval rating is high enough. The other method involves a threesome with a character the Warden meets at the brothel, Captain Isabella who goes on to become a companion in *Dragon Age II*. The Warden meets Isabella after watching her duel some men in the common area of the brothel, and she offers to teach the Warden how to duel if they can beat her at cards. The Warden can play cards, or they can offer sexual favours in exchange for the knowledge. Isabella agrees and as the pair are leaving to go to her ship she stops and asks Zevran if he is coming along. They reveal that they are old friends, him having murdered her abusive husband, and apparently sex is one of their methods of catching up. If the Warden refuses the threesome, Isabella shrugs and leaves with Zevran anyway.

The Warden and Zevran's relationship is initially framed by both parties as casual and

merely physical. The player can choose to maintain this, or they can have the Warden fall in love with Zevran. Zevran will share the Warden's feelings and eventually will give the Warden a golden hood earring, similar to a gift the Warden can give Zevran, which seems to take the place of an engagement ring in that he is announcing his commitment to the Warden.. If the Warden survives the final battle of the game, Zevran will offer to accompany the Warden on whatever adventures they might find themselves. This offer goes to both the lover Warden and friend Warden.

Near the end of the game the Warden and their party will be stopped by a figure from Zevran's past, one of his closest friends from the Crows. It is in the following interaction where Zevran's approval rating matters. The Crow will appeal to Zevran, telling him that together they can complete Zevran's contract and return to the Crows and Antiva. If Zevran disapproves of the Warden, he will agree with his friend and fight the party he was just a part of. Zevran and his friend die in the attempt. However, if Zevran approves of the Warden, either because they are lovers or friends, he will decide to side against the Crow. The Crow attacks regardless and is killed. Zevran is upset that he was forced to fight someone that he had been close to but is at peace with his decision. He also says that the Crows will assume that he perished with his old friend and thus he is finally free.

Protagonist to Game World

The Warden's first interaction with Zevran is one of violence, and though Zevran does eventually join the Warden's cause the threat of violence remains. After Zevran has joined the party the Warden has the option to tell him that his presence is no longer required and to tell him to leave. Zevran's leaving is, as far as he knows, a death sentence as the Crows will kill him for his failure.

The Warden has life or death power over Zevran, though this fact is not acknowledged when it comes to their relationship. Aside from the life or death power there is still the fact that the Warden is the one who is leading the group and decides whether Zevran gets to stay. Even if the party was not Zevran's buffer against death, it is still a potential point of leverage in their relationship.

Race, gender, and class are also important to consider in this case. The Warden can be any of the available races and the potential privileges that come with the backgrounds. For

example, the human, noble Warden would have racial privilege over Zevran, as well as class privilege. Zevran's accent also marks him as an outsider in Ferelden.

Player to Avatar

The Warden's relationship to Zevran is framed as consensual, and I believe that many players see it as such. I did not think that there was anything wrong with the relationship until I had already spent time studying sexual assault, and even then, it was initially a vague sense of wrongness that took quite awhile to identify. Waern has discussed emotional bleed in terms of *DA:O*, exploring how fans have experienced emotional responses to the romanceable characters, especially Alistair.

It is the player that decides how the Warden will interact with Zevran, and so it is important to think about the optics of the situation. How does this relate to the women who engage in sex tourism? How does race and gender influence the choices that the player is making in this romance, and in what ways are colonial narratives being reinforced.

Player to Game World

Zevran is othered by his race, accent, and even his sexuality. He is exoticized and is presented to the player in many ways as a sex object. Upon waking up after ambushing the Warden he immediately offers his services, including 'warming your bed'. I think the player is supposed to recognize these markers of othering and fetishization that are occurring with Zevran. He is also effeminate in that he has long hair, and the elven body is already smaller and delicate. As I discussed with Shianni in the first case study, elves are also infantilized in some ways as well, in terms of their smaller bodies and delicate features.

With this relationship the player is being asked to see this as a consensual relationship, and for the most part game scholars have discussed them through this lens (Østby 2017; Waern 2011; Greer 2013). But he is very similar to the men in the female sex tourism industry in that the relationships have unequal power between those within the relationship, but also on the focus on a relationship despite the potentially exploitative aspects of the relationship.

Zevran is coded as a person of colour, and western media has a habit of coding men of colour as hypersexual. This is in addition to the idea in our culture that men cannot be the victims of sexual assault; either because men always want sex and thus appreciate any and all

sexual activity, or because men should be strong enough to fight off any women who attack them. The player has learned from society that people like Zevran, or at least those he is coded to look like, are voracious in their sexual appetites and cannot be raped.

Player to Mechanics

One of the more problematic aspects of *Dragon Age: Origins* was the gifting system, where you could be rude to your companions and make decisions that they greatly disapprove of, but if you give them enough presents they will still like you. This system was modified for *Dragon Age II* so that there would only be one or two gifts per companion and though they did give a bit of a boost to friendship they did not outweigh the actions taken by Hawke or what they said in conversations. The gifting system can be said to show players that they can buy affection, which is problematic in of itself, but it is especially troubling with Zevran as it encourages an unequal relationship with overtones of pacifying through lavish gifts.

It is also in this relationship where we can really see the limitations of BioWare's relationship system. As I have discussed previously, the relationship is solely based on decisions made by the player and treats those decisions as proper choices. What I mean by this is that the choices by the player are the way the relationship gets initiated. The only true limiting factor is whether the Warden is the proper gender for the characters. Aside from that hurdle the player just has to choose the correct dialogue options and then they are in a relationship. The player also has a certain amount of leeway in the dialogue as it is possible to reload saves and redo conversations if the desired outcome was not achieved. The player can do whatever they want in the game, make decisions completely counter to their love interest's ideals and they will still love the Warden.

Near the end of the game, the Warden is asked to back a claimant to the Ferelden throne: Anora, wife of the late King Cailan; or Alistair, bastard son of the King Maric and half brother to Cailyn. If the Warden is from a human noble background, they can decide to marry one of the claimants and ascend the throne. If they have been romancing Zevran he is more than willing to stay on as the Warden's lover, or he can be set aside.

Developer to Game World

I think Zevran was meant to be included as a way of making the game more inclusive, as

BioWare has been known to be a progressive company which includes LGBT characters. But he conforms to a startling number of racist and homophobic tropes which cannot be ignored no matter the intention of his design. He is effeminate in his appearance, which in of itself is not necessarily a negative character trait, but he is also one of the only queer men in the entire game. Zevran is also hypersexual and is open about his willingness to engage in sexual activity which is a stereotype used against men of colour and gay men.

I have discussed the lack of diversity in the video game industry before, and Zevran is a product of this lack of diversity (Østby 2017). For example, Zevran and Leliana are the ‘gay’ love interests of the game as they can be romanced by either gender of Warden. But both are othered in the narrative and the design of the characters. I have discussed how Zevran is othered through his race, profession, and accent, and Leliana is othered in similar ways. She is human, but from Orlesis which neighbours Ferelden and until recently had invaded and added Ferelden to the Orlesian Empire. She is a bard/spy turned Chantry sister and claims to hear the voice of the Maker. Her accent others her as well, as she speaks with a French accent.

The othering of characters such as Zevran and Leliana conforms to negative ideologies about the LGBT community, those who speak in different ways, and immigrants. Both come from other places and are othered, though Zevran has other aspects of his character that set him apart even further.

Discussion

Romance in *Dragon Age* can be emotional experience. Many fans experience emotional ‘bleed’, and feel genuine emotion for the characters they romanced in *Dragon Age: Origins* (Waern 2011). I am included in this group of fans, but I have also been troubled by the same relationships that the games have presented the players. Annika Waern noted while discussing the Zevran and Leliana romances that, “The Zevran romance is possibly the more interesting option, as Leliana falls in love easily and equally easily maintains her feelings for the player character throughout the game. Zevran is a more complex character that first looks only for sex, and will confess deeper feelings only at a high level of approval” (Waern 2011).

The romance with Zevran exemplifies the general inappropriate assumption of sexual consent that plague many relationships in BioWare’s games. Most obviously is the fact that the first choice the Warden makes about Zevran is whether to kill him while he is unconscious or to

wake him up and interrogate him. Next, they are given the choice to kill him, let him go, or allow him to join the party. The first two options both death sentences, only differing in how long before the execution takes place. Because Zevran failed to kill the Warden his life is forfeit, and thus the Warden becomes his only life line. The Warden has life or death power over Zevran for the majority of the game, until his loyalty mission when one of his friends from the Crows shows up. It is implied that Zevran is safe from the Crows after they kill his friend, but this is belied by the fact that during his appearances throughout the subsequent games he is still in hiding from the Crows.

Perhaps more troublingly, Zevran is not the only romanceable companion the player is able to kill depending on the choices they make throughout the games. Leliana, the only other LGBT romanceable character in *DA:O*, may attack the Warden during a main quest looking for the ashes of Andraste, the religious figure of the Chantry. The Warden is able to defile the ashes to gain new abilities and if Leliana is with the Warden when they try to defile the ashes she will argue against the action and eventually attack and fight to the death to defend the holy relic.

I think this is worth thinking about in terms of escapist fantasies, which romance tourism also fits into, and how the escapist -power- fantasy involves questionable romantic relationships. My discussion will also skew into radical feminism as this chapter has a bit of a flashing Andrea Dworkin sign on it, specifically her assertion that all heterosexual sex is rape. Her point being that men and women have such differing levels of social and economic power that true consent is questionable, especially in cases where it is assumed and not explicitly talked about.

Conclusion

Zevran, and the relationships discussed above show that BioWare tends to create love interests who are subordinates to or are lower status than the protagonist. These relationships, as shown with Zevran, do not include discussions of the ethics of the relationship or even acknowledge that the relationship may be unethical. The relationship between the two characters is emphasized over the power dynamics, which is analogous to female sex tourism which has been termed romance tourism. By framing the romantic aspect of the arrangement between tourist women and local men, who are generally men of colour in a lower socioeconomic bracket, the tourists are able to ignore the increased power they have in relationship. This power dynamic is crucial when thinking about whether both parties have consented to the relationship

and to any sexual activity which may occur.

Conclusion

When I began writing this thesis at the end of 2016 I did not anticipate that the conversation around sexual assault would change and expand over the two years it would take me to complete this work, making this thesis timelier and more relevant than I had ever expected. The #metoo movement created a worldwide discourse about the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual violence, and the impact it has on the lives of women (Johnson and Hawbaker 2018; *The New York Times* 2018; Brockes 2018). While writing this thesis I found myself exploring consent and sexual assault at the same time the popular discourse was hashing out the very same topic. This simultaneous interest was a boon to this thesis in many ways; at the very least it proved that I was not just ranting to the choir within my feminist bubble. But it was a challenge as well. My academic interests collided with my private moments; I would write about rape in my thesis and then in my downtime I would spend hours reading and listening to the accounts of survivors sharing their stories of rape and other forms of gendered violence. At the same time that I was grappling with academic definitions of rape I would be bombarded by pundits arguing that women are too sensitive and probably just making these stories up for attention. The #metoo movement is a witch hunt, a sham, they would insist. I became emotionally and mentally drained and my work faltered. I do not mean to complain and imply that the #metoo movement adversely affected my thesis, the opposite is true. But I do wish to point out the emotional labour required to study sexual assault, even when the object of study is a step removed such as a video game. I became jealous of my partner who completed his thesis on something to do with lasers and photonic crystals as he seemed slightly less emotionally invested in his topic.

Outside of the #metoo movement this thesis was made relevant to Canadian politics more generally. While I was writing Chapter three of this thesis, which deals the most heavily with race, Canada was embroiled in a public debate about the not-guilty verdicts in the trials of Gerald Stanley and Raymond Cormier, who were charged with the murder of Colton Boushie and Tina Fontaine respectively (Edwards 2018; Maclean 2018). The murder of Colton Boushie was especially impactful for me as he was killed in Saskatchewan, a couple hours from where I grew up. Colton Boushie and Tina Fontaine were indigenous youth who were killed, and their deaths sparked a much needed but vicious debate about the treatment of indigenous peoples in Canada. Issues with the criminal justice system were at the forefront, but the deaths represented a larger failure in Canadian institutions when it comes to the inequalities facing indigenous peoples.

Unfortunately, as I finish this thesis, it does not look like much has changed or been improved.

In this thesis I have explored intersections of gender and race, and at times class, and how this relates to sexual assault in BioWare's *Dragon Age* series. I chose to examine the way BioWare drew from slavery narratives and the colonization of North America, and in doing so focused on the experiences of African Americans and indigenous people in Canada and the United States. Using Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* I argued that just as embodied subjects are oriented to the physical spaces in which they move (Ahmed 2006), players are oriented toward the games that they play. The orientation of the player to the game will not always match the embodiment of the player. Rape narratives are one instance in which the player may be disoriented by the game, because their own understandings and experiences around the subject at hand may be at odds with the portrayal within the game.

In *Dragon Age* the player was never given the option to explicitly commit sexual assault against another character, but sexual violence permeated the series. In *Dragon Age: Origins* there were two quests that were the result of sexual assault. In *Dragon Age II* there were four such quests. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* had no quests that explicitly mentioned sexual assault, but racialized and gendered violence did occur. Throughout the series characters, especially female characters, encounter sexual harassment, though it was more prevalent in the first two games. Consent was often assumed in relationships that were depicted throughout the game, and I argued that many such relationships did not take power dynamics into account and thus could be argued to constitute sexual assault. I identified three broad roles that the player is placed in in relation to sexual assault: victim, justice, and rapist.

I argued that the player is put in the position of victim in two major ways. This first occurs in the first case study, where the female city elf is kidnapped and threatened with rape. I argued that the lived experience of the player is crucially important for thinking about how this would affect players, which leads to the second form of victimization the games inflict on the players. There is a theme throughout the games of placing the player character into situation that take on different meanings depending on what experiences the player may have had in their life. For example, for players who are survivors of sexual assault having their character threatened with sexual assault could be incredibly traumatic and possibly triggering.

A common trope in games is to have the player solve problems and complete quests throughout the game. This puts the player in situations where they are in a position to adjudicate

cases of sexual assault. I use an example of a human noble kidnapping and murdering elven children, which is strongly coded as pedophilia, to discuss how the white protagonist is given the task of dispensing justice in a case they are unqualified for.

I end by discussing how consent is assumed throughout the series, but not adequately justified. I argue that difference in power between characters leads to the player entering into sexual engagements with characters who cannot give consent. I use this to discuss issues with consent when it comes to power and how to think of sex more ethically. I use the example of Zevran, who depends on the Warden for his life. So, any relationship with the Warden occurs in the context of life or death.

There were limitations to my study that could be overcome by other methods of research. I chose to use my own experiences as a player as the basis for discussing the representations of sexual assault in the series. I did so because these are single player games and I felt it was valuable to examine them as a single player. Future research could gain a more comprehensive and diverse understanding of how players interpret sexual assault within the games by conducting interviews with players or asking players to play through and produce oral protocols of relevant sections of the game.

My research also relied on definitions of sexual assault and rape that come from feminist perspectives as opposed to using legal definitions or criminal codes. I made this choice because the criminal justice system has historically failed victims of sexual assault and because I was more interested in behaviour that does not necessarily constitute rape according to legal definitions but is problematic in other ways. Future research could be done to study how rape, and crime in general, is treated in games and how such crimes are punished from a criminal justice perspective. In my research I found that the explicit cases of sexual assault were punished extrajudicially, often with death, if they were punished at all. Researchers interested in criminal law perspectives would provide an interesting perspective that I was not able to.

Future research could also examine other lenses or experiences both within the *Dragon Age* series or without, as my perspective was limited by time constraints and my own lived experience and expertise. Though I chose to look at race within the game I was not able to examine the way elves were also based upon the experiences of Jewish and the Romani peoples in medieval, and perhaps, modern Europe. Similar projects could explore the way age, ability, or religion affect the representations of sexual assault in video games, as well as focus more fully

on racial discourses that I missed. The emotional effects that I experienced as a result of studying sexual assault could also be an area of research.

This research shows that narratives around sexual assault are complex and require thinking of sexual assault in a way that takes power and non-violent means of coercion into account. It is also necessary for game developers, and game critics, to interrogate relationships within games to avoid creating relationships that are unethical and could approach sexual assault.

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