



A Literary Analysis of Cognitive Dissonance in the “Dragon Age” (2009-2014) Video Game Series

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Abstract;

This study offers an inquiry into the emergence of cognitive dissonance within video games. By examining the dissonance between gameplay mechanics and narrative exposition, and the influence of player agency on moral deliberations, this study illuminates the immersive capacity of video games to submerge players in intricate ethical quandaries. "Dragon Age" (2009-2014) emerges as an example challenging players to face the implications of their decisions and battle with the intricacies of morality. By offering diverse paths for resolving conflicts and endowing players with consequential decision-making authority, the series provides invaluable insights into the potential of video games as a medium for navigating moral ambiguity and fostering astute contemplation of ethical dilemmas.

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1. Introduction

In the present day, video games have grown into complicated forms of entertainment, engaging players in experiences that connect emotionally and morally. One psychological challenge typically faced in these tales is cognitive dissonance—a discomfort coming from opposing ideas or behaviours. In gaming, this issue emerges when players control allegedly virtuous characters that engage in ethically dubious actions throughout gameplay.

The relevance of cognitive dissonance in game narratives resides in its power to unsettle players' moral compasses, stimulating thought and self-reflection. Unlike passive media consumption, video

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games provide interaction, permitting players to alter the narrative and make ethical judgements. This active engagement heightens cognitive dissonance, requiring players to reconcile their in-game activities with their own ideals.

This research examines at the occurrence of cognitive dissonance in video games, focusing on the renowned "Dragon Age" series. Through dissecting its morally intricate plots, player-driven choices, and character arcs, the paper aims to illustrate how "Dragon Age" embodies cognitive dissonance, challenging players to reassess their moral outlooks and grapple with the ramifications of their decisions within the game's universe.

2. The Heroic Archetype in Video Games

Video games commonly draw into the heroic archetype, depicting players as protagonists who exemplify characteristics like courage, altruism, and justice (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2008). These protagonists embark on epic voyages, facing difficulties, conquering villains, and finally saving the day—a narrative tradition strongly entrenched in literature, cinema, and mythology (Murray, 1997).

In many games, the player-controlled character reflects the heroic ideal (Juul, 2003). Whether it's a lone adventurer navigating a magical region, a super-powered vigilante patrolling a crime-ridden metropolis, or a military commander directing soldiers into conflict, players guide characters that epitomize courage. These characters exhibit attributes like bravery, tenacity, and moral integrity, important for surmounting adversities (Rollings & Morris, 2000).

Video game storylines typically depict the player-controlled character's ambitions as noble and virtuous (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). From rescuing abducted royalty to foiling evil machinations or preventing world calamity, players execute quests associated with conventional heroics. Urgency and significance accompany these adventures, urging gamers to embrace their heroic destiny.

Moreover, video game narratives promote the player-controlled character's heroics via numerous storytelling tactics (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2008). Epic sequences showcase their courage, speeches stress their goals and responsibility, and encounters with other characters present them as symbols of hope and inspiration.

However, when players advance, the veneer of heroism might erode (Juul, 2003). Moral challenges, ethical decisions, and opposing aims undermine their notion of heroism. This conflict between their heroic status and the moral ambiguity of their acts may generate cognitive dissonance, requiring players to face the paradoxes in their character's depiction.

3. Gameplay Mechanics and Narrative Dissonance

Video games provide a unique combination of gaming mechanics and storyline, offering an immersive experience for players. However, this fusion may occasionally lead to cognitive dissonance, when the player's actions depart from the intended narrative. This issue is notably visible in games like "Dragon Age" (2009-2014), where players control characters positioned as heroes but participate in ethically problematic activities throughout gameplay.

Gameplay mechanisms in video games generally highlight action, conflict, and player agency, allowing players to change the game environment by their actions (Juul, 2003). These features include fighting systems and moral choice systems, improving player immersion but sometimes contradicting with the narrative's presentation of the player-controlled character as a hero.

In "Dragon Age," players hold tremendous control over the plot and their character's progression (BioWare, 2009-2014). However, their decisions may stray from the heroic tale produced by the game's storyline. For instance, players may participate in combat settings where they slaughter foes presented as misguided rather than blatant villains, producing a conflict between gaming actions and narrative heroes.

Moreover, "Dragon Age" features moral choice systems with far-reaching repercussions (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). While meant to improve player connection, these options might produce dissonance when players decide for ethically problematic actions opposing the heroic archetype. Sacrificing innocent lives for a perceived greater cause or abandoning comrades for personal benefit undermines conventional ideals of heroism.

The conflict between gameplay mechanics and narrative storytelling in "Dragon Age" underlines the difficulties of player agency and moral decision-making in video games. While empowering players, these features may generate dissonance when they contradict with the intended narrative of heroism and morality.

4. Justifications and Rationalizations

In video games like as "Dragon Age" (2009-2014), where users guide characters presented as heroes but who participate in ethically problematic activities, game makers adopt varied tactics to excuse or justify these behaviors. These techniques try to contextualize violence within the story and alleviate possible cognitive dissonance faced by gamers.

One frequent method is offering narrative reasons for the player character's behaviour (Rollings & Morris, 2000). In "Dragon Age," similar explanations may develop via in-game conversation, where other characters excuse the need of violence to attain greater objectives. Companions and friends could claim that fighting is needed for defending innocent citizens or destroying existential dangers. By portraying the player character's actions as ethically justifiable inside the game world, developers aim to relieve players' anxieties over the ethical consequences of their choices.

Another method is incorporating violence inside the greater narrative setting of the game (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). In "Dragon Age," major themes like war, political intrigue, and warfare offer a background where violence becomes a fundamental element of the protagonist's path. Players meet morally ambiguous forces involved in warring countries or opposing factions where conflict serves as a method to progress the tale. This incorporation of violence into the narrative framework tries to produce a unified and immersive experience fitting with players' expectations of the fantasy genre.

Additionally, game creators employ moral choice systems to provide players agency in shaping the story's moral course (Juul, 2003). In "Dragon Age," players encounter options filled with ethical consequences, such as sparing or killing vanquished opponents or settling problems via diplomacy or bloodshed. These options enable players to mould the story according to their ideals, generating a feeling of ownership over the player character's actions. By easing moral decision-making, developers enable players to justify their decisions inside the game environment, so relieving cognitive dissonance.

The tactics utilised by game creators in "Dragon Age" to excuse or rationalize the player character's morally dubious behaviours show the nuanced nature of narrative in video games. Through narrative explanations, contextualizing violence, and moral choice systems, developers aim to construct immersive experiences that engage players while addressing any concerns about the ethical consequences of their in-game selections.

5. Player Agency and Moral Decision-Making

In "Dragon Age" (2009-2014), player agency emerges as a major factor in defining both the player character's actions and moral choices inside the game environment. Defined as the level of power and influence exercised by players over the game's narrative and environment (Juul, 2003), player agency in "Dragon Age" gives players with a variety of options and actions that directly sculpt the plot, the world, and their relationships with other characters.

At the core of player agency in "Dragon Age" lies its moral decision-making mechanism, permitting players to negotiate decisions fraught with ethical repercussions throughout their adventure (BioWare, 2009-2014). From basic encounters with non-player characters to critical storyline choices influencing the direction of the narrative, players face issues such as sparing or executing a vanquished opponent, endorsing one group over another in political warfare, or balancing selfish gain against noble goals.

The influence of player agency on moral judgements reverberates throughout "Dragon Age," influencing narrative trajectories and generating varied consequences dependent on players' choices (Juul, 2003). For instance, selecting to spare a crucial opponent may prepare the stage for subsequent prospects of forgiveness and reconciliation, but choosing to remove them might lead to a more confrontational conclusion.

Moreover, player actions in "Dragon Age" carry implications on relationships with other characters and the moral status of the player character. Through interactions with companions and NPCs, players acquire insight into the effects of their actions and the opinions of others (BioWare, 2009-2014). Opting for self-interest above altruism, for instance, may evoke condemnation from partners valuing selflessness and compassion.

This sophisticated interaction between player agency, moral decision-making, and narrative repercussions in "Dragon Age" might generate cognitive dissonance among players (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Such dissonance happens when players meet opposing ideas or attitudes inside the game, such as situations when their actions as the player-controlled character collide with the established moral framework of the story. For example, saving the life of an obviously irredeemable opponent could create cognitive dissonance if the narrative depicts them as an unquestionable danger to the world.

The integration of player agency and moral decision-making in "Dragon Age" generates a dynamic and engaging player experience, whereby players wrestle with ethical quandaries and the reverberations of their decisions. By providing players agency in determining both the narrative and the moral trajectory of the plot, "Dragon Age" provides an intriguing investigation of morality and ethics within the worlds of fantasy role-playing.

To dissect "Dragon Age" (2009-2014) as a paradigm for cognitive dissonance in video games, it's imperative to scrutinize specific instances from the series spotlighting the juxtapositions between gameplay mechanics and narrative storytelling, as well as the ethical ambiguities inherent in player decisions. Let's look into two notable instances from the "Dragon Age" saga:

5.1. Moral Choices in "Dragon Age: Origins" (2009)

In "Dragon Age: Origins," players experience a multitude of moral quandaries, each holding deep ramifications for the developing plot. One especially dramatic choice emerges in the questline revolves around Loghain Mac Tir, a person representative of both valour and treachery.

The tale presents Loghain as a multidimensional individual, swinging between adoration and hatred. Players battle with contradictory impulses, empathizing with his impassioned defense of country against foreign dangers while recoiling from his devious activities, notably his betrayal of the monarch and his disturbing connections.

At the centre of the problem lies the critical decision: whether to spare or execute Loghain—a choice mirroring the player's moral attitude and affecting the destiny of the narrative. Opting for mercy may open the door to political connections and chances of atonement, while choosing retaliation may quench the craving for justice but risk splitting prospective friends.

This moral problem reflects the essence of "Dragon Age: Origins," as players traverse a morally complicated terrain plagued with difficulties, each option a thread delicately woven into the fabric of the game's story.

5.2. The Nature of Power in "Dragon Age II" (2011)

In "Dragon Age II," the story dives into themes of power, ambition, and moral compromise, embodied via the protagonist, Hawke. Amidst a city ravaged by political unrest and magical conflict, players traverse the arduous path of Hawke's ascension to fame.

One painful depiction of this narrative dynamic develops in Hawke's friendship with the mage Anders, whose radicalism and desperation in the struggle for mage independence deepen as the game proceeds. Players are presented with the grave option of whether to condone or condemn Anders' increasingly aggressive actions, conscious of the possible apocalyptic implications for both mages and non-mages alike.

The story delivers a complex representation of power and revolution, ensnaring players in a morally murky conundrum. Siding with Anders may connect with ideas of freedom and justice but risks prolonging a cycle of violence and disruption. Conversely, condemning his acts may favour stability and order yet maintain structural oppression and injustice.

These instances from "Dragon Age" emphasise the deep interaction between moral decision-making and narrative implications inside the game's setting. They serve as interesting case studies showing how the series grapples with issues of cognitive dissonance, requiring players to traverse ethically complex settings and reconsider their concepts of heroism and villainy.

6. Implications and Reflections

Cognitive dissonance in video games, as shown by titles like "Dragon Age" (2009-2014), bears substantial ramifications for both players and game producers. By exploring this phenomenon within the framework of the "Dragon Age" series, we may draw insights into its larger repercussions and analyse the ethical issues for game design.

6.1. Impact on Players

Cognitive dissonance in video games may severely influence players, testing their ideas, attitudes, and moral views (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). In "Dragon Age," players may suffer cognitive dissonance when their choices as the player-controlled character collide with the established moral framework of the story.

For gamers, coping with cognitive dissonance may encourage introspection and critical self-reflection on their own ideals and principles. By confronting ethical quandaries and moral ambiguity inside the game environment, players may get a greater grasp of human intricacies and the ramifications of their actions (Juul, 2003).

Nonetheless, unresolved cognitive dissonance may also provoke emotions of anxiety, irritation, or ethical concern among players, particularly if the game fails to provide adequate remedies or paths for redemption (BioWare, 2009-2014).

6.2. Considerations for Game makers

Game makers must carefully examine the consequences of cognitive dissonance in their designs, especially in games having ethically ambiguous storylines like "Dragon Age." Developers face the obligation of generating meaningful and powerful experiences for users while respecting their agency and autonomy (Rollings & Morris, 2000).

One feasible method for game makers is to integrate moral choice systems that allow players the ability to explore alternative views and results. By providing players with consequences actions,

developers may stimulate critical thinking and involvement with difficult moral challenges (BioWare, 2009-2014).

Moreover, game creators should aim to design coherent and engaging tales that connect with players' expectations and ideals. Consistency in storyline and character evolution may assist alleviate cognitive dissonance and increase player immersion (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004).

6.3. Ethical Considerations in Game Design

Ethical issues have essential relevance in game creation, especially when presenting delicate or disputed subjects. Game creators must be conscious of the possible influence of their designs on players' emotions, beliefs, and actions (Juul, 2003).

When incorporating ethically ambiguous storylines or gameplay mechanics, game creators should equip players with appropriate context, knowledge, and help to negotiate ethical quandaries responsibly. This may mean adding trigger warnings, giving resources for gamers seeking support, and furnishing alternate pathways for those uncomfortable with specific choices (Rollings & Morris, 2000).

Cognitive dissonance in video games such as "Dragon Age" bears deep ramifications for players, game producers, and the larger gaming community. By recognising and resolving the ethical implications related with cognitive dissonance, game creators may construct meaningful and compelling experiences that allow players to engage critically with nuanced moral challenges.

7. Alternative Approaches and Solutions

In "Dragon Age" (2009-2014), comparable to several video games, conflict resolution typically relies on battle and violence. Nevertheless, the series also provides various techniques and answers that allow players to negotiate disputes non-violently or with minimum violence. Furthermore, "Dragon Age" actively tackles cognitive dissonance via story themes and character development.

7.1. Non-Violent Conflict Resolution in "Dragon Age"

Despite combat's central role in gameplay, the "Dragon Age" series presents opportunities for non-violent conflict resolution, highlighting dialogue, diplomacy, and persuasion as viable alternatives to physical confrontation (BioWare, 2009-2014). This element of the game allows players a more sophisticated approach to problem-solving, permitting investigation of multiple routes for conflict resolution.

A significant instance of non-violent dispute resolution in "Dragon Age" emerges in its negotiating and diplomacy systems. In "Dragon Age: Origins" (2009), players experience circumstances where they may apply diplomatic abilities to calm difficult situations or arrange peace treaties between competing groups. For instance, players may arbitrate conflicts among competing nobles, form alliances with neighbouring countries, or engineer treaties between warring parties. These diplomatic engagements compel players to methodically analyse their speech options and apply persuasive methods to alter crucial persons' perspectives.

Similarly, in "Dragon Age: Inquisition" (2014), players may seek non-violent dispute settlement via the game's War Table quests. These missions require strategic planning and decision-making at a higher level, forcing players to participate in diplomatic initiatives, espionage, and political manoeuvring to attain goals without direct combat (BioWare, 2009-2014). For instance, players may elect to assign spies for information collection, perform clandestine operations to undercut opponent forces, or establish partnerships with powerful persons to accomplish their interests. By highlighting diplomacy and strategy, these missions offer players with different pathways for objective accomplishment and conflict resolution.

Consider a situation in "Dragon Age: Origins" when the player's party confronts a blockage erected by a bunch of bandits. Instead of resorting to confrontation, the player decides to establish discourse with the robbers. Through effective bargaining and persuasion, the player convinces the bandits to resign quietly, giving them an alternate path or a share of their goods in return for safe passage. Consequently, the battle ends devoid of violence, allowing the player's party to travel unimpeded on their quest.

This shows how "Dragon Age" increases chances for non-violent dispute resolution, permitting players to manage difficult situations via discourse, diplomacy, and negotiation. By incorporating these features into the gaming experience, the series invites players to ponder alternate problem-solving techniques and highlights the need of communication and empathy in resolving problems within the game world.

7.2. Games Addressing Cognitive Dissonance

Some video games directly challenge cognitive dissonance by elaborately weaving narrative themes and character development that push players to grapple with the ramifications of their choices and the nuances of morality. The "Dragon Age" series, produced by BioWare (2009-2014), demonstrates this approach via its depiction of ethically complex people, ethical quandaries, and opposing aims.

"Dragon Age II" (2011) stands out as a prominent example of a game that goes extensively into cognitive dissonance. Players walk into the shoes of Hawke, a protagonist presented with challenging decisions that blur the borders between heroism and villainy. Throughout the game, the story brims with occasions when players must cross ethically murky terrain, making actions that bear deep implications.

Consider a key point in "Dragon Age II" when Hawke faces the option of what to do with a group of mages who are being chased by the templars. The player is confronted with the opportunity to either help the magicians' struggle for independence or to surrender them into the clutches of the authorities. Each decision holds tremendous moral weight, since supporting the magicians may provoke turmoil and violence, while surrendering them might lead to their oppression and persecution.

The implications of this choice resonate throughout the game, altering Hawke's connections with numerous groups and personalities. Regardless of the selected course, players are pushed to face the ethical consequences of their acts and battle with resulting cognitive dissonance. This moral complexity is further underlined by the game's study of issues such as authority, responsibility, and the repercussions of one's decisions.

Through its complex narrative tapestry and character-centric storytelling, "Dragon Age II" pushes players to consider the subtleties of morality and the repercussions of their actions. By directly addressing cognitive dissonance, the game invites players to engage critically with ethical problems and to examine the ramifications of their actions. This immersive experience not only heightens player engagement but also underlines the ability of video games to induce significant reflection and moral inquiry.

8. CONCLUSION

In studying the "Dragon Age" series (2009-2014) as a case study, it becomes obvious that video games contain a special capacity to engage players in complicated moral quandaries and narrative themes, frequently evoking cognitive dissonance. Throughout this analysis, we have explored into many facets of cognitive dissonance in "Dragon Age," spanning the interaction between gaming mechanics and narrative, the representation of morally ambiguous characters, and the role of player agency on moral decision-making.

The series shows how video games can serve as strong vehicles for digging into ethical concerns and questioning traditional ideas of heroism and villainy. Through its deep narrative storytelling and

dynamic gameplay aspects, "Dragon Age" challenges players to face the implications of their decisions and wrestle with the difficulties of morality inside a fictitious environment. Whether negotiating diplomatic talks or facing ethically complex actions that transcend ethical lines, players are engaged in an experience journey that stimulates critical thinking and reflection.

Moreover, "Dragon Age" illustrates how game creators may manage cognitive dissonance by presenting other pathways for conflict resolution, such as non-violent diplomacy and discussion choices. By endowing players with significant choices and effects, the series allows them to determine the narrative trajectory and invites thought of the ethical aspects of their actions.

In summary, the examination of "Dragon Age" gives useful insights about the potential of video games as a medium for probing moral ambiguity and cognitive dissonance. As video games continue to advance as a method of interactive storytelling, it is vital for creators to understand the ethical implications associated to player agency and narrative complexity. By immersing players in intellectually stimulating experiences that challenge their preconceptions and encourage critical reflection, video games hold the promise of fostering deeper empathy, insight, and engaged discourse on intricate moral issues both within and beyond the confines of the game world.

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