



LET'S PLAY: GENDER

Video games, performativity & online social spaces

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1. Introduction

[Tachyk] Over the last couple of decades video games have received a wealth of academic attention (Scott 1995; Diet, 1998; Newman 2005; Kafai et al. 2008; Nardi 2009; Bryce & Rutter 2010; Fromme & Unger 2012; Newman 2013; Nielsen 2015, to name a few). Bryce and Rutter (2010) point out that a great deal of research on video games in general has focussed on the media effects discourse, in which games are often framed as having a negative (or, at times, positive) effect on those who play them.

Alongside this media effects discourse there has been considerable attention to the representation of gender, mostly women in video games (Dietz 1998; Dill & Thill 2007). These aforementioned studies and criticisms of video games are mostly content analyses; research that tries to place games within a broader social context is not as abundant (Bryce & Rutter, 2010). Dietz (1998), for example, states that how games represent gender affects how people will view gender in real life, but offers no insights on how people engage with games, what precisely they take from games, nor how they may interpret games. Indeed, Bryce and Rutter (2010) point out that content analyses often end up portraying people who play games as “passive and vulnerable” (Bryce & Rutter 2010, 5), which then makes it seem like players just blindly absorb representations of gender from games. However, Newman (2005) contends that people do more with games than simply play them, and this has also been our personal experience as gamers. Given this, we have laid our focus on online social spaces connected to the games, which is where those who play games engage with each other in regards to the games. Our approach intends to view games and their attendant online social spaces as sites of culture, and as gender is part of that culture, we investigated how it is reproduced or transformed, and what meanings are attached to gender.

Online social spaces for us are spaces that fans make for themselves to talk to each other about the games they like. These spaces comprise several sites fans can visit to speak to others about topics related to the games. Instead of content analyses of the games alone, we went to their online social spaces. We have interviewed people on their interactions with, use of, and opinions on the games and their characters. Simultaneously, we observed how players interacted with and spoke to each other in spaces dedicated to engaging with the games; this

allows for a more active representation of those who play these games. This meant that we were engaging specifically in online ethnography to gain insight into this topic.

We divided our research across two game series—Annelieke focussed on the *Dragon Age* and Tachyk on the *Dark Souls* trilogies, respectively. By doing comparative research, we seek to demonstrate that video games and their related social spaces are not homogenous. We chose these two game series specifically because they are games we are already familiar with, but more importantly because both are considered as more progressive than other games when it comes to the representation of women (Guyot 2012; Carpenter 2016), although *Dragon Age* more so than *Dark Souls* (DM7 2015). Additionally, both game series are incredibly popular; *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, the most recent *Dragon Age* game, won several awards after its release in 2014 (Gamespot 2015). Even more recently, the last instalment of the *Dark Souls* series, *Dark Souls III* (2016), won the ultimate game of the year award (BBC News 2016).

According to Malaby (2012), anthropological forays into the topic of video games have been “rather sporadic and limited” (Malaby 2012, 288) although he also notes that interest in video games, in anthropological circles, is picking up. For anthropologists this is a great opportunity, as our focus tends to be on social contexts, meaning-making, and experiences. Online social spaces provide a setting in which we can find these cultural processes. Our research contributes to the growing anthropological body of knowledge on video games, specifically through the lens of gender as a social construct of masculinities and femininities. This is both to foster a better understanding of video games and how people interact with them, as well as a better understanding of how gender manifests in different contexts, in this case that of video games.

This focus on gender comes in light of the increasing interest surrounding video games and gender (BBC News 2016). This gave us the opportunity to look at gender and gaming in a broader social context than just the game itself. According to (Bryce & Rutter 2010) gaming has become one of the most important leisure activities. As gaming is such an everyday occurrence that takes place in the real life world and influences gender, the holistic approach, which anthropology is known for, has been the best suited for our research.

We contend that gender and gendered identities manifest differently within games, and as such discussions about and relating to gender within online social spaces attendant to the games will differ from each other. Firstly, by looking at these social spaces we intended

to look beyond the content of the games alone, and more at the people who play and enjoy them. With this, we want to show that gender is not only important in the games themselves, but also in concomitant online social spaces. Furthermore, we would argue that the ways in which the games represent gender affect how flexibly and diversely gender performativity presents itself within online social spaces related to the games.

[Annelieke] In our theoretical framework we start by giving an overview of the research that has already been done about video games and gender. Afterwards we discuss the relation between identity and video games. This allows us to discuss the connection between the player and the virtual world. And thirdly we discuss gender performativity, as theorised by philosopher Judith Butler, in relation to video games, with which we can theorize the connection between the production, internalisation, and reproduction of gender and video games.

In the empirical chapters we look at the *Dragon Age* and *Dark Souls* games themselves and how people talk about the games and gendered representation in them. We also discuss how this gendered representation affects the online social spaces that people use to discuss the games and how this representation is internalized through discussions and reproduced. We conclude our thesis with a discussion of the differences and similarities between the *Dragon Age* and *Dark Souls* series, and some suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical Frame

2.1 Video Games As a Field of Study [Tachyk]

In literature on video games, there seems little consensus as to what term to use; a few examples include Newman (2013) who speaks of ‘video’ games, Bryce & Rutter (2010) who speak of ‘computer’ games, Fromme & Unger (2012) who use ‘digital’ games, all of which seem interchangeable. For the sake of consistency, we will use ‘video games’ for our research; however, in cases where the authors themselves use a different term, we will use that. This section is dedicated to establishing a framework for how we, as anthropologists, can approach video games (in general) in our research. For this we look mostly to anthropologists who have studied games before.

Nardi (2010) did an ethnographic investigation of *World of Warcraft* (WoW)¹. Nardi contends that video games differ from other forms of media because they invite players to be active, as it allows players to both interpret visuals as well as alter these visuals, which invites players to participatory activity (Nardi 2010). With Nardi’s approach, we saw that video games are not passive activities but entail the acquisition of skills, and the chance to actively produce meaning within them.

In *Coming of Age in Second Life*, Boellstorff explores the virtual world of Second Life. Boellstorff (2008) is insistent upon viewing virtual worlds like Second Life as fields of study in their own right; he asserts that “virtual worlds are a legitimate site of culture” (Boellstorff 2008, 61). He criticises the automatic and unquestioned assumption that research in online or virtual worlds must also always include an investigation of the offline lives of those studied, and the presumption that research into virtual worlds must ultimately desire to address the actual world, which is often understood as the only ‘real’ world (Boellstorff 2008).

Once we added this perspective into our understanding of video games, then we could now view video games as activities and *legitimate sites of culture* on their own which entail the acquisition of skills and the chance to actively produce meaning within them.

However, Alex Golub (2010) cautioned us against uncritically mimicking Boellstorff’s position—that is, doing research entirely inside a virtual world or video game

¹ WoW is a massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG), which is a form of RPG in which a great number of people interact with each other in the same virtual world (Nardi 2010).

without taking other related online social spaces (and/or the actual world) into consideration as well. Golub argues against seeing virtual worlds simply as places in which traditional fieldwork can unproblematically take place and instead for a multi-sited approach that includes the various sites where people engage with the game. This meant that we not only looked at the games themselves, but that we also looked at the online social spaces connected to them, and within that paid attention to various sites rather than just one, as that would have given us an understanding limited to one site alone.

Furthermore, Newman (2005) shows that even for video games where interaction seems limited in the game itself (such as single-player games, in which only one person actually plays the game), it would be incorrect to assume such games promote isolation and lack of social contact outside of the game itself. Instead he says to consider that there are other sites where people may engage with each other, such as online discussion boards and fan websites. For him, “video games provide a focus for critical discussion, talk and textual production, thereby acting as a pivotal point in the social and cultural lives of many players” (Newman 2005, 50).

As such, we spent most of our time during our research online on forums and blogs, talking to fans and participating in related activities. The rest of our time, when not analysing our data, was spent playing the games. We will present our results more in depth in our empirical chapters.

Similarly to Newman, Kafai et al. (2012) and various other authors in their book seem to agree with authors cited previously in this literature review in that they make clear here that playing videogames and other activities related to playing videogames are not isolated events; they happen in a social context: “[g]aming activities are not neutral or isolated acts but involve a person’s becoming and acting in the world as part of the construction of a complex identity” (Kafai et al. 2012, xx).

This last observation was important for our research. With Kafai et al. (2012), and the other previously cited authors’ words in mind, we could see that games are neither passive nor isolated activities but can themselves be sites of culture in which players can actively produce and internalise meaning. Playing video games and, thus, this production of meaning happens in a social context in which identities are constructed. In the next section, we will narrow our focus down to the specific form of video game we used in our research and its relation to identity.

2.2 Identity & Role-Playing Games

[Tachyk] Seeing as the video games we are interested in for our research are classified under the subcategory of role-playing games (henceforth RPGs), we take a closer look into RPGs and identity in this section. According to Tychsen (2006), all RPGs share some common features: storytelling with rules, control of fictional characters, a fictitious reality, usually the presence of a game master (or game engine, as would be the case with an RPG played on a console or personal computer), and at least one player.

[Annelieke] Waggoner (2009) explains that video games in general allow the player to interact both through avatars and agents, agents being characters that players can't edit or make up an appearance for, but still control during the game. Avatars are characters in the game players customise themselves and therefore strongly identify with. The avatar becomes the identity through which a player experiences the world of the game. The avatar functions as the middle person to transfer the imagined ideas of the self between the player and the game. Players frequently consider their avatar to be apart from themselves while referring to them as I or we.

[Tachyk] Nielsen argues that RPGs specifically are “well suited to exploring self-representation or identity play” and that in RPGs “people are given some opportunities to play as they choose, and players use the game’s language to write their identities through the linguistic, visual, and strategic choices afforded in the game design” (Nielsen 2015, 47). The choices RPGs may allow players, include, according to Nielsen, “changing not only the avatar’s clothes but also more critical choices that align with identity: gender, skin tone, hair color and style, facial features, height, weight, and more recently, sexual orientation.” (Nielsen 2015, 49). This, in combination with Nielsen stating that, “players may play as they see themselves, as they believe others in the offline world see them, or as someone, or something, entirely different”, implies that RPGs allow experimentation with identity markers such as gender.

We’ve seen, in our research, that this aspect of roleplay is not restricted to the game alone, but also presents itself in online social spaces. We will present a more in-depth discussion in our chapters, especially in the case of *Dark Souls* games.

The authors cited thus far place great emphasis on the game itself, with occasional mentions of there being more than just the game. In contrast to Nielsen, Potts’ analysis of

sexuality and gender follows the interactions between YouTube gamers and their fan base. Potts (2015) proposes that,

Multiplayer online video games are a form of social networking which exposes unprecedented numbers of gamers to scenarios, discourses, and identities far outside of their usual environments. Considering masculinities and femininities as communities of practice, these are also sites where ‘young people would learn what it is to be masculine or feminine... through legitimate peripheral participation in these communities of practice, while simultaneously taking part, as full participants, in their own child and adolescent masculinities and femininities’ (Paechter, 2003, p. 70) (Potts 2015, 163).

As such, she departs from a singular focus on the game itself and moves instead to the social context where an aspect of identification such as gender is produced and reproduced, which is what we attempted.

With this in mind, the essence of approach to video games was that they are games played using computer power and video display; these games are neither passive nor isolated activities but can themselves be sites of culture in which players can actively produce meaning. Playing video games and thus this production of meaning happens in a social context in which players construct their identities.

Furthermore, games can be a form of social networking; this production of meaning and construction of identity can also occur in attendant spaces. As gender is an important part of a person’s identity (Pelletier 2008), and as RPGs often allow players to choose the gender they play as (Nielsen 2015), we looked closer at the meaning and construction of gender within these online social spaces. Both of us have a section in our empirical chapters dedicated to this in specific, and we will be discussing the differences and similarities between our cases in our conclusion. In the following section, we will focus on gender.

2.3 Gender & Video Games [Annelieke]

Butler (1988) argues that gender is historically and socially constructed, rather than a natural state that the sexes are born into. People are born with a sex but gender is socialized by historical and cultural context. The sex of a person is therefore not the determinant for the gender of a person, but something that comes into existence because of the personal and cultural history surrounding them. Gender is acted upon by the person themselves, by

stylizing, moving, communicating and every other form of expression or lack thereof. Butler argues that gender is shaped through *performativity*. The performance of gender is acted upon and acted out in everyday life; performativity includes the repetitive acts through which people produce and reproduce the social construction of gender. People do gender rather than that they are a gender, though people are not generally actively aware of this. Gender is performed in a similar manner as to how an actor might perform a role on stage, except that this is unconsciously done; people act through different scripts depending on the social context they are in. Butler thus argues that gender is inherently constructed by a constant performance through time. This creates a gendered image of the self that actors themselves come to believe and act upon.

Nagel (2003), who draws on Butler, explains that gender is performed and needs to be performed in everyday life. Gender is constructed through rules people set for themselves and others; how people are supposed to eat, talk and behave, what kind of clothes they are allowed to wear, which colours they are allowed to like and which things they are allowed to enjoy. But the knowledge of what is correct and incorrect gender behaviour is hidden and implicit; gender behaviour is internalised and is therefore done unconsciously. Gender expectations only become explicit when people deviate from the implicit norm; often when people don't perform their assigned gender in accordance with society's expectations, they will trigger a negative reaction from other people. The negative reaction is an attempt to control the person crossing the gender boundaries set by the implicit gendered and performed rules of society.

According to Kafai et al. (2008) Butler's notion of performativity is important when discussing gender in relation to video games because games influence the way people see and perform gender outside the virtual world. They point out the importance of researching gender in video games because it could show how games contribute to gender norms. Many researchers have been critical towards video games, especially in regard to the difference between how female characters and male characters are portrayed.

For instance, Williams et al. (2009) argue that the way female characters in video games are represented is most prominent in the way they are not present at all. Most characters in video games are white males, despite that over 40% of the people playing video games is female². And when female characters are present in video games they are unlikely to

² This varies from game to game. Some games have more female players than others, such as The Sims.

take on the role of the protagonist, often being reduced to a supporting character role. Male characters are, compared to the population of the US, overrepresented at the expense of female characters. They're mostly given the roles that set the story of a game in motion or they make active decisions to further the plot.

Other content analyses came up with similar results. According to Sharrer (2004), video games show males in a hypermasculine manner, by which she means that males are presented as emotionally hard, that they are psychically and violently active and have a desire for danger and traits that are traditionally associated with men are emphasised, such as having extreme muscles or being physically strong. What Sharrer (2004) calls hyperfemininity entails making female characters dependent on male characters, female characters who act submissive or are overly sexually present (Sharrer in Dill & Thill 2007). Hyperfemininity and hypermasculinity are ways in which gender is shown and performed in a stereotypical way.

When authors such as Williams et al. (2009) and Dill and Thill (2007) talk about the conceptualisation of gender in video games they often refer to Dietz (1998). She states that representation of gender in media has an effect on how people construct ideas about gender and perform femininity and masculinity outside of the virtual world. This effect is especially prominent in video games because the player is actively asked to participate in the media consumption. This means that by playing video games as a leisure activity, people perform gender through video games in everyday life.

Through large scale content analyses Dietz (1998) tries to grasp the way in which ideas about masculinity and femininity surface in video games. She concludes just like Williams et al. (2009) that female characters are mostly absent in video games, though when they are present they are often shown in a much more sexualised manner than their male counterparts. Male characters were often shown as aggressive and masculine, which aligns with what Sharrer says about how gender might be performed in virtual worlds.

According to Dill & Thill (2007) of the female characters that are present in video games a quarter is shown in a sexualised way. Sexualisation is a term used to identify when a female character is less clothed than her male counterparts, mostly around her chest area, or her female features, such as her boobs or buttocks, are noticeably enlarged.

Content analyses like these conclude that video games often portray gender in a stereotypical way, with Sharrer (2004) dubbing these stereotypes as hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity. We do not, however, completely agree with Sharrer's conceptualisation of

gender in terms of hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity. We argue that gender in video games consist of much more than just masculinity and femininity. Many video games have characters whose gender never gets defined along the binary lines of masculinity and femininity (Williams et al. 2009), and so it would be difficult to say they are presented as hypermasculine and hyperfeminine. Nonetheless, it benefitted us to see how people react to and talk about characters whose gender is not directly defined.

Additionally, Jans & Marits (2007) show that there has been a shift in recent years and that women are given more noticeable roles in video games. While these female characters were often still sexualised in the sense that their clothing emphasise their breasts and hips, their research showed that female protagonists are becoming less rare and are often on equal footing in terms of decision making capabilities.

Moreover, Kafai et al. (2008, xvii) argue that this change in social roles given to female characters in video games allows girls to dismantle gender stereotypes. Women are allowed to be strong and violent while still maintaining their feminine attributes and looks.

However, there is a distinct lack of research about how gender is produced and reproduced in the online social spaces of video games, for example on forums and streaming sites. Kafai et al. (2008) argue that female players are often excluded and oppressed in social gaming spaces, both online and offline. Because of its lack of female characters with independent backstories or protagonists, gaming as a leisure activity is often viewed as a male space by content creators, despite research suggesting otherwise³ (Bryce and Rutter 2010). When prompted in a social setting women denied playing aggressive video games, despite admitting to playing them in a previous questionnaire. Boys did the same with games that are according to Pelletier (2008) considered to be less masculine, such as *The Sims* and adventure games. Players thus seemed to be aware that gender influenced how you are allowed to express interest in gaming (Pelletier, 2008). People seem unconsciously aware of what Nagel (2003) conceptualises as the implicit knowledge on how to perform in gender in society. We argue that gaming is therefore gendered; some games seem to be considered exclusively for girls or for boys. People act upon the tacit knowledge of who should play which video games and hide the violation of those gendered rules. We thus argue that gender in the context of video games is in accordance to Butler and Nagel performative.

Identities online and in a game are often anonymous, which makes it harder for

³ Bryce and Rutter estimated that 75% of the women who play video games do so at home

players to restrict and exclude female gamers from the online social space. The public gaming space, such as gaming events, festivals or tournaments, are mostly visited by male gamers. The private space, such as at home or private rooms are traditionally more female dominated. Through virtual online spaces female gamers have a chance to combat the social space restrictions on gender because the gendered space can still be negotiated (Bryce & Rutter 2010). We argue that gender plays an important role in online social spaces. In the following section, we will conceptualise online social spaces.

2.4 Online Social Spaces

[Tachyk] There have already been attempts to conceptualise online social spaces. Kellerman (2014), for instance, views the internet as a “second action space for contemporary individuals...side-by-side with their traditional and “obvious” action spaces located in real space” (Kellerman, 2014, 5). He makes a distinction between real social space and virtual social space, which he considers to be intertwined and co-evolving with each other, as virtual social spaces are accessed from and affected by real social spaces. As such, virtual social spaces are rooted in real social spaces.

[Annelieke] Despite that he separates real space and virtual space, Kellerman points out that the virtual space has in a way become real and influences reality greatly by quoting Jordan (2009): “[...] what we once called ‘virtual’ has become all too real, and what was solidly a part of the real world has been overlaid with characteristics we thought of as belonging to the virtual” (Jordan 2009 in Kellerman 2014, 40).

[Tachyk] However, Kellerman’s approach is not of much use to us, as it is not entirely clear what exactly he means with action space. In contrast, Galligan (2006) writes that “[a] social sphere may be defined as an area of activity where the actors are able to unite in sharing understandings, rules, and principles, regarding the activity. These understandings influence the way in which individuals engage in such activities” (Galligan 2006). If we apply this definition in the context of video games, then social spaces are areas of activity where players are able to unite in sharing understandings, rules, and principles regarding video games. We can also apply the definition of social space to gender, in which case social spaces are areas of activity where people are able to share understandings and such regarding gender.

For our own case, we would state that online social spaces are those spaces a fandom creates to engage with other fans in discussions and other activities surrounding the games. The fandom itself is not the online social space but does actively make spaces where they can talk to each other about characters, draw art of the games and its characters, and even write stories or make music. Online social spaces contain several sites people may visit to find others to speak with or to find the aforementioned artwork. These sites are often social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, or blogging platforms such as Tumblr.

Following Bryce and Rutter (2010) and Kafai et al. (2008), we would argue that social spaces, or online social spaces are areas of activity where understandings are shared of video games and gender, perhaps even understandings of gender through the understandings of video games. We also show in our research that online social spaces contain several sites where people can engage with each other, and these various sites form one social space.

3. Context

Despite that we focussed on two different game series, both of us ended up mostly on Reddit, Tumblr, and Twitch. Other sites did not come up as frequently in the online social spaces of these games. All of these sites give fans a platform on which to talk to each other, whether about the games, news relating to the games, and/or sharing fan-made content for the games.

What follows is a brief discussion of the games, as they provide the context for their online social spaces. We will go into further detail about these online social spaces in the second section of our empirical chapters.

3.1 *Dragon Age* [Annelieke]

The *Dragon Age* series is a game franchise developed by the Canadian game developer Bioware, a daughter company from *Electronic Arts*. The first game of the franchise, *Dragon Age: Origins*, came out in 2009. The second game, *Dragon Age II* was released in 2011 and the third game, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* in 2014. According to Guyot (2012) and Lööf (2015), Bioware is often praised by the gaming community for being more progressive than its peers in terms of inclusion of marginalized groups. *Dragon Age: Origins* is often praised as a must-have-played title on most gaming sites and is recommended in the book *1001 video games you must play before you die*. The game won several awards after its release, including

the game of the year award and RPG of the year award. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* also won the game of the year award in 2014.

The *Dragon Age* series are RPGs, situated in a dystopian world that resembles the swords and sorcery dynamic (Holmes 2016). The player is able to make their own avatar, including male and female protagonists of various skin colors. Furthermore, during the game players are able to romance companions, with both straight and queer options available (Lööf 2015).

According to Guyot (2012) female characters in the *Dragon Age* franchise are given a more equal standard than most games do. Games like the *Witcher* don't allow the player to chose a female avatar or make their own character. Additionally, most armor in the *Dragon Age* games was designed in an unisex way, meaning the design is generally the same or very similar for male and female characters. The sex you chose at the beginning of the game also doesn't limit the player's gameplay in terms of abilities or attributes like games such as *Torchlight* do. Players are spoken to by their last name (given as a default name by the game) or title, which makes it easier for the dialogue to remain unisex as well. In several of the downloadable contents (DLCs) that came with *Dragon Age: Origins* the story focuses on female companions to give them more story, such as the DLC *Leliana's song* and *Witch Hunt*. Yet Guyot (2012) notes that there are stereotypical portrayals of female characters in *Dragon Age*. Characters such as the desire demon play the typical role of a female seductress to gain power and wear more exposing armour than any other character in the game.

Lööf (2015) is also critical towards the third instalment of the series, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and how it seems to have stereotypical gender roles. The bodies of the female characters are less varied and fit the beauty standards of slim waists and narrow hips. Male characters have more body variation and seem to have generally more muscle than their female counterparts, sometimes to extreme proportions. Some male characters would thus fall into what Dill & Thill (2007) described as hypermasculinity.

Lööf (2015) does however note that *Dragon Age* seems to include a much more varied representation of gender and female characters than most other gaming franchises. It is also one of the first few games to include a transgender character and is not using this character as a trope or a series of jokes. She concludes that *Dragon Age* doesn't fall into the obvious gender representation pitfall that most games do, but that there is still a clear difference in how men and women are represented throughout the game.

The official site of *Dragon Age* used to be Bioware's *Dragon Age Forums*. However, Bioware closed the forums on August 26 2016, stating that most of their fans were concentrated on other social media platforms and they found it easier to communicate with them there.⁴ Fans can ask the developers and writers questions on twitter and the developers sometimes comment on reddit posts.

3.2 *Dark Souls* [Tachyk]

The *Dark Souls* trilogy, consisting of *Dark Souls*, *Dark Souls II*, and *Dark Souls III*, were developed by Japanese video game company FromSoftware, Inc. The games are all third-person RPGs in which the player has the freedom to create a male or female avatar in whatever semblance the player chooses.

Academic writings on the series are limited to only *Dark Souls* (the first game) and not its sequels (see Farrow & Iacovides 2012; Bertozzi 2014; Vella 2015; Van Nuenen 2016). Furthermore, none of these give much, if any attention to gender in the *Dark Souls* trilogy, and the discussion stays within the boundaries of (the experience of playing) the game.

That said, at least one fan of the game has taken it upon themselves to do a "Sociological Analysis of the way that Gender is depicted" (DM7 2015) in *Dark Souls* on a blog. As far as I can tell, DM7 has not completed this analysis, but the general sentiment of their analysis seems to be that *Dark Souls* portrays female characters in stereotypical and sexist ways, both overtly and more subtly. Sadly, there have been no comments in response to this analysis.

In contrast to DM7's conclusions, Carpenter (2016) states that "the *Souls* series has an ambivalence toward gender, be it the player's character or the various enemies and npcs [non-playable characters]⁵ across the many games" (Carpenter 2016), with most of her argument to support that statement leaning on the lack of sexualisation of female armour in the *Souls* series. She eventually states that, "[w]here other games or media would design a female alternative to armor sets, *Souls* games give everyone the same set with only minor alterations depending on the size of the character model⁶" (Carpenter 2016).

⁴ As tweeted by bioware's official twitter account: <https://twitter.com/bioware>

⁵ Meaning the characters the player cannot play as (versus the playable character, which functions as the player's avatar).

⁶Some armour sets in the first *Dark Souls* do have noticeable differences unrelated to the size of the character; for example, Thief/Black Leather set has gendered differences, http://darksouls.wikia.com/wiki/Black_Leather_Set.

This is a sentiment my participants across the various sites shared. I will discuss their responses and reasoning further in our empirical chapters as well as offer my own observations and, at times, opinions, on how *Dark Souls* trilogy handle gender and, more importantly, how gender and gendered ideas manifest within this social space.

4. Methods

[Tachyk] Our main method was participant observation, as De Walt & De Walt (2011) made clear that this is one main method anthropologists use to gain knowledge and understanding about the feelings and cultural context of participants in their everyday life. Both of us expanded our efforts on Tumblr, Reddit, and Twitch. Annelieke had sixty-four participants on Tumblr who gave her their consent to be observed. Tachyk had fifteen on Tumblr, eighteen who showed interest on reddit, two she was referred to, and one close friend she approached. Because of the number of responses, we were unfortunately unable to contact and interview everyone.

[Annelieke] Observing them meant looking at fanart they reblogged, fanfictions some of them wrote and discussions about the game or characters they held. Tumblr posts that seemed important or relevant to our research were saved in drafts or ‘likes’; those on Reddit with the ‘save’ function Reddit provides. this was so we could look back at them later or ask those who had made those posts about them.

Annelieke chose her interviewees based on the frequency of their activity as well as their follower count. On Reddit, she posted open discussions people could join in on. She also chose to interview three of the moderators in a group interview on Discord and held her other interviews from Reddit on Skype.

[Tachyk] Similarly, Tachyk chose her participants on Reddit based on their response to an introductory post she made, and prioritised those who mentioned something interesting (such as being a woman or having been around for a while). On Tumblr, she approached people based on how frequently and how much they posted about *Dark Souls*. In the case of Twitch, she approached streamers she had prior knowledge of first, then looked for more who were well-known or otherwise were playing one of the games whilst she was on Twitch. She only interviewed one streamer, whom she met on Reddit.

Most interviews, for both of us, took place on Discord or Skype. Two of Annelieke's interviews were done through an email exchange, since these two participants didn't want her to hear their voice. Similarly, Tachyk's interviews on Skype and Reddit were most often done through text chat at the participant's request, with only two having been voice calls and one having been done in person, at a participant's house. We also held informal conversations through asks and the message systems on Tumblr.

[Annelieke] Additionally to our activities online, we also played the games. This was because we could gather information about how gender is represented there, and this time look at it from the perspective of a researcher rather than that of a fan. Annelieke streamed *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. During these streams, Annelieke made jot notes about the game and talked to people who came to visit the livestream in informal conversations about the games. She often asked people questions about the quests and characters we encountered during the game. Tachyk was unable to, as she could not both play the game and have a streaming program open without causing the game to lag. Instead, she watched other people's streams. Whilst playing, we would write out notes by hand (jot notes in Annelieke's case, extensive ones in Tachyk's), which we then typed over in Word. At times, participants gave us information about important aspects of the games that we would have missed. Our interaction with our participants therefore sometimes influenced the way we looked at the game.

We met up once a week both to keep each other up to date as to our activities and progress, and to work on coding, and analysing our data. Often, we discussed obstacles or issues we had encountered, and gave each other advice.

Boellstorff et al (2012) argue that doing field work online is not incredibly different from offline field work; however, we were both aware that we would face some difficulties specific to online ethnography. One of the main struggles with this research was informed consent. Because we wanted to be visible as researchers we chose TheDragonAgeResearcher and DarkSunScholar as our account names, respectively. We did our best to inform our participants as to our purpose in approaching and interviewing them, and answered questions when they had them. It was also practically impossible to see people's expressions and body-languages without a video call or being in the same physical space as them. That meant we had to listen closely to the tone of their voice, or be extra alert when reading their textual replies. This was, fortunately, not incredibly difficult.

[Tachyk] Our research provided the opportunity for us to move video games out of the realm of media and content analysis, and instead look at meaning-making, interaction, and experiences that come with playing video games. Instead of limiting ourselves to the games themselves, we looked at how those who play the games interpret and engage with the games, and how they present these interpretations to others online. This meant that we looked at fanart, read posts with people's writings about the games, asked about people's in-game avatars, and observed all sorts of other artworks (videos, music, fanfiction).

Boellstorff et al (2012) also point out that online ethnography is easier in regards to the accessibility of the field work sites, which is certainly true. Making our accounts took little time, and the rest was a matter of finding people who were both frequently active online and who were willing to participate. Furthermore, we were already familiar with the games; Annelieke has only played the *Dragon Age* series, but Tachyk has played both *Dragon Age* and *Dark Souls* games. We were also already familiar with fandoms and the sites we visited for our research. According to Hine (2008), this works in our favour, as she asserts that online ethnographers need to learn their environments to be meaningfully present and have "sufficient in-game skills to enable interaction with research subjects" (Hine 2008, 263). However, this also meant that we had to take extra effort not to exclude things we were used to, as well as take note of our own engagement with the games. In Annelieke's case, she was wary of her own excitement and soft spot for the *Dragon Age* games; in Tachyk's case, she had to watch out that she was not negatively critical of the *Dark Souls* games.



Origins



II



Inquisition

5. Playing with Genders: *Dragon Age*

Annelieke Mabelis

5.1 Introduction

The story of *Dragon Age* takes place in a dark medieval setting. While the three games seem to be very different from each other they take place in the same world and refer to the events of previous games. Players are given a clear story line and plot to follow when they play each game, although the games allows the player to make choices. Some of those choices can have side effects on events in later games. Additionally players can start a romance path with one of the different companions, which adds a small romance side plot. The gender of the player's character determines who the player can romance in the game. Even so, the player is given romance options of both genders in all games.

I played all three games for the research to get a better understanding about the subjects my participants would talk about and to refresh my own memory of the franchise. I interviewed different participants from Tumblr, Reddit and Twitch. Tumblr and Reddit were chosen because I was aware *Dragon Age* fans were active on these social sites, while Twitch gave me the opportunity to engage with fans while playing the game at the same time. While I focused on Tumblr in the beginning because I was more familiar with it, the informants from Reddit also became an important part of the research.

In the next section I first explain how gender is represented through the course of the *Dragon Age* series. I will do so through my own observations as well as those of my participants. Secondly I will show the ongoing discussions about gender in the social spaces. My overarching argument in this chapter is that, by representing gender in a noticeable fashion, *Dragon Age* has given way for players to discuss gender and gender related matters.

5.2 Gender in *Dragon Age*

Dragon Age: Origins opens with a scene narrated by the deep voice of a man, telling me of big events that have happened before the story of the game. Although few women are seen visibly fighting in the opening scene, the narrator explicitly states that both men and women have joined the Grey Wardens to defend the world. As I open character creation a message appears, ending with the following sentence; “Men and women in Ferelden are generally regarded as equals. Both genders are evenly represented in most organizations, noble houses and military forces.”

Interestingly, *Dragon Age: Origins* emphasizes in the character creation that the two genders are equally represented in every organization, yet when I started my playthrough⁷ it took me longer than an hour before I even saw the first female character⁸. When I finally finish the introduction, I’ve still only met two female characters with dialogue related to the main story line. Hopeful, I travel to a place called Ostagar, where the king has gathered his armies in order to fight the darkspawn. Unfortunately it's immediately noticeable to me that there aren't as many women in the army as there are men. Of all the soldiers I counted at Ostagar, only nine of them were women. This while there were fifty soldiers who were men.

Part of the reason I counted the soldiers at Ostagar was because Lydia, a participant from Tumblr, mentioned her own data analyses of *Dragon Age: Origins*. Lydia pointed out to me that *Dragon Age: Origins* often tells you there is an equal presence of two genders even though this is not always true. Lydia also noted that there was a difference in the way characters talked to the player character or other female characters in general. She gave the example that, upon meeting Alistair (your first companion and fellow Grey Warden) he explicitly makes a comment about how rare it is to see a woman in the Grey Wardens. This

⁷ A playthrough: When you play the game from start to finish.

⁸ *Origins* allows the player to chose different starting stories, called the origins. Because of time restraints it was undoable to play every one of the origins for our research. So in order to avoid my own bias I rolled a dice and ended up with the mage origins.

seems to be in line with the argument of Williams, et al. (2009), who state that the most prominent way female characters exist in video games is by their absence. Yet, I would like to argue that this is especially true for the first game. Even so, there are still some noticeable gender differences in the later games.

Because the franchise has changed its gender representation through time I will show the changes and the similarities between *Dragon Age: Origins*, *Dragon Age 2* and *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Story wise *Dragon Age 2* is more balanced in terms of gender. Women have more roles in the main story and are much more noticeably present in the background. The opening scene starts with a man and a woman (Varric and Cassandra) who introduce the story. Furthermore, the story gives you two female relatives, a sister and a mother, and one brother. Your sister, Bethany, or your brother, Carver, survives or dies at the end of the prologue depending on the class the player picks in character creation. *Dragon Age 2* also showed women in leadership and warrior roles more often, notably Aveline who gets promoted to Guard-captain over the course of the game and Cassandra, who is a Seeker.⁹ Furthermore, the main antagonist, Meredith, is a female Knight-commander and a templar. In the previous game templars were always exclusively male. *Dragon Age 2* thus puts women into positions that were previously exclusively reserved for men, giving them more agency and, implicitly, a more traditionally masculine role in the story.

However, while there were more female background characters in general, women still fell into stereotypes at times. For example, most of the characters in the whore house in high town were women and the desire demon you meet in the fade was, aside from jewellery covering her nipples, not wearing any clothing.

⁹ Seekers are part of an organisation meant to look over the Templars in case of corruption and extreme magical cases



I suggest that female characters in this case fulfil the role of the seductress and are sexualised. As Sharrer (2004) suggest, the portrayal of the desire demons is a form of hyperfemininity, where women are presented in an overly sexual way.

Furthermore when I asked participants from Reddit what they thought of the armour and clothing in *Dragon Age*, one of them said that it seemed weird to her that both Isabela and Bethany show of a huge part of their cleavage, since it would leave a very vulnerable part of their bodies exposed. The way female characters are presented in *Dragon Age 2* matches the description of sexualisation according to Dill & Thill (2007); female characters in video games are often sexualised because their clothing covers less of their body than their male counterparts and their boobs and buttocks are emphasized. However there were also many people who complimented the armours of Cassandra and Aveline respectively because they looked “Badass.” I argue that by giving women in *Dragon Age 2* full body armour *Dragon Age* seems to represent masculine and feminine genders in a more equal fashion.



(The companions from Dragon Age 2. From left to right: Fenris, Isabela, Varric, Aveline, Male default player, Carver, Merrill, Anders and Sebastian. Not shown: Bethany)

When I interviewed Tarah she noted that a lot of games are a lot more sexist than the *Dragon Age* franchise seems to be. It was especially interesting to her that women had a much more prominent role in *Dragon Age*, as other games seemed to have only one or a few women in the main cast in general and didn't generally give women all that much agency, although she pointed out that the gaming industry in general seemed to have gotten better in recent years. The agency the female characters had was one of the reasons she loved *Dragon Age* so much.

In *Dragon Age: Inquisition* there are other noticeable gender differences. The advisors (who generally stay at the base rather than go out and fight) are divided between two women and one man, making women a majority. The companions the player can take with them on their travels are divided between three women and six men, making men twice more likely to be present while exploring the game. The development of the *Dragon Age* franchise thus seems to be in line with the argument Jans & Marits (2007) present, stating that women in video games have been given more agency in recent years.

Inquisition does sometimes touch upon the subject of gender through its writing. For example, during the research I listened to companion banter; conversations characters have with each other while out in the field, on YouTube. I came upon a scene between one of the most muscled male companion, The Iron Bull and Cassandra, a female warrior and seeker.

The Iron Bull, who Cassandra refers to as 'Bull', compliments Cassandra on her technique and says she should use it in bed more often. Cassandra jokingly suggests that she might have already done so. The conversation turns into a back and forth between the two, making sexual comments and jokes aimed at the other. Cassandra laughs at the comments and occasionally plays along, although at other times her voice turns low and her replies grow short.

Eventually, when the conversation turns a bit more sexual, Iron Bull apologizes and tells her he will stop. Cassandra in turn replies she never said he should stop, but that she wants it to be very clear they are never going to have sex. Cassandra eventually asks Iron Bull if he dislikes fighting next to a woman, her voice wavering and quieter than before. His religion, so she says, dictates that women can't fight after all. Bull's voice is light with humour when he tells her that she, as a woman, would become a man under the Qun.

Cassandra's wonders out loud how that would work since she can't imagine actually turning into a man. When she asks Iron Bull if she is only a man to him, the smile is almost visible in his tone when he answers; 'Only when you are inside that armour.'



(*Dragon Age: Inquisition* promotion art for Cassandra)

The writers seemed to consider Cassandra's character design as more masculine and made this into a conversation in the game. I wondered, however, why the religion Iron Bull followed, the Qun, held up such strict gendered notions. Despite their belief that everyone has their place under the Qun this place seems to be tied to gender in general. It wasn't as though Cassandra would be completely barred from being a warrior under the Qun, but she would be forced to switch genders to do so. I watched the *BioWare Interview: Lead Writer David Gaider on Krem, Dorian and Sexual Diversity in Gaming*¹⁰. Although David didn't go into detail about the subject, the Qun was, according to him, a way to explore gender in a different manner than they had done previously. I found it noticeable however that the Qunari use gender in an extremely stereotypical way, with women either fulfilling a sexual or mother's role while men are seen as warriors. Lööf (2015) suggested this means that *Dragon Age: Inquisition* still plays into stereotypes about men and women, though in less obvious ways than many other games do.

¹⁰ Interview with David Gaider, done by *Video game sophistry*.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rCLuxp2EpE>

In this interview David Gaider also mentions that the developers and writers sometimes ask their fans for feedback. Especially when writing characters that are important for representation, such as the transgender character Krem in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. In this case *Dragon Age* doesn't only influence its players, the players also influence the games, making the gender representation in *Dragon Age* a two way interaction. Krem is part of the Bull's Chargers and therefore also part of the Qun.

In my interview with Jez, one of my participants from Tumblr, she mentions that she considered this kind of representation of gender is realistic, and that the way Bioware represents gender is both progressive and stereotypical. According to her women are given more agency than they had compared to medieval European times, especially since women are the leaders of the main religion in the game. When we discussed the Qun she noted how Krem, a trans character in the game, is accepted under the Qun even though the Qun is very stereotypical in its enforcement of gender otherwise.

In a way the Qun allows people to change their gender to fit the roles they want to fulfil, as we see with Cassandra. Transgender is recognized and respected, yet I argue that the Qun enforces stereotypical gender roles on people within its society, even though they are allowed to change their gender and the concept of gender itself is more flexible. After all, had Krem been interested in traditional feminine interests, like taking care of children, it would have been harder for the Qun to accept Krem as a man.

It became apparent to me while doing my research how much the games have changed over the years. Bioware has been working on the *Dragon Age* series for ten years and the way that gender is represented in *Dragon Age: Origins*, *Dragon Age 2* and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* differs greatly from one another. In more recent years the games have shown more equality between the genders and have explored characters beyond male or female characters. Women in particular have become more present and are given roles with more agency over time. Even so, the games sometimes still represent gender in stereotypical ways.

5.3 *Dragon Age* as a social practice

*5.3.1 The *Dragon Age* fandom, a masculine space?*

As Kafai et al. (2008) pointed out, gaming spaces are typically viewed as masculine spaces, where women are actively excluded and shamed for participating with gaming culture. This is

especially true with games that hold the social stigma of being a masculine interest. In this section I aim to answer the question if the *Dragon Age*, in extension the *Dragon Age* fandom, can be considered a masculine space. When I interviewed my participants I generally started by asking them how they had gotten interested in *Dragon Age* as a franchise. Four out of the ten women I interviewed were introduced to the game by their male friends, boyfriends or exes. Some of my female participants and a few of my male participants got interested in the game because they had heard good things about the game in regards to LGBT+ representation, like Zach and Lydia. Zach mentioned that since he was gay and lived in a rather small town he got interested in *Dragon Age* because the game offered LGBT side plots.

Furthermore, some of my female participants expressed that they enjoyed *Dragon Age* because it was not an online game. Many of them had received negative attention when playing online games, such as catcalling, harassment or other forms of threats. *Dragon Age*, as an offline RPG was a way for them to enjoy gaming without being afraid of being shamed for it. This seems to be in accordance with the argument of Kafai et al. (2008) that gaming spaces are more accessible to men and that women are often excluded from public gaming spaces, perhaps not only when they are physically present but also when their gender is in other ways visible.

When I asked participants on Reddit what they thought their demographic looked like, most of them assumed the genders were equally distributed in the *Dragon Age* fandom, although one participant said that he always assumed people were men unless otherwise specified.

AliveProbably mentioned that a lot of people automatically assume she is a man when she is active on Reddit. She especially noticed this when she talked about female relevant topics and people attempted to use her assumed male gender to shut her down. She did think it was funny when people attempted to use this presumption against her and it backfired. She gave the example of women saying she wasn't allowed to participate in a discussion about how bad periods were, because she wouldn't know what she was talking about. "Joke's on them because I'm a woman too. I know what I'm talking about." This in accordance to what Bryce & Rutter (2010) discussed, online social spaces can be easier negotiated because the gender of a person is not immediately clear.

I argue that Reddit as a site is considered to be a male-dominated space, since most people assume the other is male by default. When I held my interview with the Reddit moderators, beelzeybob gave me access to their own research¹¹ that they conducted on the *Dragon Age* subReddit. They held a questionnaire that asked about the gender of people on the *Dragon Age* subreddit, showing a gender distribution where there were slightly more women than men¹². So even though Reddit is considered to be a male dominated space, women are equally present and possibly in the majority.

Many participants I interviewed from Tumblr noted that the people they knew in the fandom were mostly women. When I was doing my research it was a lot harder to find men on Tumblr in the *Dragon Age* fandom then it was on Reddit. One of my participants, Vicky, worded this in a very particular way: “On Tumblr it’s just [women] talking amongst ourselves. So that makes it feel a bit safer.” She said that she felt safe while discussing and playing *Dragon Age* because she had been met with sexual harassment in online games before, since the name she used there gave away her gender. Because the chance of being attacked for being a woman felt less likely for her in the *Dragon Age* fandom on Tumblr, it felt safer for her to participate. This suggests that online games are a very masculine site that women are actively kept away from through harassment. I argue that, because Tumblr is a more feminine site, it allows women to discuss topics like video games more easily.

Jez also mentioned that she automatically assumed people were women on Tumblr and seemed really interested in the question as why she always assumed people from Tumblr were women. “Maybe it’s because most people I know or whose gender I know happen to be women.” The online sites function as a way for our participants to connect to other people playing the games. According to Bryce & Rutter (2010) women are less likely to be allowed to be present in public spaces related to games.

I found it relevant to examine not only why people connected to each other on the online sites, but also to look at what kind of relationships they formed. According Pelletier (2008) women who play video games often feel like they have to hide the fact that they play certain games because it doesn’t fit the expectations society has of women, as gaming is not generally considered to be a feminine practice. One of my participants mentioned how she

¹¹<https://docs.google.com/a/students.uu.nl/forms/d/1PnrNtgB96NjRFc6OOhkUnPjRK51GICCPJG4nHc6JA8Y/viewanalytics>

¹² 49.5% of the participants identified as female and 1.2% transgender female, while 46% identified of the participants identified as men and 0.8% as transgender male. 2,5% identified as genderfluid.

was unable to talk to her peers about video games in general. “They would look at me weirdly and I would be afraid they would think I was obsessive. You don’t have that problem when you are on Tumblr.” Tumblr became the online site where she was allowed to express her interest without shame.

In conclusion, the social sites, Tumblr and Reddit respectively, are a way for people to connect to other players of the game. The *Dragon Age* fandom on Tumblr is a site where women are assumed to be very present, more so than men. Kafai et al. (2008) and Pelletier (2008) suggest that video games are implicitly gendered and women are often excluded from places related to video games because of it, but this seemed not to be the case with the participants from Tumblr. It’s possible this is mainly the case because Tumblr itself is viewed as an online site where women are more present overall, rather than this being a *Dragon Age* fandom specific phenomenon. I therefore argue that Tumblr is a feminine site.

Although this might not be true for every specific fandom on Tumblr, it was most likely true for the *Dragon Age* fandom on Tumblr. However, because people generally assumed others to be men on *the Dragon Age* subReddit, most women I spoke to were introduced to *Dragon Age* by men and because female participants expressed shame when talking about the game in real life, I argue that the *Dragon Age* franchise is sometimes still a masculine space depending on the social context. This might be because games are seen as masculine spaces in general.

5.3.2 Fandom policing

In the following section I will examine the way people use sexism and sexist language in relation to characters in the game, as well as towards people while discussing the game. Because only two participants joined my streams on a regular bases and sexist language didn’t come up as a subject, I will lay my focus first on Reddit and secondly on Tumblr.

What I noticed most in the way that people on Reddit talked about gender was how the men I interviewed used degrading language for female characters more often than for male characters, ‘bitch’ being one of the most commonly used words.

For example, N0wh3re_Man, a moderator from Reddit, stated that his favourite romance option, Isabela, was a total bitch. He enjoyed the rival romance in particular because he felt like he could reign her in a little and make her a better person. When he romanced Anders he preferred the friend romance, because he felt like Anders could use someone to

trust after having such a hard life and didn't call him with a slur. Interestingly enough none of my participants on Reddit referred to people being bitches outside of the virtual ones. Here, N0wh3re_Man strongly felt the urge to control the female character, Isabela, although this urge seemed to be absent with the male character Anders. By calling Isabela a bitch and showing an urge to dominate her, N0wh3re_Man showed that he thought of Isabela in a very sexist way and aimed to take power away from her, and through his dominance of a female character, he could performatively assert his masculinity. In the romance with a male character both the slur and the need to be dominant were absent, which suggested that Isabela as a woman was not considered and treated on equal footing as Anders in a romantic relationship.

Characters weren't the only ones who sometimes got called names, although the moderation of Reddit prevented people from actually using slurs like bitch when referring to people. Unpopular opinions were discouraged by giving groups of people who share that opinion an epithet. In my interview with Jillian she mentioned that words like Social Justice Warrior are used to shut people down when they discuss gender related matters.

“Social justice warrior gets thrown around a lot as an insult. Which I never quite understood [...] A lot of people came to the boards because they were excited about being represented, either for gender or [sexual] orientation, did tend to become a target. Which is unfortunate. And thankfully they really did start a crackdown on that. Like, I know a few people who were pretty excited to have like a trans character like Krem, involved as a positive representation for the trans community. And people criticized pretty harshly about that.

[..] A lot of people considered it [adding a transgender character] just reckt [wrecked] the game, but I don't understand that. At all. But there was like a lot of another Bioware game that's gonna push this in my face kinda thing.”

In this case, people who have identities that don't fit the masculine space, people with feminist views, women, LGBT people, get attacked when they become visible in a masculine space. In an attempt to exclude these groups from the discussions on the social sites words like social justice warriors are used. Furthermore, the representation of women and transgender characters caused a transphobic and sexist backlash from some people in the fandom, although this sexist and transphobic rhetoric is now moderated by moderators, allowing Reddit to become a more inclusive site.

When I talked to the moderators, beelzeybob, AliveProbably and N0wh3re_Man, they mentioned that they moderate the forums because the *Dragon Age* subReddit used to be a rather hostile environment. Both physical threats and emotional harassment used to be common before the moderators edited the subReddit. When I asked about the kind of behaviour they had to edit out, they said that it often included rude behaviour when people held very strong opinions about subjects. They generally edited things that weren't on the level of respect you would show a co-worker.

Beelzeybob told me an example of a thread a few years back when *Inquisition* had just recently come out. It showed how someone used harmful language towards Cassandra because she looked, according to them, too much like a man. "They felt there was something wrong with her cheekbones and that she shouldn't be female because of that. I thought it was really weird. They felt the game was too gay for heterosexual men because Cassandra looked too much like a man." When I asked one of my participants from Tumblr if she thought of Cassandra as a was more masculine than other women, the idea was met with confusion. She said she didn't think Cassandra was truly a butch at all and thought the assumption that she was more masculine than others a bit of a stretch.

On the other hand Tumblr seemed to have less vulgar language towards female characters and female participants, especially when talking about characters and when reblogging posts from one another slurs were rarely used. However in my interview with Liandra she told me of an instance where she wrote a fanfiction and got a lot of negative feedback, because it didn't portray the popular male character, Cullen, in a favourable light. She mentioned that one of the hate mails she got called her with a sexist slur. "I don't remember the precise words, but they said something like; 'he would never do that, that crazy bitch wants to portray him that way and she needs to go away'. While this person called her a crazy bitch, another insulted the character she created by calling her a slut. Liandra noted that it was "really interesting, where people come out of the woodwork to defend a male character, they do so by insulting women."

In this case, Liandra went against the popular portrayal of a male character and got attacked for it. Interestingly people started to use gendered slurs alongside the suggestion that what was she was writing was wrong. Additionally her original character got called a slut, despite the fanfiction portraying Cullen as unfaithful. As Liandra herself pointed out, women in the fandom and the original female characters who act as their agents in fanfiction, are

called names and degraded in the defence of male characters. Sexism in the form of sexist slurs is used to attempt to control the content people create in the *Dragon Age* fandom. I argue that sexism is a form of policing to keep the creative content in the *Dragon Age* fandom on Tumblr in certain boundaries. Although what these boundaries were exactly remained unclear to me. However, Liandra was not my only participant who pointed out that to me that they had been getting harassment on Tumblr for going against popular opinions.

In my interview with Jasmin we talked about the subject of fandom policing because she had been recently attacked for liking two characters in a relationship. Jasmin suggested that the main reason why people police others through sexist and abusive language is because they could easily get away with it because of the anonymous feature¹³. This would explain why the personal attacks on Tumblr seemed to be more severe than on Reddit.

In conclusion, I argue that there is a certain amount of policing on the social sites, although the way that opinions are policed differs between Reddit and Tumblr. The biggest difference stems from the fact that Reddit is moderated and Tumblr is not. Because of this the opinions on Reddit are more regulated with the aim to keep a healthy debate. However, strong opinions that aren't directly insulting are still undergoing a form of social policing, this through terms such as Social Justice Warriors, suggesting that people with feminist or liberal views are wrong by default. Social Justice Warrior is thus a word used to shut down opinions that do not fit in with the white, male and heteronormative ideals. On Tumblr the social policing takes a more aggressive form where people sometimes seek others out with whom they disagree in order to police opinions by sending mail with sexist slurs towards women, indicating that this form of harassment targets women in the fandom especially. Sexism is used here as an attempt to control the creative output fanfiction creators make to fit certain social norms.

5.3.3 Identification and Performativity

In the following section I will argue that *Dragon Age* allows players to identify more easily because players are allowed to create their own original character in the game. This avatar was something a lot of our participants noted they related strongly to. Often referred to as 'self-inserts', these avatars allowed players to act out their personal feelings and opinions in the game. Most women I interviewed explained that the ability to pick a female character at

¹³ A feature that allows people on tumblr to send messages without revealing your account.

the beginning of the game was very important to them, since they grew up without that option. Tarah especially explained to me that this choice was important to her because it allowed her to identify with a female protagonist:

“I guess I just had a few different personalities and stories that I wanted to tell through female characters. Because I’ve been playing video games for a long time so many of the games force you to play as a male, you don’t have the choice of choosing your gender. So when I have the choice to play as a female I’m almost always gonna choose that because I can identify with that character more.”

Waggoner (2009) argues that the avatar the player creates allows a player to explore the virtual world as a part of themselves. In this case, *Dragon Age* allowed women to pick the option to play as a female character, which allowed players to identify with their avatars more easily.

Aside from the characters that players made themselves, people also identified to the characters in the games, and used this identification to overcome issues in their personal lives. For example, one of our participants on Reddit said that she admired Cassandra a lot because she was so strong, and that they wanted to be more like her. Acting more like Cassandra helped them overcome issues in their personal lives. The character Aveline also had this effect on some of our participants. Rosemary for example named herself after the character Aveline on Tumblr because she wanted to be more like Aveline and she thought the name would help her reproduce Aveline’s behaviour. She felt deeply connected to this character because she felt this character helped her become stronger: “I love Aveline. I am actually more like Merrill, but I admire how Aveline handles her problems head on. I take inspiration from her and try to act more like her when I have to teach the kids in school.”

She also noted that she loved the way Aveline was not the most socially apt. She thought that women were too often put in a role of social service and seeing another strong woman fail in the same way she did, but still be able to succeed at the end of the day, was reassuring. Aveline is a female character that is physically strong and doesn’t take shit, exactly the qualities she needed for her teaching job. Rosemary admitted she was actually more like Merrill by nature (shy and soft spoken), but that Aveline as a character allowed her to change in the way that she needed to.

Tarah also agreed that seeing women in *Dragon Age* who were less socially adept than what was expected from them was reassuring. Tara mentioned that it's a stereotype that women are always well spoken and well behaved, because they take on roles where it's expected of them to do emotional labour. In this way, *Dragon Age 2* presents a portrayal of gender, in this case a female character, that is the opposite of what is usually expected. The way female characters such as Cassandra, but also characters like Aveline, were portrayed in *Dragon Age* seem to fit what Kafai et al. (2008, xvii) say about female characters dismantling stereotypes. Female characters in Video games that go against feminine stereotypes allow women to use these characteristics to challenge these stereotypes in real life.

Interestingly enough, two of the women I interviewed mentioned that the only reason why they would play as a male character was when they wanted to try out a playthrough where they made meaner choices. Vicky noted that she never had the courage to pick evil options when she played as a woman, because it would feel to mean. She considered making a male character in *Mass Effect*¹⁴ so she would be able to pick *Renegade*¹⁵ options.

This suggest that playing a female character implies certain boundaries and rules on how to behave, even in the game. According to Nagel (2003) gender is constructed by implicit rules on how to behave in a certain social and cultural context. In a broader social context this implies that being a woman entails being kind and making gentle choices, while being a man is implicitly connected to making harsher choices and being mean or rude. As such, Vicky's reliance on a masculine character for the ability to be mean suggests performative behaviour, in which she reproduces the societal expectation of men as aggressive and potentially mean, and encapsulates women in the idea that they must remain compassionate and kind-hearted.

5.4 Preliminary Conclusion

When I examined the games I've argued that the games have changed their gender portrayal significantly since the release of *Dragon Age: Origins* in 2009, although gender is sometimes still portrayed in a stereotypical manner.

The social sites I looked at the most were Reddit and Tumblr. Reddit seemed to be a more masculine space, since people assumed others to be men when talking to them.

¹⁴ *Mass Effect* is also created by Bioware, although the game takes place in a sci-fi setting.

¹⁵ *Renegade* is a term used in *Mass Effect* for a player's choices and personality that is generally more harsh and violent

However the *Dragon Age* subReddit seemed to be more inclusive than Reddit in general, since people were aware women played the *Dragon Age* games in equal measure. Tumblr on the other hand seemed to be a more feminine space, since people assumed everyone was a woman by default. I argue that *Dragon Age* as a franchise can still be considered a masculine space in general, since almost half of our female participants were introduced to *Dragon Age* by men and expressed shame when they wanted to talk about the game in offline situations. It's also possible that this is caused by games being considered a masculine activity in general.

Furthermore, sexist language against female characters was more present on Reddit than on Tumblr, although not against real people. This is most likely due to the forums being moderated, as there have been cases of sexism and homophobia that the moderators deleted. On Tumblr sexist or racist language was often more directed against people rather than towards the characters from the game. I argue that this is mostly due to the lack and means of moderating harmful language on Tumblr. Opinions that were considered unpopular were often policed, often through sexist language. Policing happened on both Tumblr and Reddit, although not in the same way. Characters in the game often held emotional and personal significance to people. I argue that some female characters enabled a form of empowerment for women because they rejected standard stereotypes. And lastly, some of my female participants made male avatars in order to explore masculine behaviour, which implicitly suggested that there are gendered rules about how female characters should behave.

In the next section Tachyk will examine the *Dark Souls* Franchise and its related social space.



I.



II.



III.

6. Gender Matters¹⁶: *Dark Souls*

Tachyk Nahar

6.1 Introduction

The *Dark Souls* trilogy has an esoteric backstory, in which Gods, kings, and knights are protagonists who have set the tale in motion. The player finds themselves battling monstrous creatures, noble knights, and lesser foes to reach the end. Many fans on sites like YouTube, Reddit, and Tumblr have tried to paint a cohesive picture of the story, but as much is left open to interpretation, this is not entirely possible. However, the games follow a certain pattern; the player is often given an objective at the beginning of the game which they must complete, and in the process travel across the world.

As I told previously, I re-played the games to have a better understanding of how gender presents itself in them, as well as to understand what people spoke of when they mentioned something about the game. Though initially this was my main focus, as I gained participants and did interviews, my interactions with them (both to get to know them better and to further my field work) on the various sites I visited became more important, as they provided new insights and interpretations or information I could have overlooked.

¹⁶ Definition 1: a subject or situation under consideration.
Definition 2: be important or significant.

In the next sections, I will present my findings on gender in the games. Then I will devote attention to the online social space itself and how this and gender relate to each other. My overarching argument is that the lack of emphasis on gender in the *Dark Souls* games parallels the superficial attention the fandom gives to gender both in the games and in their social space. My arguments and observations are part of the our broader statement that the way the games approach and depict gender will ultimately affect how gender presents itself in online social spaces which a game's fandom inhabits. At the end, I will add a preliminary conclusion, which we will expand on afterwards in our main conclusion and discussion.

6.2 Gender in the Games

High up on the rafters of a church, I walk slowly to avoid a fatal fall. As I near the end of the rafters and deal with the last foe waiting there for me, I notice the orange glow and indecipherable black letters of a message another player has left on the beams. A prompt appears for me to read it.

“Amazing chest,” it says. I frown, already dismayed. In this place, that can only refer to one thing. And surely, just down below, there stands a statue of the Goddess Gwynevere—the exact spot where I stand grants me a perfect view of her enormous breasts, immortalised in stone.

This was the first instance of sexualisation of a female character that I experienced whilst playing the games. Dill & Thill's (2007) explain that sexualisation entails portrayal of women with less clothing and enlarged breasts or buttocks. Gwynevere fits this description to the letter: she is shown in a skimpy outfit, and her breasts are more than noticeably enlarged:



(Gwynevere in the Chamber of the Princess)

Despite this, Celeste, a Tumblr blogger, said to me, “in this game, gender doesn’t really matter...” Subsequently, I asked everyone I could whether they thought this is indeed so, why, and in what ways. Celeste and Jack both gave a similar argument as to what Carpenter (2016) had argued—there’s no “boob armour” for women.

Jack also pointed out that there are no armour restrictions; regardless of the sex of the player’s avatar, they can wear all the available armours, including sets tailored specifically to the body of a grown woman. Cragtongue, comparing the *Dark Souls* games with *Dragon Age: Origins*, said of the latter, “The character’s gender is very...*there*...” meaning that it was obviously present, whereas in *Dark Souls* games, “there’s a lot less emphasis [on the character’s gender].”

Sarah gave an even more detailed answer, saying “In terms of PvE [player versus environment]¹⁷ gameplay, it doesn't matter. Your character's gender doesn't affect their skills or their stats, it only changes how they look, and the sound of their voice (which you don't hear in "Dark Souls" very much, anyway, because your character doesn't actually speak)¹⁸.” She also added that she liked how the game designers, for the most part, avoided gender

¹⁷ Player versus Environment means that one plays solely against computer-generated foes. This is in contract to Player versus Player (PvP), in which one plays against another player

¹⁸ Characters don’t speak but they do grunt or scream when hit/dying

stereotypes: “They allow women to be knights—warriors who fight in melee combat, which is an arena that is very much associated with men and masculinity.”

This allows players to go against gendered expectations of what they can be. As Nielsen (2015) proposed, this kind of flexibility allows players to play with identities, to the point where Jack explained that they had used their avatars to explore femininity, masculinity, and non-binary ways to express gender.

In some ways, then, the *Dark Souls* trilogy seems entirely different from other games: women’s armour and bodies are mostly not sexualised, players have the freedom to explore gender expression because of a lack of restrictions on armour, and often female-sexed characters can take up similar roles to that of their male-sexed counterparts.

Given this, it was interesting, to find and speak to someone who largely echoed Sharrer’s (2004) contention that women are often portrayed in stereotypical ways even in the *Dark Souls* games. Sharon explained “They’re weak, passive, mothers, devoted to men, need saving.” For example, characters like Dusk and Rhea, require the player to rescue them, and others like Quelana and Rosabeth don’t do much besides sit or stand somewhere and offer their services to the player despite conceivably being able to fight.¹⁹ This was not an opinion I encountered often.

But what really caught my attention was that she said the games will “treat you like a man anyway.” When I asked after this, she explained, “...regardless of what you pick in character creator, you’ll be the Dark Lord at the end or whatever they call you, [...] dark souls one has like one moment where gender matters and they seem to pull that thing where the male title is suddenly unisex,”

It occurred to me that this may be the reason why gender seems not to matter in the *Dark Souls* games: they assume that the player, and perhaps by definition the avatar, is male, and don’t go out of their way to treat the avatar differently based on sex and gender. My data supports that assertion; in all three games, the avatar in character creation is consistently male (and fair-skinned) by default. In *Dark Souls 2*, one even begins the game before one can create a character, and thus one can briefly only play the game as a male character.

What Sharon expressed above reminded me of a statement Carlen Lavigne made

¹⁹ Other examples include but are not limited to Rosaria, *Mother of Rebirth*, Gwynevere who is often described or implied as being married and having children, most of the Fire Keepers, who are there simply to serve the player, Sieglinde and Sirris whose questlines revolve around chasing a male relative. There are some notable exceptions such as the Darkmoon Knightess.

about *Mass Effect* (another RPG from Bioware): “as far as the game mechanics are concerned, Shepard is a man” (Lavigne, 2015).

Lavigne (2015) argues that Shepard’s neutral treatment is not a result of the game’s lack of sexism, but rather because the game simply treats a female Shepard as it would a male Shepard. In contrast, the game does treat other female characters in stereotypically sexist ways. By taking a male Shepard as a neutral starting point, the game creates the illusion that Shepard’s gender doesn’t matter.

Dark Souls games also exhibits sexist treatment, though mostly when it comes to other female characters. When I asked Ross after discussions about the portrayal of gender in the games, he told me that *Dark Souls* caught a bit of flak on this particular topic, but that he wholeheartedly disagrees:

The original argument was something along the lines of "all the female characters in Dark Souls are weak and cannot fend for themselves, or are portrayed as being needed to be rescued." I somehow think that these arguments came from people who did not complete the game.

Sure, some characters like Anastacia of Astora and the Fair Lady are imprisoned or otherwise incapacitated for the entire game, but this travels over to many male characters too. Rickert of Vinheim sits in a cell for the entire game, just like Anastacia. The Fair Lady's sister, Quelaag, is a powerful boss. She's no pushover by any means. Other women like the witch Quelaana are powerful combatants with clear goals in mind. And for every woman who is in extreme pain (such as the brass-armored firekeeper), you can find three men who have it just as bad. (Havel is insane and locked in a tower, Ceaseless Discharge literally lives in constant burning agony, and Gwyn is a rotting husk that may or may not still be alive)

Two things stand out to me here: the comparison between male and female npcs, and how the reasons given for *Dark Souls* not being sexist are actually a result of the game being sexist. The conclusion that wherever and whenever one female character was hurt or captured, you could “find three men who have it just as bad” seems to imply that male characters simply have it worse by nature, except, when one casts a critical eye upon *Dark Souls*, there’s a total of eleven (11) female npcs to a total thirty-one (31) male npcs. This is without counting in the

bosses²⁰, of which there are in total twenty-six (26), and only three (3) who are (confirmed) female, two (2) visibly so. As such, it is not a matter of male npcs being treated worse, but a matter of proportion; there's more of them in numbers, and as such more of them to be hurt.

This is also fascinating in light of Williams et al.'s (2009) assertion that female characters are often not present at all in games, and when they are, the proportion of male npcs is far greater. In the case of the *Dark Souls* trilogy, female characters are certainly present; there are simply far less of them than there are male ones.

Williams et al. (2009), Sharrer (2007), and Dietz (1998) all point out that female characters are often given different roles from male characters, with the latter often being the driving forces in the game, and the former being in supportive roles, and often sexualised. Likewise, *Dark Souls* games treat female characters qualitatively different. Quelaag, who Ross asserts is a powerful boss, is introduced in a cutscene that focuses on her naked upper body, with her hair seductively covering her nipples—no male or masculine-coded boss is given such sexualised treatment.

Ross also uses Anastacia and Rickert for comparison, stating that both are trapped in a cage, which makes their situations similar. As he correctly points out, both characters are trapped inside a cage. However, Anastacia has had her tongue cut out for no immediately discernible reason, and is also implied through the description of her bloodstained skirt to have had her legs broken to impede an escape. She is effectively voiceless, and is later murdered by Lautrec, a male npc. In contrast, Rickert does not seem at all harmed and has his voice still, which he is quick to use to inform the player that he is just fine and dandy where he is in his cage.

On the one hand we have a woman locked away and maimed by unknown entities, whose sole purpose is to strengthen healing items and tend to a bonfire, and who meets an untimely, brutal death at the hands of a man. She is avenged and resurrected by the player (whom, I remind, is considered male by default in the game). On the other hand we have a young smith content to be locked away, who asks that the player pass by and give him smithing work.

This insidious form of sexism is often present in the game, but it doesn't directly affect the player. On the surface, the game seems to treat male and female characters equally,

²⁰ A boss is a significant/more powerful enemy, usually at the end of areas, missions, or sections of a video game.

which players like Ross, Celeste, Sarah perceive, but just under it there is a distinct pattern of sexist and even misogynistic attitudes, with male characters who frequently brutalise or (verbally) abuse female ones.²¹ What Cragtongue says about *Dark Souls* having less emphasis on gender is true in so far as the avatar is concerned; when it comes to female npcs, their abuse and passivity emphasises their gender, as it highlights femininity as both meek and weak in contrast to their masculine abusers who are strong, protective, and aggressive.

In this sense, performativity also presents itself in the game. With male and female npcs portrayed with these stereotypes, *Dark Souls* games reproduce already existent ideas of what femininity and masculinity should be, and unlike the *Dragon Age* franchise has not seen change through time. As Annelieke points out in her chapter, the developers at Bioware seem more aware of their fans and the critical eye that these fans cast to gender in their games, and thus adapt accordingly; FromSoftware does not appear to be as involved with fans. I would point out, however, that even if FromSoftware were to be as engaged, it is unlikely that they will find a great volume of criticism towards their depiction of gender; rather, they are more likely to see praise launched at the lack of sexualised armour.

I've established thus far that the *Dark Souls* trilogy appears to treat genders equally and that players often interpret it as such, even when there are cases where the games veer into sexism. I would posit that gender as a topic is not important to nor overtly emphasised in the games, likely because the developers did not think it important, and because of that any discussion of it within the fandom is often superficial, as I will argue below. The next section also touches upon performativity as it manifests online within the social space of *Dark Souls* games.

6.3 The Games as Social Practice

6.3.1 Dark Souls as a Masculine Space

“Quelaag or Gwynevere?” read a post on Reddit. Curious, because it seemed to ask which of the two female characters people preferred, I clicked on the link. The body of the post is short: “w.r.t boobies”. With regards to boobies.

²¹ E.g. Lautrec murders Anastacia, Petrus abandons Rhea in the Catacombs and later murders her if she is rescued, Eygon plainly states that Irina is a lost cause and thus should be left in the cell she is locked in, and then further on casually implies Irina fits in well with “degenerates and doddering oldfolk”.

Beneath that were six replies, one of which read: “Well, one is real, but a freaking half spider being [Quelaag]. The other is big bosomed illusion [Gwynevere]. I'll take the illusion, I guess.”

This was my first encounter with gender on Reddit, though not the last. Gender as a topic never appeared directly, but sexualisation of female characters happened from time to time, often jokingly. Usually, gender appeared in more subtle ways, as I will discuss further below.

Reddit, Tumblr, and Twitch were the three most active sites as well as those most often cited apart from YouTube; as such, I focused my efforts on those aforementioned three sites, with some occasional forays unto YouTube.

Reddit, especially, provided several loci where one could participate and observe simultaneously, as fans posted frequently and replied to each other, as one would expect from a forum-like site. It also provided me with the most participants. Reddit is, in essence, a forum with several sub-sections dedicated to specific topics. In the case of the *Dark Souls* games, there is r/darksouls, r/darksouls2, and r/darksouls3, as well as other related sub-sections. These loci are easy to access and only require a free subscription. All three were decorated with a banner made up of the title of the game as well as the cover poster.

Tumblr, being a microblogging site, was also relatively active and provided ample opportunity for me to observe other people's activities as well as participate in them. As blogs are semi-personal, people can and do decorate them with background pictures and customised layouts. Sometimes, the themes of these layouts would be their favourite games, favourite characters, and so on.

Twitch was, initially, the least fruitful. I got only one response when I approached streamers, and he did not respond when I asked for permission to watch his streams for my research, and few, if any, were playing any of the *Dark Souls* games. Nevertheless, I would be present during the streams, observing streamers as they played one of the games, and reading what people in the chatbox were saying. Around the 28th of April, FromSoftware released the second and final downloadable content (dlc) for *Dark Souls III*, at which point a sudden boost in the amount of people streaming the games took place. Most of my data relating to Twitch came from this time. I will likely not go in much depth in regards to what I noted here, given the lack of permission, and will not directly mention any names, either of streamers or those present in chat.

Most of what I saw on Twitch was that people would mainly go there to watch a specific person play a specific game, though at times people certainly went to streamers only for the sake of watching someone play a particular game. To the right of the screen that shows the streamer playing the game, one can find a long, rectangular chatbox in which people would frequently send messages to each other or to the streamer, as such ensuring that people could converse. Twitch also offers “emotes”, which are basically small images people could use to add to their text. To have these emotes to appear, one would have to type a specific word or text such as “Kappa” or “PogChamp”²², and once entered the word would become the emote. These emotes come in three varieties: general emotes Twitch provides for everyone’s use, emotes specific to a streamer’s ‘channel’²³, and emotes provided by a Twitch extension called BetterTwitchTV.

These are all sites that a group of people, the fandom, has taken parts of and made into their online social space. As we’ve mentioned earlier, an online social space comprises a space, often containing specific sites within them, where people go to engage with each other, with the games as their main focus. These are then the sites where performativity manifests.

Bryce and Rutter (2010) argue that gaming is often seen as a masculine activity, through virtual spaces offer a place where female players can participate without having to worry about their gender causing male gamers to treat them differently. However, both they and Kafai et al. (2007) state that women are subject to sexism, and are often excluded or even oppressed.

In the case of these sites both assertions are true to a certain extent; overall, the people I interviewed are a fairly even collection of various genders, though I cannot be certain if this is necessarily representative of the population of people who play *Dark Souls* games. When I add those I spoke to in general, men are more numerous.²⁴ When asked, most participants said they knew more men who played the game than women or otherwise gendered persons. Cates mentioned that this masculine predominance may be a result of gaming often being perceived as a masculine activity: “there is a general thing, right, that’s like guys play video games, and girls don’t, right. There’s [...] this like societal—you know, guys play with action

²² see glossary for images and description

²³ You can gain access to the channel-specific emotes by subscribing for \$4,99 a month

²⁴ As I did not survey the number of people who play/have played the game, I cannot say what the actual population and their gender composition is like.

figures, girls play with dolls type of thing, you know? So it extends itself to video games, on a certain level.”

In the case of the *Dark Souls* games, he added, women may just not like them as much as men because of their reputation as being difficult games to play. Furthermore, Dibs, another Redditor, told me that *Dark Souls* doesn't attract a lot of female players because of its lack of fleshed out characters, little dialogue, and its esoteric story. He added, “I think men and women have interest in games that sometimes overlap and sometimes don't.”

This gives further credence to Pelletier's (2008) argument that gender influences which games society views as appropriate for certain genders to like and thus express interest in; women are expected to like dolls and men are expected to like action figures, and thus as *Dark Souls* is an action RPG with a reputation for being difficult, it's expected to be oriented at men. Simultaneously, this notion of men liking difficult games implies that women don't, and reproduces ideas of what men and women are essentially like (when it comes to their interests) and excludes both people who aren't one of those binary genders, as well as the possibility for any gender to negotiate what they like. If only men are expected and allowed to like action-oriented video games, then it's not surprising that online social spaces contain more of them.

Celeste also said, “[j]ust my observation, but seems like male gamers are more vocal on almost every platform except tumblr, which is the place for art, ships, roleplay and stuff.” When it came to Tumblr, she said that she comes across female and male players about equally as often. She could not explain why, but from my observations, I would second Annelieke's claim that Tumblr in general is a more female-oriented space than Reddit or Twitch. People often assume that bloggers on Tumblr are female, and there are more open discussions of gender than one would find on the other sites. I would posit that despite that *Dark Souls* itself may have a predominantly masculine social space, the concentrated presence of women on Tumblr balances things out on that particular site.

That is not to say that there *aren't* women or otherwise gendered persons on Twitch or Reddit, just that there's fewer of them visible, and probably ignored or assumed male. Sarah told me, “I've observed that I often don't get any comments at all, even when I think that I've made an interesting point, when I mention my gender. It's like I get ignored.”

Furthermore, the lack of women and otherwise gendered people may also be because they are afraid of verbal abuse, harassment or oppression, as Kafai et al. (2008) argue. Jack

said to me: “Sadly, most places I go to interact with Dark Souls fans is full of people spewing a lot of hateful garbage. A lot of Dark Souls players are male and chase off women from interacting with other fans by being a little creepy and sexual which is uncomfortable.” They added, “And its not a very safe environment for trans people when there are countless “trap” and “dickgirl” jokes made about Gwyndolin.”

This harassment seems to go hand-in-hand with a lack of discussion of gender, because people fear they will be ignored or incite hostile reactions. Oftentimes participants said that the interview or conversation they were having with me was the first time they had ever discussed gender in the context of *Dark Souls*. And, indeed, I only sporadically saw any mention of gender in the games and both times occurred on Tumblr. Those mentions were restricted to the argument that *Dark Souls* doesn't sexualise armour when it's put on women, and when Gwyndolin is the topic of conversation. As Gillian told me: “I dont see much of [a discussion about gender] tbh [to be honest]. Few trap jokes with Gwyndolin, inevitable 'magnificent chest' comments with Gwynevere, but nothing serious.”

In both instances, participants bring up Gwyndolin; it's curious, but not an accident. Gwyndolin's gender is a matter of some debate, and as such practically one of the few discussions people may have about gender in the context of *Dark Souls* games. In the next sub-section, I will go more in depth into how people in the fandom treat Gwyndolin, more specifically, how male gamers oftentimes treat Gwyndolin, as well as some thoughts on how Gwyndolin is represented in the games. I chose Gwyndolin specifically because I found more data on this character , and an analysis of Gwyndolin provided intriguing look into how performativity manifests in the interpretations and interactions with fictional characters in an online social space.

6.3.2 *Gwyndolin, Performative Masculinity & Gender Policing*

“The power of the moon was strong in Gwyndolin, and thus he was raised as a daughter.” - Moonlight Set, *Dark Souls*.



(Gwyndolin in the Darkmoon Tomb)

The fandom's interpretation of Gwyndolin's gender is somewhat divided; some see Gwyndolin as a trans woman, others say Gwyndolin's father, Gwyn, forced them to be a woman, and yet others say there is nothing truly conclusive to say about it. Whilst initially this division stood out to me, what really caught my attention was how frequently, especially on Twitch, people hurled slurs at Gwyndolin for no immediately apparent reason.

In the span of a few seconds whilst watching a stream on Twitch, I saw people say things such as, "He's a cute trap," "Is it gay if I am attracted to Gwyndolin", and "Dark Trap Queerdolin", which is a play on the name 'Dark Sun Gwyndolin.' Whilst some would not consider Gwyndolin a (trans) woman it is remarkable that the insults they use are most often directed at trans women.

The constant repetition of this 'joke' strikes me as performative in a manner Butler (1988) would have written of, though not only because it is a repetitive act, so much as for what it accomplishes: the insurance that whoever reads these messages is aware that the person who wrote them is likely a heterosexual man, and the person the insults are directed at deviates from what they consider normal.

The treatment of Gwyndolin shows three things: sexism, transmisogyny, and homophobia. They reveal this idea that women exist to be attractive for and to men, exist

basically for the benefit of men looking at them (sexism). The moment a woman is revealed not to be a ‘real’ woman (whatever ‘real’ women may be), and is instead interpreted as a man dressed up as a woman, she is understood as a ‘trap’ because she used the image of a woman to get a man interested, only to be revealed to supposedly not be a woman (transmisogyny). Heterosexual men perceive this as a threat to their sexuality, because so long as they interpret this woman as a man, it means that their attraction to her makes them homosexual, which they must insist they are not because it’s bad (homophobia). And thus, because they discredit a trans woman’s femininity, they must call her a trap, as it lays the blame of their attraction on her, and as such safeguards their heterosexuality and by extension their masculinity. In this sense, (heterosexual) masculinity itself is performative.

As Butler (1988) argues, gender is a *stylized repetition of acts*, with which people produce and reproduce notions of gender. In calling Gwyndolin a ‘trap’, male players repeatedly communicate to each other that they, too, are ‘real’ heterosexual men, and simultaneously reproduce ideas of what women should be. Whilst in this case this is not done through their own bodily practices, which seems to be Butler’s major focus, they do accomplish it through text, online, using Gwyndolin’s body or image to get the point across—Gwyndolin is a “dickgirl”.

The games themselves, and by extension the developers, are not innocent in this either. Consider the description I quoted above, in which they explain that Gwyndolin was raised as a daughter. They also refer to Gwyndolin as ‘he’, thereby emphasising that Gwynolin’s gender is ‘unusual’. Katie said to me that at times she felt that FromSoftware had wanted to put Gwyndolin in as a trans character, but then went out of their way to not explicitly say that Gwyndolin is such, because, she sarcastically added, “trannies are weeeiiiiirrrddd”.

Interestingly, despite the transmisogyny, there is also an insistence that Gwyndolin is feminine. The reason given is often the lore itself; someone on Reddit said to me, “Gwyndolin's upbringing show how traditional Gwyn is. If it's under the moon, raise it as a daughter. Not sure how Gwynevere²⁵ fits into this though. She was probably also born under the moon but had an affinity for sunlight.”

When I pointed out, however, that perhaps this makes Gwynevere, the Princess of Sunlight, a (trans) man, he simply repeated himself, saying, “I'm not entirely sure what

²⁵ She and Gwyndolin are siblings

happened during Gwyndolin/Gwynevere's youth and likely never will (they're long gone or dead) but [the Reversal Ring] definitely associates the moon with femininity. Not sure how Gwynevere plays into this like I said earlier.”

This could be a subtle way to police gender—holding onto rigid ideas of femininity and masculinity, so that any character who appears feminine should remain so despite that they could potentially be otherwise. On the flipside, calling Gwyndolin by derogative terms is also a way to police what women *should* be like, i.e. not a ‘trap’ or a ‘dickgirl’.

In contrast, when I brought the idea of a trans male Gwynevere up to Jack, who is a Tumblr blogger, they were enthusiastic about the idea, saying that if Gwynevere were to ever come out, they would be supportive. This difference in opinion could simply be attributed to these being two different people, but it also follows a rather specific trend I’ve noticed in three months of participant observation, in which those on Tumblr are often more inclined to be transformative in their approach to fandom, and more open-minded to variety and flexibility in gender and sexuality, whereas those on Reddit tend to be more conservative. In the following section, I will discuss this difference in more depth, particularly through the case of roleplay.

6.3.3 Roleplay & Performativity

Nielsen (2015) writes that RPGs provide players with the space to experiment with their identities by providing them with choices to be whatever they want to be, however they want to be. Her argument is certainly true from what I have observed; an example would be Jack, who said experimentation with gender is important, and who made characters of various genders and gendered appearance (androgynous, agender and feminine, male and masculine). Celeste explained that she made a female character who is a fighter but who does not care much for her appearance; this character is ‘pretty’, and by pretty Celeste meant that her character looks like an “average human being.” In this way, *Dark Souls* games give players some leeway in how they can present their characters and their genders, perhaps taking off pressure to look a certain way, and at the same time giving room for people to explore gender.

As such, Nielsen (2015) assessment of the games allowing people to experiment or explore their identities, including gender, stands correct. However, it remains within the

boundaries of the game itself, but from my observations, I would say that this certainly extends to online social spaces²⁶, especially when it comes to roleplay.

I interviewed five roleplayers, three of which were Redditors and two from Tumblr, and followed five on Tumblr. What I mean with roleplayers in this specific case is those who act or ‘play’ as fictional characters, either their own or existing ones in a particular fictional universe. Outside of the interviews, my interactions with most of them was limited. Aside from the regular interview questions, I made another list of questions specifically tailored to the topic of roleplaying. What became immediately evident both through these questions and participant observation is that Tumblr and Reddit provide entirely different kinds of spaces for roleplaying that affect its form.

For one, Tumblr, offers players their own personal blog on which they can post whatever they like. For roleplayers, this often meant they could post pieces of text of how they interpret characters, events, interactions, as well as what they imagine the character they roleplay to be like, outside of what we can see in the game. They also often had entire pages on the blog itself where they explained how they approach the character, what their backstory is, as well as providing rules of what they did or did not want or allow for their roleplay experiences.

Because of Tumblr’s format, roleplayers then often ended up engaging in long-form interactions, writing story-like bits of text in reply to each other. They were not just writing dialogue, but also providing descriptions for scenes and their character’s emotional responses along with their verbal ones.

One of the most interesting aspects about Tumblr in general, however, was the potential for interpreting characters in various ways. This extended itself to roleplay as well; I came across three bloggers who roleplayed Gwyndolin; one viewed Gwyndolin as a man who is sensitive about his being raised as a woman, another had no preferences for pronouns but used ‘they/them’ exclusively, and yet another one interpreted Gwyndolin as a lesbian trans woman. This happened with various characters.

Reddit, on the other hand, has little roleplaying action, most of what I saw being on the subreddit for *Dark Souls III*. These often tend to be short interactions, often in response to someone else’s post, at other times a funny post on its own. Often, as all three roleplayers I

²⁶ I’ll only be discussing roleplay of npcs, but there are also various instances of people roleplaying their own characters. I will not be discussing cosplay, as I have no data on that.

spoke to explained, this requires in-depth knowledge of the characters, with Mackenzie saying:

Typically follow the various conversation cues and do my best to stay close to the average players assessment of [the character's] personality. If given the option I will gladly branch out to my own interpretation, but back around the weeks I created this account every single rp account came under fire. So to avoid a similar situation I stick more to the basic personality of the character.

All of them also told me that roleplay on Reddit is often situational and that their replies, though in character, must be relevant to the situation at hand. In this way, roleplay on Reddit often tends to stay within confirmative bounds. This is not surprising, as Reddit in general has a rule that states that posts made must be relevant to the topic of the subreddit, otherwise the moderators will delete the post.

This was most evident when I stumbled upon a comment asking what Gwyndolin's eldest brother, the Nameless King, was like before he was exiled. A Gwynevere roleplayer replied that he was "an absolute brute" but that her brother constantly had to "fight wars", and "had no respect for the finer things in life...Only weapons and battle mattered to him".

Their text displays a lot of masculine stereotypes, which they likely based off of what little we know of Gwynevere's brother: that he was once a God of War, and watches over his warriors. As we know so little and as there is hardly any room on Reddit for transformative work, they instead have to rely on reproducing gendered stereotypes (brutish character, warrior, single interest in weaponry) so as to not make Nameless King seem out of character to other fans, who would likely police or ignore them if they said anything too radical, as we saw when I posited that Gwynevere could be a man.

Tumblr, then, offers a space for people to be transformative in people's approach to both gender and sexuality. Reddit is more conservative in this case, often not allowing radical breaks from the norm. I posit that this is because Tumblr's platform offers intersections with other interests as well as political movements, such as feminist and queer activism, which makes people more likely to incorporate that into how they interpret characters in their Tumblr posts. In contrast, Reddit has bounded sub-sections devoted to specific topics, and the

rules dictate that any posts made there must be relevant to the main topic, lest the post be deleted. Reddit, to a certain extent, polices fans' possible actions within its bounds.

In some of these cases of roleplay, identification with the characters also comes into play, as Annelieke has discussed previously. Both Mackenzie and Katie expressed that their interest in roleplaying specific characters (Elfriede and Gwyndolin, respectively), is born from recognising aspects of themselves in these characters. Mackenzie felt that Lady Friede was much like herself: "Essentially I have a very large number of personality flaws and social troubles. As a result I typically barricade myself behind a harsh, chilly personality. When I was thinking about the most impressive dark souls characters who most matched me mentally Friede just seemed to be the best choice."

As for Katie, she herself is trans, and whilst she's not jumping to interpret Gwyndolin as such, she feels their experiences match; her family "kind of hates" her, and her mother was proud to have a son and as such expected traditionally masculine things from her. Despite this, Katie has, by her own admission, always been feminine, and rather than being gay, she felt there was always more. Since accidentally coming out, her sister won't speak to her and her mother was "disgusted."

Similarly, Gwyndolin, in the game, is not given stellar treatment. Gwyndolin is hidden away in Gwyn's tomb, and the only references to the Lord of Sunlight having a third child is found on a ring and on Gwyndolin's robes. Unlike with Gwyn's other children, there are no statues for Gwyndolin until the third game. As such, players can find characters they identify with, be it based on experiences, personality traits and other aspects that may appeal to them, which are not necessarily always related to gender.

6.4 Preliminary Conclusion

As I have argued above, the *Dark Souls* games do not from the outset engage with gender in more than a superficial manner, i.e. the game offers some lip service to equal treatment of two sexes and genders, but often portrays these genders in stereotypical and sexist ways. This seems indicative of how FromSoftware approached gender in their games as, unlike with the *Dragon Age* franchise, they did not make any notable changes. As such, the adjacent social space where a fandom resides is not more than superficially engaged with matters of gender, and oftentimes one finds little to no in-depth discussion. This varies across sites within this space, as I have explained.

Dark Souls games themselves seem to be mostly male-dominated; although other genders do seem to play the game and are certainly present in the online social space, those who play *Dark Souls* often say that they know more men who play the games than women or other genders. This is likely because gaming in general is seen as a masculine activity.

Additionally, on sites like Reddit and Twitch, sexism, homophobia, and transmisogyny seem to go unchallenged and unchecked. In more subtle ways, gendered stereotypes pass by unnoticed, reproducing strict ideas of what it means to be a man and a woman. In contrast, Tumblr is more open to transformative acts and ideas that question and defy the status quo as it pertains to gender. This variation is not born from the games but rather specific sites and their social context.

What follows now is our general discussion, in which Annelieke and I conclude with important comparisons as well as suggestions for future research.

7. Discussion & Conclusion

The *Dragon Age* and *Dark Souls* franchises are vastly different games in terms of story, gameplay, and visuals, but beyond those things, there is also differences in how the games represent gender, and how gender and performativity manifest in their respective online social space.

The *Dragon Age* trilogy has changed its representation of gender over time, women have gained more presence in the game while gaining more agency. Even so, *Dragon Age* still sometimes portrays genders in stereotypical ways.

When it comes to the *Dark Souls* trilogy, the representation of gender has not changed noticeably over time. Male characters are more numerous than female ones, and whilst both genders can take on varied roles, men also tend to abuse women, and women are portrayed as passive and inept more often than men are.

As Cragtongue mentioned, gender is emphasised more in *Dragon Age* games (both as a topic of conversation and how characters are portrayed) than it is in *Dark Souls* games. It is remarkable that as a result of that, the *Dragon Age* games' more active mention and talk of gender opens up doors for the fandom to discuss gender, while in contrast, *Dark Souls* games barely discuss gender, with hints and mentions that are not substantial enough to spark an ongoing, serious and critical conversation around the topic. This gives credence to Dietz's (1998) assertion that the presence and presentation of gender within a video games does indeed affect how people view gender and, we would add, the kinds of conversation they have regarding gender. Because of how old Dietz's article is, it's interesting to see that the basis of her statement hasn't changed.

What has changed, perhaps, since her time, is the form representation of gender takes, and the attention some developers give to it; in the case of *Dragon Age* games, the developers and writers seem to have made more of an effort to pay attention to gender as a subject and taken views outside of their own into account.

Additionally, roleplay in online social spaces is a constant variable that provides opportunity to produce and reproduce gender, depending on the site. In the case of roleplay however, it is not the games themselves that affect the manifestation of roleplay and gender, but the specific sites people use. For both game franchises, roleplay on Reddit is not as present, structured, or expansive, and in the case of *Dark Souls* games oftentimes relies on

more stereotypical performances of gender which serve to reproduce existing ideas about gender. However, Tumblr offers a space in which people can write in depth pieces on their original characters as well as existing characters within the universe, which makes a game's social space both discursive and reflective. This often leads to lengthy interactions and more critical and transformative approaches to characters, with participants adding to or changing how they interpret a character's gender and personality.

Another aspect that seems specific to the sites themselves and not necessarily the games was that Reddit seems a more masculine space and Tumblr a more feminine one. This was the case for both game franchises, although less so for the *Dragon Age* subReddit. It seems to imply a gendered segregation because gaming in general, seen as a masculine space, often will also create masculine-dominated spaces, which leads women and people of other genders to seek sites of their own. The *Dragon Age* fandom on Tumblr could be considered a feminine space, since most participants assumed people to be women.

Furthermore, *Dark Souls* games are presented as more of a masculine interest than *Dragon Age* games are, with reasons being elements in the games themselves that may attract different groups; for instance, *Dark Souls* games have less dialogue and a less obvious story, which according to some is less attractive for women. However, there *are* girls and women who do like the game despite and even because of it. Additionally, gaming itself is seen as a masculine activity, and as some spaces are more male-dominated, it could simply be the case that girls, women, and otherwise gendered people may be less visible, especially since a lot of times they will be interpreted as male until stated otherwise. As such, arguments that women like one thing and men something else are performative: they simply reinforce and reproduce already present ideas about gender and what these genders should and are allowed to enjoy.

There are also forms of policing present in online social spaces in which fans can subject each other to harassment if they disagree with a popular opinion, as was the case with *Dragon Age*. More subtle forms of policing, however, include simple insistence upon a specific opinion or denial of a diverging opinion by not giving it attention, as we saw with *Dark Souls*. It's likely that this policing is a result of ideas of what certain genders should or should not like, should and should not be and look like.

In the case of *Dragon Age*, the characters gave players in some cases the means to a form of empowerment, by replicating the behaviour from characters in the games. This

allowed female players to change their own gendered behavior in ways that were different from the stereotypes present about women.

What our research shows is that there's not only the games themselves and how they (and by extension the developers) choose to portray gender. Online social spaces, as spaces fans create to talk about these games, are sites of culture where these portrayals of gender become part of what talk about and how they talk about, be it in overt discussions about gender stereotypes, or in subtle comments, representations, and interpretations. Content analyses are useful in so far as they show what stereotypes and biases are present in games and how these relate to stereotypes and biases in society, but they fall short in revealing how fans of the game then continue on to interpret or engage with these aspects of the games. As we've argued, the way the games portray gender will affect the way fans approach it in their online social space, though *Dragon Age* fans also show that this can be a two-way street if their conversations are obvious enough for the developers to take note.

We have also argued that fans' engagement with each other and the games reveal performativity, as Judith Butler (1988) conceptualised. With *Dark Souls*, this shows most prominently in how they interpret and talk about characters, as Tachyk showed with Gwyndolin. With *Dragon Age* this performativity was most visible when creating a male character made it easier for participants to break gendered social rules on how female characters should behave.

Our research was not extensive nor exhaustive. Further research could look into how race and/or ethnicity interacts with gender in online social spaces, as it became evident that in the case of *Dragon Age* games, there was certainly an ongoing conversation about this, but with *Dark Souls* this was not at all the case. The process of policing people within online social spaces is also an intriguing aspect to look into, with questions regarding the impetus behind it and the various forms it can take. The relationship between performativity and roleplay within online social spaces related to games would also be an interesting topic to look into further, as well as how all these questions relate to the world outside of these online social spaces.

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Samenvatting [Annelieke]

In de afgelopen jaren is er veel onderzoek gedaan naar hoe gender gerepresenteerd wordt in video games. Het is echter opvallend dat de plekken waar fans over de games praten nog weinig in achtning is genomen; vaak wordt er alleen gekeken naar de inhoud van een video game, waardoor het lijkt alsof er niets eromheen en ermee gebeurt. Om die reden hebben wij in dit onderzoek gekeken naar de manier waarop *Dragon Age* en *Dark souls* gender representeren in de bijbehorende spellen en hoe de fans online denken en discussiëren over gender.

Allereerst hebben we geprobeerd om video games als een antropologisch onderzoeksveld weer te geven door een overzicht te geven van de onderzoeken naar video games van de afgelopen jaren. Boellstorff (2008) beargumenteert dat online onderzoek niet altijd gepaard hoeft te gaan met offline onderzoek, aangezien video games een eigen culturele en sociale context kunnen hebben. Golub (2010) geeft echter als tegenargument dat de sociale context van video games tot uiting komt op meerdere plaatsen online en offline. Newman (2005) geeft aan dat deze online sites ook een manier zijn voor spelers om met elkaar in contact te komen, zelfs als het niet een online spel betreft. Het was voor ons dus van belang om naar meerdere online sites te kijken waar fans hun mening uiten over de games, aangezien dit een plaats is waar volgens Kafai et al. (2012) de betekenis van de representatie in de video game wordt geconstrueerd, gediscussieerd en geïnternaliseerd.

Video games geven volgens Waggoner (2009) spelers de optie om een eigen karakter te maken waarmee zij de wereld van de game kunnen ontdekken. Nielsen (2015) voegt daar verder aan toe dat video games spelers de ruimte geven om te experimenteren met hun identiteit.

Gender was de grootste focus van ons onderzoek. Butler (1988) beargumenteert dat gender geconstrueerd wordt door alledaagse handelingen, die zo vaak herhaald worden dat ze onderdeel zijn van een onbewust proces. Dit noemt ze *performativity*. Kafai et al. (2008) geven aan dat deze *performativity* belangrijk is in relatie tot video games en gender, aangezien mannen en vrouwen op zeer verschillende manieren worden gerepresenteerd in dit medium, waardoor ideeën over gender ook hier gereproduceerd kunnen worden.

Tijdens ons onderzoek kwam naar voren dat de representatie van gender in *Dragon Age* is veranderd door de tijd heen en mannen en vrouwen op een steeds meer gelijkwaardige manier worden gerepresenteerd. Vrouwen hebben meer zeggenschap en worden minder snel geseksualiseerd, hoewel gender soms nog wel op stereotyperende manieren wordt neergezet. Deze verandering is voornamelijk veroorzaakt doordat Bioware, het bedrijf dat *Dragon Age* maakt, luistert naar feedback van fans, zowel op officiële platformen als via social media. Daarentegen is *Dark Souls* weinig veranderd door de jaren heen; vrouwelijke karakters in *Dark Souls* zijn zeldzamer en worden vaker als passief en onmachtig neergezet. FromSoftware, het bedrijf wat *Dark Souls* maakt, heeft ook weinig direct contact met de fans.

We beargumenteren de *Dragon Age* fans meer en vaker over gender praten, omdat het spel representatie laat zien waardoor er een discussie ontstaat op de online sites. In het geval van *Dark Souls* wordt de discussie over gender gezien als overbodig en vindt over het algemeen niet of weinig plaats. Over het algemeen wordt gaming gezien als iets mannelijks, waardoor de spellen en hun online omgeving vaak ook meer mannelijke participanten kent dan die van andere genders. Het was opvallend dat, voor beide spellen, mensen er vaker vanuit gingen dat vrouwen op Tumblr actief waren en mannen op Reddit. Dit verschil was minder groot for *Dragon Age*, hoewel het nog wel aanwezig was.

Ons onderzoek heeft laten zien dat er een cultureel fenomeen gaande is rondom het spelen van games. Het spel en de plaatsen waar men praat over het spel zijn belangrijk voor het vormen van ideeën over de eigen identiteit en gender. Hiermee laten we zien dat het van belang is om naast de games ook naar gesprekken rondom de games kijken, naar hoe fans video games interpreteren, wat ze eruit halen, en wat voor betekenis ze eraan geven, ook ten opzichte van gender. We raden verder onderzoek aan naar hoe de online sites de offline sites en belevingswereld beïnvloeden. Ook denken we dat het interessant is om te kijken hoe andere sociale structuren op het onderwerp van video games en gender inspelen, zoals racisme of classicisme.

Glossary

Avatar: in gaming terminology, often the character a player plays as, basically functioning as their embodiment in the game; see 2.1.

Boss: significant enemy at the end of an area or level, which a player usually has to defeat to progress to the next area.

Cosplay: contraction of costume and play, in which people may dress up as fictional characters as a form of performance art

Let's Play: name for a series of videos that document a playthrough (see below) of a game.

Kappa: twitch.tv emote most often used to connote something said sarcastically



NPC: non-playable character, specifically a character the player cannot play as in the game, as opposed to a playable character that functions as an avatar for the player

Roleplay: the act of 'playing' as a fictional character, either from an existing medium or self-made; see 6.3.3.

RPG: role-playing game, in which a player can create a character and act out the role the narrative gives this character; see 2.1.

Playthrough: playing the game from start to finish; streamers and YouTubers tend to show these live or record them

PogChamp: twitch.tv emote most often used to connote excitement

