

You're still the **[{M}hero][{F}heroine]** of the *Dragon Age*: Translating gender in fantasy role-playing games

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1. Introduction

Video games represent one of the most rapidly growing segments of creative industries at global level (NewZoo 2020a). They uniquely combine technical and artistic talent, offer a variety of multimedia interactive entertaining experiences, and are enjoyed by people of every age, gender, ethnicity, and language. Indeed, the success story of gaming is fully dependent on the game localization profession (Bernal Merino 2011: 11), which emerged to allow multimedia interactive entertainment software to reach players in different locales, each representing "a specific combination of region, language and character encoding" (Esselink 2000: 1).

Video games' impact on society is testified to by the revenues of the global games market, namely \$159.3 billion in 2019, with more than 2.7 billion gamers across the world (NewZoo 2020a). As both producers and consumers, the leading countries are China, the USA and Japan, which occupy the top three positions on the country-markets by game revenues ranking (NewZoo 2020b). Consequently, despite the multicultural nature of the industry (Consalvo 2006), the main source languages of video games are Chinese, Japanese and, particularly, English, the latter as either native and/or working language.

In Europe, 51% of the population aged 6-64 play video games, which equates to some 250 million players (ISFE 2020). More relevantly, as regards gender, nearly

half (45%) of players are female (*ibid.*). The biggest European game markets are Germany, the UK, France, Spain, and Italy, the latter two come in at number nine and ten respectively on the global ranking (NewZoo 2020b) and are central game consumption areas. Indeed, Italian and Spanish have always been included in the standard set of target European languages for video games, commonly referred to as “FIGS” (French, Italian, German and Spanish). This acronym was coined in the 1980s and still represents “the minimum default group of languages that most games are translated to” (Bernal-Merino 2011: 14-15).

When investigating gender in game localization, particularly relevant are role-playing games (RPGs hereafter), which allow players to customize the playable character’s gender. Given that the interlinguistic and intercultural transfer of gender is one of the most challenging issues in game translation, as will be discussed in Section 3, this research aims to contribute to the debate about the topic by extending Pettini’s study (2020) to the genre of fantasy and, thus, to verify whether the number and the importance of female characters in war video games is directly proportional to the degree of fictionality of game contents. Accordingly, this paper examines women’s representation in fantasy RPG *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Electronic Arts 2014): the roles women play in the game’s storyline are outlined to contextualize the corpus-driven analysis of the original and translated representation of gender in English-Italian and English-Spanish language pairs. In this view, Section 2 explores the link between women and video games and discusses the most relevant aspects of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, from a gender-critical perspective. Section 3 offers an overview of the influence of gender on game translation, which backgrounds the working methodology developed for this study and described in Section 4. The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the original and translated representation of women is presented in Section 5, with special attention to the gender-biased approach of Italian language professionals which emerges from a contrastive perspective. Lastly, in Section 6 the results of the analysis are critically discussed to highlight linguacultural-specific tendencies which, as concerns Italian, disclose a sociocultural resistance to the symmetrical use of language.

2. Women and video games: *Dragon Age Inquisition*

Since the 2010s the common misconception that playing, watching, and owning games are male-dominated pastimes has been challenged by the global scope of gaming. NewZoo's research (2020c: online) on international gamer segmentation clearly demonstrates that "the stigma of gamers as young, unemployed males – as they're still portrayed in some circles – is simply inaccurate". Specifically, consumer insights show that not only women account for 46% of all gamers, but 40% of "ultimate gamers", namely "the most dedicated game enthusiasts" are female (*ibid.*).

Today "many publishers have realized their audiences are split equally in terms of gender, and it's inspiring to see more female representation in games" (NewZoo 2020c: online). While "in the past, the overwhelming majority of game protagonists were male", an increasing number of "female lead characters are now featured in flagship titles from some of the world's biggest publishers" (*ibid.*). In sum, "the archaic mindset of 'women don't sell' is finally coming to an end" (*ibid.*).

In this sense, as Sarkeesian and Petit (2020: online) argue, based on yearly data collected by Feminist Frequency¹, 2020 represented "a significant improvement, with about 18 percent of games shown featuring female characters" and also marked "the narrowest divide [5%] between games featuring defined female protagonists and games featuring defined male protagonists", respectively forming 18% and 23% of the total (*ibid.*). Indeed, the number of games starring male characters has always been at least three times higher in previous years (*ibid.*). More importantly, gender-customizable games, those "which allow players a choice between a male and female character", accounted for 55% in 2020, "the biggest percentage of all" (*ibid.*).

As concerns representation, today women in video games go far beyond "glassy-eyed dolls, damsels in distress or mere extensions of the main character" (Reed

¹ Feminist Frequency (<https://feministfrequency.com/>) is a not-for-profit, educational organization which provides analyses of modern media from a critical perspective on societal issues such as race, gender, and sexuality.

and Hartup 2018: online). “Female heroines and characters have become” more relatable and “believable women who are every bit as heroic and inspirational as their male counterparts” (*ibid.*). In this regard, it is worth mentioning that in the 25 most inspirational she-characters listed by Reed and Hartup (*ibid.*), the ones which come at number one and three respectively are two women from two fantasy RPGs, yet with different ‘cultural’ perspectives: Yuna, from the Japanese *Final Fantasy X* (Square Enix 2001) and Cassandra Pentaghast, from the Western *Dragon Age* series (Electronic Arts 2009 – Present). In fact, in terms of genre preferences, several studies have shown women’s increasing tendency towards RPGs (Daws 2014; Cunningham 2018).

Dragon Age: Inquisition (DAI hereafter) is a fantasy RPG developed by BioWare and published by Electronic Arts in 2014 as a multiplatform title. It is the third major episode in the *Dragon Age* franchise (Electronic Arts 2009 – Present), representing the sequel to *Dragon Age II* (2011) and is considered “the most successful launch in the BioWare history” (Trefis Team 2015: online), with over six million units sold across all platforms worldwide (VGChartz 2021). Concerning the fantasy game world in which DAI’s story unfolds:

A cataclysmic event plunges the land of Thedas into turmoil. Dragons darken the sky, casting a shadow over lands on the brink of chaos. Mages break into all-out war against the oppressive templars. Nations rise against one another. It falls to you and your allies to restore order as you lead the Inquisition and hunt down the agents of chaos. (Electronic Arts 2021a: online)

DAI’s Thedas is a world populated with races familiar to any fan of the fantasy genre, including humans, dwarves, elves, and the giant qunari². The protagonist of DAI’s war is a completely customizable character³ known as the Inquisitor, whose mission is to close a mysterious tear in the sky called the Breach, which is unleashing dangerous demons, and finally save Thedas from destruction. In

² In the *Dragon Age* series, the qunari are a race of giant and very robust humanoids with metallic skin, white hair and pointed ears, whose name comes from their (fantasy) religion, The Qun.

³ Players can customize their character by choosing his/her name, surname (depending on their race), gender (male or female), race (human, elf, dwarf or qunari), class (warrior, rogue or mage), physical appearance and clothes, armor, voice (one male Southern English accent and one female North American accent), etc.

the religious landscape of Thedas (McNeely 2020), the Inquisitor is viewed as the “chosen one”: s/he has a mark on his/her left hand capable of closing the Breach and s/he leads the Inquisition to defeat the villain Corypheus, an ancient humanoid monster, who opened the Breach in his attempt to achieve godhood.

The war players fight in DAI is not solo experience: the Inquisitor interacts with hundreds of non-playable characters, which range from well-developed members or potential allies of the Inquisition, who help the Inquisitor in his/her missions, to simple extras, about whom nothing is known. The most narratively significant ones are the thirteen characters presented on the game’s official website (Electronic Arts 2021b: online), of which six are women, as discussed in Section 5.

In Game and Media Studies, BioWare’s RPGs have often attracted scholars investigating video games from a gender-critical perspective. Holmes (2016), for example, shows how the representation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender themes has developed in time and how the inclusion of non-heterosexual relationships has become the status quo of BioWare’s games.

As regards the *Dragon Age* series, as Leonid (2020: 158) states, due to its popularity, “many authors have analyzed this franchise, and the way it deals with” themes like love, gender, and sex. BioWare has always paid great attention to these areas and developed the model of relationships between the playable character and other companions that became a standard for the entire RPG genre, also in games from other developers (*ibid.*). In particular, according to Leonid (*ibid.*: 163), by interpreting video games as representation, we can understand them as simulations of the cultural constructs surrounding actual phenomena and mostly originating in other texts, including literature. These constructs can be either abstract or realistic, but they are conditioned by the culture(s) in which they emerge. In this sense, DAI belongs to “the Western, primary American, culture” and “the simulated cultural systems used in the game belong to the tradition of representation of” gender, sex, relationships, women and men “introduced in Western European literature and later rethought as part of American mass culture” (*ibid.*).

In light of this, many studies have investigated the *Dragon Age* games from a gender-critical perspective. For example, Guyot (2012) diachronically examines how the representation of womanhood changes in the first two *Dragon Age* titles and states that, despite gender-equal opportunities in terms of gameplay and despite a large variety of female characters and romance options (heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual relationships), the marketing of the franchise has “inevitably” relied on some stereotypes, including “woman as seductress”. As concerns this point, Loof (2015) shows how the male gaze affects physical appearance and clothing, the framing of bodies, the ‘Ms. Male Character’ trope and the romance mechanics of DAI’s characters. In particular, Loof (*ibid.*: 31-32) explains that, notwithstanding its gender-inclusive nature, DAI actually conforms to the conventional portrayal of genders and reinforces “the idea of female as other and the male as the norm”. Conversely, according to Hays (2016: 23-34), DAI excels in women’s representation in terms of equal status and power, without oversexualization: differences in the design of both the playable Inquisitor and non-playable female characters only depend on race and class, regardless of their gender, and prove to be functional and appropriate for their narrative roles (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, as Hays clarifies (*ibid.*: 34-38), when gender combines with other representational aspects, sociocultural issues emerge. In Hays’ opinion (*ibid.*), a prime example regards the powerful human enchanter Vivienne who, due to her bossy personality, represents the angry black woman stereotype, which negatively influences how players perceive her, as opposed to other equally bossy characters like Cassandra, whose whiteness made her one of DAI’s most successful characters in terms of reception (*ibid.*). By combining the performative nature of gender and playing, Navarro-Remesal (2018) explores the ways in which gender, sexuality and identity can be performed in DAI and argues that playing the game becomes an act of self-expression, self-reflection and critical interpretation of the designers’ world-view (*ibid.*: 188).

Going back to DAI’s gender-customizable experience, the infographics about players’ gender preference published by BioWare after the game launch (Baker 2015) revealed that 32% of gamers were playing as female. This figure represented “a 14% increase in female gaming since the 18% of players who used a female Shepard in BioWare’s *Mass Effect* series”, which suggested “a

potential trend in the growth of female gaming in RPGs” (*ibid.*: online). Two years later, a study by Quantic Foundry (Yee 2017) not only confirmed this tendency but showed that women made up nearly half (48%) of people who played *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, compared to the overall average of 23% for the Western RPG genre (Gates 2017).

3. Translating gender in video games

Game localization is a specialized translation area that combines elements of audiovisual translation and software localization (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 1). As multimedia interactive entertainment software, video games present language professionals with medium-specific challenges and constraints which depend on interactivity and represent clear indicators of the uniqueness of this translation realm, one of which affects games like DAI, where gender-customization poses the challenge of variables.

Also known as “placeholders”, variables “are values that hold the space for different text or numerical strings – such as proper nouns, numerals, and objects – and they change depending on” players’ actions (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 132). Interactivity expresses itself in variables because they allow displaying a wide number of attributes for players’ characters such as name, gender, profession, nationality, etc. (Bernal-Merino 2015: 147). Therefore, “variables are video games’ textual devices, which allow the game engine to display gender-specific strings properly” (Pettini 2018: 106).

In game translation, “given the lack of co-textual and contextual information owing to textual non-linearity⁴, this phenomenon may give rise to several linguistic

⁴ Game texts are made of separate and decontextualized independent strings, which are displayed in different locations of the game in obedience to players’ actions and which often do not have a clear meaning without co-text and context. In particular, isolated text fragments are combined by way of concatenation (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 130), which is a technique “whereby text stored in different parts of the game code is put together in a sentence or paragraph by means of linguistic variables and formulae” (Bernal-Merino 2015: 280). The concatenation of text strings and linguistic variables allows the game engine to customize players’ experience through interactivity.

issues, because it can lead to inconsistencies and incorrect sentences across different languages” (*ibid.*). Specifically, special attention must be paid to gender agreement in the transfer from languages with a mainly semantic gender system, like English, into languages with a formal gender system, such as Italian and Spanish, where gender is also a grammatical category (see Hellinger and Bußmann 2001) reflected in the behavior of all associated words (Díaz-Montón 2007; O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 132-133; Bernal-Merino 2015: 147-152). In these languages, “gender is marked morphologically on all linguistic elements that are syntactically associated with one (gendered) referent” and “agreement, or concord, establishes a morpho-syntactic relationship between satellite elements and the referent’s gender through grammatical marking or inflection” (Pettini 2018: 109).

Accordingly, due to players’ agency as expressed through interactivity, this type of linguistic information must be ‘translated’ into computing instructions (Heimburg 2006). For this purpose, developers and localization agencies usually create their own metalinguistic tools. For example, DAI’s developers at BioWare use a programming metalanguage consisting of “a set of codes and characters that mark gender-variable strings with tags, [...] serving as computing instructions that allow the game engine to display gender-specific strings correctly” (Pettini 2020: 446). “This system is fundamental when translating gender-customizable games, which enable players to select either a male or female avatar, since their choice theoretically affects all linguistic items referring to the playable character” (*ibid.*).

As opposed to Media Studies, where great attention has been paid to gender issues over the past decades (see Ross 2020), especially as regards the representation of female characters in video games, interests and experiences of female players and the game industry composition in terms of demographic representation, few scholars have examined the translation of gender from the perspective of game localization. For example, Maxwell-Chandler and O’Malley-Deming (2012: 315-326) offer an interesting case study of the translation of *Fable II* (Microsoft Game Studios 2008) and underline that “one of the main text challenges in this project was gender control” because, since this title “can be

played as a male or female hero" (*ibid.*: 321), when translating into languages with a grammatical gender system, all lines had to be duplicated unless "a good neutral sentence was applicable" (*ibid.*: 322). Czech (2013) shows that, due to the lack of contextual information in game translation, several sociolinguistic issues such as proper gender marking may arise in Polish. Specifically, according to Czech (*ibid.*: 15), the "unnatural sounding expressions" in the Polish localization of *Mass Effect 2* (Electronic Arts 2010) depend on translators' arbitrary decisions owing to the absence of information regarding the characters' gender. Still focusing on the transfer from English into European languages, Šiaučiūnė and Liubinienė (2011: 51) illustrate how the incorrect translation of the English third-person singular pronoun "it" into the feminine-marked equivalent pronoun in Lithuanian may represent a "linguistic plot-stopper" (Dietz 2006: 125), which impairs the playability of *Magic Encyclopedia: The First Story* (Alawar Entertainment 2008). In fact, the referent of "it" is a semantically masculine object, but the Lithuanian translation "induces the player to search for female gender objects and after fruitless efforts to identify them, the player is forced to move on trying to identify an object of masculine gender" (Šiaučiūnė and Liubinienė 2011: 51). In her corpus-driven study on gender representation in game localization, Pettini (2018) examines the linguistic and textual dimension of gender-related issues in the science-fiction RPG *Mass Effect 3* (Electronic Arts 2012) and demonstrates how the game protagonist's gender affects the translation of in-game dialogues from English into Italian, in terms of both grammar and style, the latter meant as a gendered approach to audio localization, e.g. voice-over professionals' choices, which remarkably influences the gaming experience. The representation and localization of female roles between realism and fictionality is instead the focus of Pettini's study (2020) on the typically male-gendered worlds of war video games. This research analyzes a reality-fictionality corpus of three story-driven military-themed games, namely *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* (Electronic Arts 2012), *Battlefield 4* (Electronic Arts 2013) and *Mass Effect 3* (Electronic Arts 2012) and explores the narrative weight and the linguacultural representation of female characters in the localization from English into Italian and Spanish, to finally show that the number and the importance of women in war video games "is inversely proportional to the degree of verisimilitude of game content" (Pettini 2020: 453). "Indeed, the more the game is realistic, the more

limited is the number of females, the more passive and socioculturally stereotyped are their narrative roles” (*ibid.*). Moreover, “Italian and Spanish present remarkable asymmetries in the representation of female characters and, particularly in Italian, these irregularities seem to disclose gender-biased values and assumptions that mirror and reinforce sexist clichés and stereotypes through language” (*ibid.*: 454).

Against this background, this paper aims to replicate Pettini’s work (2020) and extend the analysis to a war video game of the fantasy genre⁵, in order to evaluate whether the number and the narrative weight of female characters is directly proportional to the degree of fictionality of game contents.

4. Methodology

As Wolf and Perron (2009: 11) argue, “the video game is really a complex object of study” and the interactive nature of video games introduces several challenges to the analysis of their content (Schmierbach 2009). This is particularly true in game translation research because, in order to give players authorial agency in the storytelling process, game texts are non-linear, as discussed in Section 3. Textual fragmentation reveals itself in the Excel spreadsheets game translators usually work on, with little or no contextual information and, above all, without the possibility to see the game before the release. Textual non-linearity represents a challenge also for researchers, especially when dealing with story-driven games and examining dialogues as text type, as in this paper. Indeed, in order to create corpora in game localization studies, researchers must reorder dialogue strings and make conversations linear by playing the game or using online walkthroughs played by independent gamers and uploaded on platforms like YouTube. In this study, however, thanks to the DAI’s original Excel database the researcher was provided with by the game’s publisher and which was used as a corpus, as will be discussed below, non-linearity represents a relative challenge. To answer the research questions of this study, the whole spreadsheet is used as a corpus and

⁵ In order to extend the realism-fictionality spectrum of war video games to the fantasy genre, the selection of DAI is based on the same criteria used by Pettini (2020: 447).

has been interrogated by using Excel tools. Specifically, the ‘filter’ function has been applied to extract matching records from the whole set of source data (the Italian and the Spanish columns) based on the criteria described below.

As Section 3 illustrates, DAI’s developers created their own computing metalanguage, variables which allow the game engine to display gender-specific strings properly, namely {M} for male and {F} for female and the whole gender-variable string is contained within square brackets. As the dialogue line in example (1) shows, the original English string “The Chosen of Andraste, a blessed hero sent to save us all”, which is addressed to the gender-customizable player character, becomes “Il Prescelto di Andraste, un eroe inviato per salvarci tutti” if male and “La Prescelta di Andraste, un’eroina inviata per salvarci tutti” if female in Italian, and “El elegido de Andraste, el héroe bendito que ha enviado para salvarnos” if male and “La elegida de Andraste, la heroína bendita que ha enviado para salvarnos” if female in Spanish, since the translation of the items referring to the game’s protagonist must agree with his/her gender and thus requires the use of variables. Accordingly, the above-mentioned gender variables have been used to filter text strings in the corpus.

(1) The Chosen of Andraste, a blessed hero sent to save us all.	[M] Il Prescelto di Andraste, un eroe inviato per salvarci tutti.][F] La Prescelta di Andraste, un’eroina inviata per salvarci tutti.]	[M] El elegido de Andraste, el héroe bendito que ha enviado para salvarnos.][F] La elegida de Andraste, la heroína bendita que ha enviado para salvarnos.]
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This study corpus is DAI’s localization database, that is the Excel spreadsheet which organizes game texts in typical table style format with several columns and hundreds of thousands of rows. Columns in DAI database include, for example: “identifier”, a set of numbers which identify text strings, “English”, “Italian” and “Spanish”, each containing strings in the relevant language, “resource type”, which classifies the different string types, such as “conversation”, “codex”, “journal”, etc., and, more importantly for this study, the columns “speaker character” and “speaker gender”. As Christou *et al.* (2011) explain, developers at BioWare usually commit themselves to provide as much contextual information as possible to translators, and data concerning the speaker character’s name and

their gender can be extremely useful when translating from English into Romance languages⁶. This information has been useful also for this research, since the number of female characters and their role in dialogues can be easily inferred by filtering strings based on the two relevant columns.

In line with the typical textual features of role-playing games highlighted by Christou *et al.* (2011) and Pettini (2018, 2020) concerning BioWare’s *Mass Effect* series, DAI is a very text-heavy video game, which contains dozens of thousands of text strings and hundreds of thousands of words to be translated. Particularly relevant are dialogue strings, named ‘conversation’ in the database, which play a key narrative role in story-driven RPGs like DAI. DAI’s text-heavy nature is illustrated in Table 1, which shows the total number of dialogue strings and the related number of words in the three versions examined, namely the original English, and the Italian and Spanish localizations. The key narrative role of dialogues is confirmed by quantitative data: conversation strings represent 77% of the total number of strings (84,449) and the number of words of dialogue strings represents 61% of the total number of words of all string types (956,378), as concerns the original English game. As to the difference between Italian and Spanish in word count, this depends on the higher number of gender-tagged strings in Spanish, as Section 5 will show.

Table 1. Size of the corpus.

Number of dialogue strings	Word Count		
	English	Italian	Spanish
65,105	580,529	550,276	607,357

Lastly, regarding this research corpus, it is useful to mention that in terms of localization levels (Maxwell-Chandler and O’Malley-Deming 2012: 8–10), DAI

⁶ BioWare’s commitment to high quality translation also means providing localization professionals with the so-called “character bible” (Christou *et al.* 2011: 42), which concerns all “the virtual characters experienced in-game” in terms of “pertinent background information such as name, gender, species, age, character archetype, importance (major/minor character), speech patterns, accent, demeanor, etc.”. This tool represents essential reference text for all professionals involved, translators and voice-over actors in particular, who can access this contextual information in an informative and smooth manner thanks to the Excel spreadsheet which contains it (*ibid.*).

was partially localized into both Italian and Spanish, i.e. all game assets are translated, and the original audio is subtitled. This means that dialogue strings represent interlingual subtitles in Italian and Spanish, although subtitling norms “are clearly not adhered to” (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 163-164).

In sum, the corpus-driven methodology used in this descriptive research is based on the data contained in DAI’s database: the columns “speaker character” and “speaker gender” have been used to examine women’s representation and narrative weight in the game (the number of female characters and of the dialogue strings featuring female speaker characters) while gender variables, namely {M} for male and {F} for female, have been used to filter gender-specific strings in the columns named “Italian” and “Spanish” of the corpus (made of a total of 65,106 dialogue strings). In particular, thanks to variables, it has been possible to contrastively compare gender representation in the two Romance languages and verify whether and to what extent the use or non-use of variables confirms “linguacultural-specific tendencies” in Italian and Spanish, as observed by Pettini (2020).

5. Women in fantasy role-playing games

This section provides a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the representation of female characters in the corpus and examines parallel excerpts of in-game dialogues involving them as speaker characters.

First, since dialogues are the most important narrative device in RPGs, it is possible to evaluate the weight of characters based on their involvement in conversations. In this respect, findings clearly show that the gender-customizable Inquisitor is the story-leading character, involved as speaker in 16,237 dialogue strings, which represent 25% of the corpus. If we consider that DAI characters are almost 900, of which 365 are female (41%), this figure testifies to the major role of DAI’s protagonist (the player) in the game experience, whose gender-customizable nature deeply affects the translation from English into Italian and Spanish.

These dialogue lines can be uttered by either both a male and a female Inquisitor (16,206 strings), or by a male Inquisitor only (4 strings) or by a female Inquisitor only (27 strings). In conversation with other non-playable characters, the Inquisitor can also be listener and/or referent, but the database spreadsheet does not contain any columns signaling these roles. However, some instances can be inferred by filtering the strings which contain relevant names: Inquisitor itself, Herald, ‘the chosen’, last names depending on the protagonist’s race (Trevelyan if human, Lavellan if elf, Cadash if dwarf, Adaar if qunari). This search has revealed around 2,500 dialogue strings which, far from being truly representative of the Inquisitor’s role as addressee or referent, contribute to show his/her importance in dialogues.

As regards other female characters, the most significant ones are those who serve as companion warriors and advisers to the Inquisitor, as featured on DAI’s website (Electronic Arts 2021b), namely: (1) the human warrior Cassandra Pentaghast and (2) the Inquisition’s spymaster Leliana, also known as “the Right Hand” and “the Left Hand” of the Divine Justina respectively, (3) the human witch Vivienne, whose moniker is “the Lady of Iron”, for being very respected and feared, (4) the humanoid elf Sera, (5) the ambassador and chief diplomat of the Inquisition, Lady Josephine Montilyet, and (6) the powerful human witch Morrigan. The importance of these six women is confirmed by the number of dialogue lines casting them as speaker characters, as Table 2 illustrates. Moreover, as to other conversational roles these women may play in DAI, namely listener and/or referent, the analysis of the occurrences of the appellations (names, surnames and nicknames) of the six major female characters in the “English” column of the database shows that they are explicitly addressed and/or referred to in dialogue lines as follows: Cassandra Pentaghast (364 strings), Sera (291), Leliana (245), Josephine (243), Vivienne (144), and Morrigan (93).

Table 2. Narrative weight of DAI characters.

Speaker character	Speaker gender	Number of strings as speaker
The Inquisitor	M/F	16,237
Cassandra Pentaghast	F	3,253
Sera	F	2,633

Dorian Pavus	M	2,514
Varric Tethras	M	2,380
Solas	M	2,358
Iron Bull	M	2,303
Blackwall	M	2,071
Vivienne	F	1,895
Cullen	M	1,738
Cole	M	1,735
Josephine	F	1,658
Leliana	F	1,603
Morrigan	F	1,047

As regards the most important male characters, i.e. those presented on the game's official website (Electronic Arts 2021b), the Inquisitor's companion warriors and advisers involved in dialogues as speaker characters include, in order of narrative weight: (1) the wizard of the Tevinter Imperium Dorian Pavus (2,514), (2) the surface dwarf Varric Tethras (2,380), (3) the elven apostate wizard Solas (2,358), (4) the qunari warrior Iron Bull (2,303), (5) the Grey Wardens warrior named Blackwall (2,071 strings), (6) the Fereldan templar Cullen (1,738 strings), and (7) the human wizard Cole (1,735).

Out of a total of 365 female characters, other narratively important women play a minor role in dialogues in comparison with the six women mentioned above, with only hundreds of dialogue strings casting them as speaker characters, including: Revered Mother Giselle (436 strings), who is a member of the Andrastian Chantry (the dominant religious organization in Thedas), the shapeshifter mage Flemeth (221 strings), the lead scout for the Inquisition, Lace Harding (192 strings), Empress Celene of Orlais (131 strings), the latter is the largest and the most powerful nation in Thedas, and her elven handmaid Briala (197 strings), a dwarf arcanist named Dagna (179 strings), the elven leader of the mage rebellion Fiona (162 strings), and the Divine of the Andrastian Chantry Justinia V (111 strings), among others.

The qualitative analysis of the dialogue strings of female non-playable characters does not present any special issues in terms of gender representation. These women in DAI manifest themselves in translation thanks to the use of feminine-marked forms, which do not require variables. For instance, as example (2)

shows, in the dialogue line uttered by Cassandra Pentaghast, the English adjective “harsh” is translated into *severa* in Italian and *ruda* in Spanish, both gender-marked equivalent adjectives. Similarly, in (3), Sera says that she is not “like an elf”, and in Italian and Spanish both the indefinite article and the noun are translated into feminine forms. In this sense, it is easy to understand the importance of contextual data in terms of speaker character and their gender in the spreadsheet translators are provided by developers.

(2)	Cassandra Pentaghast	I can be harsh , I know.	Sono severa , lo so.	Puedo ser muy ruda , lo sé.
(3)	Sera	That’s why I’m not “like an elf .”	Ecco perché non mi comporto “come un’elfa ”.	Por eso soy una elfa diferente.

As mentioned above, the story-leading character in DAI is the savior of Thedas, the playable and customizable hero/heroine named Inquisitor, also known as the Herald of Andraste⁷ and ‘the chosen one’. In the corpus, the male/female option has produced 1,386 and 3,196 gender-tagged dialogue strings in Italian and Spanish respectively, that is strings containing two different wordings, which are displayed by the game engine depending on the Inquisitor’s gender thanks to the presence of variables: {M} for male and {F} for female. From a contrastive perspective, linguacultural-specific tendencies visibly emerge. In addition to the remarkable quantitative difference between Italian and Spanish, there are only 902 instances of correspondence. Indeed, if we compare gender-marked strings in the two Romance languages, we find: (a) symmetries, (b) gender-neutral asymmetries, and (c) gender-biased asymmetries, as in Pettini (2020).

The first category refers to the use of either unmarked forms or feminine forms in both languages. Gender-neutral asymmetries include the use, in one of the two languages, of structures which correctly translate the original string, but do not require tags because they are not gender-variable expressions. Lastly, gender-biased asymmetries represent those instances in which one of the two languages

⁷ In the *Dragon Age* series, Andraste is the female human prophet who founded the religion of Andrastianism and the Chantry, the dominant religious organization in Thedas. Andraste is believed to be the spiritual wife of the male deity worshipped by Andrastians and referred to as the “Maker of the World”.

adopts masculine forms only, disregarding the Inquisitor’s customizable gender. The latter group only includes Italian strings, meaning that it is the sociocultural gender bias affecting Italian language use, i.e. masculine expressions used to refer to women, especially in leading positions, what determines the quantitative and qualitative difference in gender representation between the two localizations, which confirms previous findings (Pettini 2020).

As to the first category, the addressee in (4) is the Inquisitor and the English pronoun “yourself” might be substituted with gender-variable equivalent pronouns. Thus, the whole string might have been translated into *Non incolpare te stesso*, if male, or *te stessa*, if female, in Italian and *No te culpes a ti mismo*, if male, or *ti misma*, if female, in Spanish, and would have required the use of gender tags.

(4)	Cullen	Don’t blame yourself .	Non fartene una colpa.	Es mejor no culparse.
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In (5), the symmetry depends on the use of feminine-marked forms in both languages and of variables which differentiate the string based on the protagonist’s gender. “My dear” is literally translated into *mio caro*, if male, and *mia cara*, if female, in Italian, and into *querido*, if male, and *querida*, if female, in Spanish, which, as opposed to Italian, also transfers a gender-specific version of the proper name, that is *Inquisidor*, if male, and *Inquisidora*, if female.

(5)	Vivienne	My dear Inquisitor, whatever can I do for you?	[M]In cosa posso servirti, mio caro? [F]In cosa posso servirti, mia cara?	[M] Querido Inquisidor, ¿qué puedo hacer por vos?][F] Querida Inquisidora, ¿qué puedo hacer por vos?
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The second category developed for this research includes gender-neutral asymmetries. For example, in (6) the structure used by Italian translators does not include the gender-variable nouns *il primo*, if male, and *la prima*, if female, for “the first”, as happens in Spanish. The semantic value of the Italian string, *Me lo dicono in molti* [Many people tell me so], is slightly different but no gender issues arise. Similarly, in (7), while in Italian the past participle for “fail” agrees with the

Inquisitor’s gender, i.e. *deluso*, if male, and *delusa*, if female, the Spanish literal translation, which omits the subject, is invariable. Gender-neutral invariable forms in Spanish are found also in those strings which present gender tags in Italian but not in Spanish (484 strings). Indeed, no special bias affects the Spanish approach to translation: almost all strings are transferred by means of common gender-neutral constructions, like those discussed above or, for example, *sobreviví* for “I survived”, *Andraste me eligió* for “I was chosen by Andraste”, *Tuve que salvarme yo* for “I had to save myself”, *impresionante* for “I am impressed”.

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|-----|-----------------|---|--|--|
| (6) | Dorian
Pavus | You’re not the first
to say that. | Me lo dicono in molti. | [M]No eres el primero que dice eso.][F]No eres la primera que dice eso.] |
| (7) | Inquisitor | She failed me. | [M]Leliana mi ha deluso .][F]Leliana mi ha delusa .] | Me ha fallado. |

Similarly, almost half of the strings which do not contain gender variables in Italian (616 strings) but do contain them in Spanish, represent gender-neutral asymmetries or, in the words of O’Hagan and Mangiron (2013: 132) “the safest option”, that is “translations that will work in all contexts, regardless of the gender and number of the noun they modify, even if this translation may not be the preferred one stylistically” or, one might add, even if variables would enhance the linguistic representation of the gender of the Inquisitor and, therefore, of the player.

The third and final category comprises the asymmetries observed when comparing the two localizations and depending on a language-specific gender bias which, as mentioned above, affects the lines which are gender-tagged in Spanish and not in Italian (2,294 strings). On closer inspection, the large majority of these Italian gender-biased solutions (49%) concern the most important title of DAI’s protagonist, namely ‘Inquisitor’. Indeed, the masculine *Inquisitore* for “Inquisitor” occurs in all instances (1,121 occurrences), as in (8) and (9), where the feminine form ‘Inquisitrice’ should be preferred. As Treccani Italian Grammar (2012) explains, the suffix -trice is used to form feminine agent nouns from masculine counterparts ending in -tore, as in ‘attrice’ [actress or female actor] and

‘scrittrice’ [female writer]. As concerns this title, there are also 68 instances of omission in Italian, as in (10).

(8)	Inquisitor	I was meant to become the Inquisitor .	Era il mio destino diventare l’Inquisitore .	[M]Yo tenía que ser el Inquisidor . [F]Yo tenía que ser la Inquisidora .]
(9)	Blackwall	Whatever you used to be, you aren’t anymore. You’re the Inquisitor , the Herald of Andraste.	Non sei più la persona di un tempo. Sei l’Inquisitore , l’Araldo di Andraste.	[M]Fueras lo que fueras antes, ya no lo eres. Ahora eres el Inquisidor , Herald de Andraste. [F]Fueras lo que fueras antes, ya no lo eres. Ahora eres la Inquisidora , Herald de Andraste.]
(10)	Inquisitor	“Inquisitor” means something. “Blackwall” doesn’t.	Il mio titolo significa qualcosa, “Blackwall” no.	[M] “Inquisidor” significa algo. Y “Blackwall” , no. [F] “Inquisidora” significa algo. Y “Blackwall” , no.]

Another title relevant to gender analysis is ‘herald’ (557 strings, 24%) belonging to the title phrase “Herald of Andraste”. In DAI, it means that the hero/heroine was chosen by the divine Andraste as her messenger and savior of Thedas. In English, ‘herald’ refers to a mediaeval officer, whose extended meaning today is “official messenger” (Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary) and the equivalent nouns are the gender-invariable *araldo* and *heraldo* in Italian and Spanish respectively. As example (11) shows, however, Spanish translators systematically used gender-marked satellite elements, whereas in Italian only masculine options are provided.

(11) Fiona	I heard of this gathering, and I wanted to see the fabled Herald of Andraste with my own eyes.	Ho sentito di questo incontro e volevo vedere con i miei occhi il leggendario Araldo di Andraste .	[M]Me enteré de esta reunión y quise ver al legendario Herald de Andraste con mis propios ojos.][F]Me enteré de esta reunión y quise ver a la legendaria Herald de Andraste con mis propios ojos.]
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Lastly, as regards the remaining dialogue strings, in 157 instances (7%) Italian translators used masculine generics, as illustrated in (12), (13) and (14), which show the sociocultural resistance to the use of gender-fair alternatives, as reflected in language use.

(12) Inquisitor	So now I'm a hero ?	Quindi ora sono un eroe ?	[M]¿Así que ahora soy un héroe ?][F]¿Así que ahora soy una heroína ?]
(13) Corypheus	Ah, we have a visitor .	Ah, abbiamo un ospite .	[M]Ah, tenemos un visitante .][F]Ah, tenemos una visitante .]
(14) Sera	I don't want you to be just a scary mage .	Non voglio che diventi l'ennesimo mago spaventoso .	[M]No quiero que seas un mago que asusta.][F]No quiero que seas una maga que asusta.]

6. Conclusions

Since women and girls today represent half of the global gaming population, and given their increasing preference for RPGs, in order to contribute to the scholarly debate about gender and/in game localization, this study has examined the number and the narrative weight of female characters in a fantasy gender-customizable war-themed RPG, namely *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, and has

analyzed their representation in the original English dialogues and in the Italian and Spanish localizations.

By extending the “reality-fictionality corpus” of story-driven war games (Pettini 2020) to the genre of fantasy, this research has shown that, in line with previous findings (*ibid.*), the more the game is fictional, the higher is the number of women, the more active and leading are their narrative roles in the game experience. Like science fiction RPGs (*ibid.*: 453), in fantasy game worlds, women are hundreds, they constitute nearly half of all characters (41%), and the fantasy protagonist can be a heroic woman who cooperates with other well-developed female characters (46% of the Inquisitor’s helper characters), ranging from brave warriors and sharp-sighted spymasters to powerful witches of different races and classes. Based on their engagement in dialogues and their relevance to gender analysis, the playable Inquisitor is the undisputed pivot of DAI’s story, involved as speaker character in 25% of all dialogue lines. In the translation from English into Italian and Spanish, his/her customizable gender has implied the use of computing variables which mark strings with tags and enable the game engine to display texts according to the Inquisitor’s gender. From a contrastive perspective, findings confirm linguacultural-specific tendencies (Pettini 2020: 454): the number of gender-marked strings in Spanish is three times higher than that of Italian and, more importantly, 49% of the dialogue strings which are gender-unmarked in Italian depend on the biased translation of the protagonist’s title, namely ‘Inquisitor’, into a masculine form only, as if the Inquisition’s leader can be linguistically portrayed as man only, which is in clear contrast with the customizable experience players can enjoy. The reason for the Italian androcentric approach seems to lie in the sociocultural resistance to the introduction of feminine forms in the language, as Gheno (2019) clearly demonstrates with regard to occupational titles.

Gender-customizable games, which are currently mainstream products, offer researchers several opportunities to further investigate gender from a contrastive perspective and observe how it manifests itself across different languages, especially when translating from English. Moreover, as Sarkeesian and Petit (2020: online) show, the rapidly growing number of games featuring defined

women protagonists and/or dealing with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender themes open up original and compelling directions for interdisciplinary research about representation in video games from a gender-critical perspective.

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