

# **Divine intervention: Multimodal pragmatics and unconventional opposition in performed character speech in *Dragon Age: Inquisition***

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Despite the fact that video games often take place in fictional worlds, the performed accents of game characters are very real reflections of the language ideologies of a game's creators and its intended audience. This chapter demonstrates how these ideologies are at play in the game world of BioWare's popular fantasy role-playing game *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), through its linguistic differentiation of two of its primary female characters. On many levels of representation the characters are presented as counter to one another; however, both are linguistically othered from the majority of in-game characters by way of their accented English. Video games allow players a number of medium-specific affordances absent from other forms of media, such as agency and interactivity, which gives players the unique opportunity to shape their own narrative. Thus, using medium-specific multimodal discourse analysis and the concept of procedural rhetoric, this chapter examines the ways in which Leliana and Cassandra's accents participate in the construction of social and ideological meanings during gameplay, and how the dynamic, performative nature of gameplay affects players' perception of these characters.

**Keywords:** Multimodal pragmatics; Performed accents; Language ideologies in videogames

## **1. Introduction: Language ideologies and performed accents in fantasy role-playing games**

In videogames, performed accents reproduce language ideologies that perpetuate stereotypes in both the virtual and real world. The goal of this chapter is to identify the language ideologies underlying the accented English of two of the fantasy role-playing game *Dragon Age: Inquisition*'s main female characters, Cassandra and Leliana, and to examine the ways in which social and ideological meanings are constructed for their characters using pragmatic performativity. Although the *Dragon Age* series takes place in a fictional world, the performed accents of its characters reflect the language ideologies of the game developers, the voice actors, and the game's intended audience (Ensslin 2010, Goorimoorthee, Csipo, Carleton, & Ensslin 2019, Thurlow & Mroczek 2011). While on many levels of representation Cassandra and Leliana are counter to one another, both are linguistically othered from the majority of in-game characters by way of their accented English, which falls outside of the predominant in-game accents: Received Pronunciation (RP) and SNAm (Standard North American).<sup>1</sup> Their accents instead combine varied, marked phonological features associated with different cultural and regional communities (Ensslin 2011). Videogames allow players several medium-specific affordances absent from other media, such as choice, agency and interactivity, giving players the opportunity to shape their own narrative. Thus, using medium-specific multimodal discourse analysis (Ensslin 2012, Hawreliak 2019) and the concept of procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007), this chapter aims to examine the ways in which Leliana and Cassandra's accents participate in the construction of social meanings during gameplay, and how the dynamic, performative nature of gameplay affects players' perception of these characters. Through reflexive, critical gameplay, audio analysis, and written discourse

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<sup>1</sup> These predominant accents still come with their own set of stereotypes and archetypal characters. RP is often used in DA to represent rigid, upper-class members of the Chantry (e.g. Grand Chancellor Roderick), whereas SNAm is associated with dwarves, and connotes a more confident and headstrong character (e.g. Varric).

analysis, this project will provide a nuanced understanding of the ways in which verbal and non-verbal communication are used in *DAI* to create unconventional oppositions.

The ideas explored in this chapter will contribute to pragmatics and new media sociolinguistics, a field that Thurlow and Mroczek (2011) delineate into four interrelated components of digital communication: discourse (language in use), technology (mediums of communication), multimodality (meaning-making through multiple semiotic modes and their combinations), and ideology (an individual or group's system of values and beliefs). New media sociolinguistics is an emergent field in media studies with an emphasis on digitally-mediated discourse that is roughly organized around the technological, situational, and linguistic variables at play in acts of digitally-mediated communication (Herring 1996, 2001, 2004). By examining the complex ways in which videogames make use of multimodal discourse to create meaning in interaction, this study deepens our understanding of the role of performed accents in videogames. We will begin with an analysis of sociolinguistic theories regarding language in media, and unconventional opposition, followed by a description of *Dragon Age: Inquisition's (DAI)* storyline and narrative structure. A brief overview of past research on the *Dragon Age (DA)* series will demonstrate a focus on sex, gender and race, and a gap regarding the role of language ideology in our understanding of the game's stories and characters. We then outline our methods of data collection and analysis, which included three months of reflexive, critical gameplay, written discourse analysis of forum posts related to *Dragon Age* characters' accents, and a phonetic analysis of audio clips where Cassandra or Leliana were the primary speakers. Our analysis will first discuss our own initial understanding of the characters, followed by an exploration of fan opinions from online forums on the characters' accents and an analysis of three phonetic components of each character's speech. Finally, we will discuss how the perception of Cassandra

and Leliana is tied to their accented speech and pragmatic performativity as intended by the game creators, using multimodal analysis and the data collected as evidence to support these arguments.

## **2. Theoretical framework: Language ideologies in videogames and character opposition**

Language ideological theory focuses on the study of belief systems as they relate to language, as well as the adherence to or deviance from the prescriptive rules and norms of language (Blommaert 1999, Kroskrity 2000, Schieffelin et al. 1998). Lippi-Green (2012) tackles this deviance through the concept of standard language ideologies, which bias inauthentic and idealized versions of a spoken language imposed by a hegemonic power structure. This standard also propels the myth of the non-accent, which marks people as ‘other’ if their accent does not fall within the range of the standard language middle-class (Lippi-Green 2012). Pragmatics builds on this and further prioritizes the importance of context, noting that choices in language use, whether explicit or implicit, contribute to how we are viewed and understood by ourselves and others (Woolard 1998). Additionally, Irvine and Gal (2000) have identified three semiotic processes that relate linguistic form to social reality: *iconization*, *fractal recursivity*, and *erasure*. Erasure is particularly relevant when talking about videogames and works in tandem with iconization and recursivity to ignore all information outside of the chosen narrative through the simplification of nuanced language (Andronis 2003). Erasure often results in tired tropes derived from the oversimplification of characters and cultures. This not only creates a false binary value system, it projects these values onto the players, which can affect players’ assumptions and ideologies regarding a character and their representation (Ensslin 2010).

Language ideologies as presented through videogames are especially interesting due to their narrative embedding. Narrative videogames, including those of successful videogame franchises such as *Mass Effect* and *Bioshock* (Juul 2005), combine rules and fiction in order to tell an interactive story. Despite their medium-specific interactivity and multilinearity, they often follow cinematic plotlines and rely on character archetypes and cutscenes to further the story. Another commonality with movies is the use of stereotyped characters that reflect and perpetuate language ideologies. In film, there are two main stereotyping issues related to dialogue: character stereotyping and linguistic stereotyping (Hodson 2014). One feeds into the other, so much so that Hodson (2014) notes a relationship between the use of certain language influences and the audience's perception of a character. This leads to assumptions about characters that eventually turn into broad, sweeping stereotypes about certain types of people (Hodson 2014). Lippi-Green (2012) found that foreign accents in Disney animated movies were often associated with negative stereotyping; a well-known example of this is Jafar, the antagonist in *Aladdin* (Clements & Musker 1992), who has a British accent and is portrayed in a stereotypically Semitic fashion, while Aladdin and Jasmine the princess have Standard North American accents.

While there has been extensive research into character speech and accents in film (see Hodson 2014, Planchenault 2015, 2017), minimal videogame research focuses on in-game character speech. The work that has been done has focused on comparative representations of RP and SNAm accents in games like *Black and White 2*, *Fable*, and *Wizard101* (Ensslin 2010, 2011). Videogames are uniquely multimodal media, and this warrants further sociolinguistic research in two main areas: procedural rhetoric and the role of player agency and immersion (Zagalo 2019). Bogost (2007)'s concept of procedural rhetoric refers to how games communicate cultural processes and values through rules and encoded player behaviour (ie. motivation and reward,

punishment). It uses these processes to persuade the player about the realities of a game world and about the values and behaviours required to succeed in it. Thus, procedural rhetoric accentuates the medium-specific importance of play and interactivity vis-à-vis audiovisual representations. The affordances and restrictions placed upon players tell them *truths* about the ludofictional world,<sup>2</sup> and guide their decisions and actions through the game's narrative (Bogost 2007). Role Playing Games (RPGs) give players the opportunity to create their own personas in the game world and dictate their own version of the story. This process of re-embodiment and the affective connection it creates between player and character enables a level of immersion and abstraction lacking in other media (Bogost 2007, Ensslin 2011). This immersion can heighten a player's response to, and investment in the game and its characters, and the subtle messaging embedded in the representation or stereotyping of characters' accents can bleed over into a player's real life (language) ideologies.

Multimodality and procedural rhetoric will be used as lenses to examine the mechanics of gameplay in *DAI*. As stated by de Saint-Georges in Levine and Scollon (2004: 83), "multimodality notes that utterances are only a moment in the continuous process of communication and there is no necessary priority of language over other modes of meaning making in social actions." Similarly, videogames are more than the sum of their parts, and their high modal density is seen through choices in visual representation, audio, dialogue, and player interaction (Ensslin 2011, Solarski 2017). These are all ways that game developers communicate meaning and character identity to the players, whether verbal or nonverbal. Character classes are mostly nonverbal forms

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<sup>2</sup> What a player can or cannot do within the confines of the ludofictional (in-game) world provides them with a set of parameters that are indicative of the game creators' intentions for the game. For example, if a player drives in the wrong direction in *Mario Kart* for more than a few seconds, the game will automatically reset their car to face the right direction, indicating that there is a correct and incorrect way to drive during a race.

of communication, in which both the developer and the player ascribe or associate different character traits with different character appearances. While videogames use verbal (oral and written) and nonverbal cues to communicate information to their players, this chapter focuses on oral communication, as the creators of *Dragon Age* have demonstrated how language ideologies can signal implicit meaning to an audience through accented speech.

Additionally, in this chapter we draw on stylistic theories of unconventional opposition (Davies 2007, Jeffries 2009, Jones 2002) to examine how videogame characters are framed in contrasting oppositions despite their many similarities. Game designers often use conventional and unconventional semantic oppositions to create a simplistic model of good and bad, relying on the binary Manichean allegory to reinforce stereotypes (JanMohamed 1995). The multimodal nature of videogames lends itself well to this stereotyping, and designers can pair moral binaries with sociolinguistic opposites to create links of relation between them. Multilayered Manichean binaries are common in videogame design (Ensslin 2010),<sup>3</sup> and the linking and stereotyping of specific characters or behaviours reinforces binary ways of thinking, especially as they relate to morality, race, class and gender.

### **3. Dragon Age**

#### *The game*

*Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare 2014) is the third major instalment of the *DA* franchise, following *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2009) and *Dragon Age II* (BioWare 2011). *DAI* is a

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<sup>3</sup> Manichean binaries rely on simplistic moral dualities to create contrast. Videogames frequently layer these binaries to create stark oppositions between right and wrong, or good and bad (ie. The videogame *Black and White 2* juxtaposes the “good” character (an older, white, angelic character with an RP accent) with the “bad” character (a dark-skinned, demonic character with a New York metropolitan accent).

dark fantasy RPG set in the fictional world of Thedas, where the player character's main mission is to close a tear in the sky called the "Breach," which has been releasing demons into the world. While *Dragon Age: Origins* has been the focus of past research relating to character design and player immersion (Jørgensen 2010, Waern 2011), *DAI* has not received the same attention. Existing work focuses on the roles of sex, gender, the male gaze, and romance in the series (Beyer 2019, Greer 2013, Lööf 2015, Navarro-Remesal 2018); one study on consent, race, and colonialism found *DAI* to be a largely colonial work, in which the player character (PC) embodies a colonialist on a mission to gain allies and claim lands for the Inquisition during a civil war (Beyer 2019).

*DAI* is a single- and multiplayer action role-playing fantasy game that was chosen for this study because of its strong focus on character development, narrative structure, and voice-over dialogue, which lends well to sociolinguistic analysis. As a part of the well-established *DA* franchise, *DAI* comes with its own lore, social structure, and history. However, certain aspects of the ludofictional world are more fleshed out than others, an intentional choice that will be further discussed in section 6, where the characters of Cassandra and Leliana are compared. The player-character's journey is filled with hundreds of lines of dialogue from characters belonging to a multitude of cultural groups within the game, making it a valuable focus of study for performative accents and the attitudinal ideologies they perpetuate. The game employs both spoken and written dialogue, and the multiple-choice dialogues in *DAI* enable morally ambiguous choices in communication, which in turn help to establish a character's personality (Bogost 2007, Ensslin 2011).

In the fictional, human-designed world of *DAI*, language ideologies underlie the speech of all characters. Intentionally or not, a number of visual and auditory stereotypes are employed



throughout the game to create rifts between people and communities, and to portray class differentiation more subtly. The game uses both pragmatic and metapragmatic devices to enhance these differences. As pragmatics focuses on the role of context in the construction of meaning in interaction, it is important to take into account the multimodal, medium-specific nature of videogames. Lore, character backstory, physical appearance, accent and patterns of speech, and interaction between characters are all used as devices within the game to provide players with context for the speech of Cassandra and Leliana. Additionally, SNAmerican and RP accents are normalized throughout the game through linguistic signaling and implicit metapragmatics (Woolard 1998), thus alienating non-standard in-game accents.

There has been no prior research identified that has examined how *DAI* makes use of verbal and non-verbal cues to construct character identities from a sociolinguistic, pragmatic perspective. Our chapter aims to address this shortcoming by examining how two leading *DAI* characters are constructed as unconventional opposites through multimodal and narrative discourse.

#### **4. Analysing characters' accented speech and players' comments**

##### *Data collection and analysis*

For this project we combined methods of reflexive, critical play, collection of audio data (6:32 minutes of audio in five speech excerpts), phonetic analysis of character speech accents, and discourse analysis of players' written social media comments (46328 words). The collected data was intended to illustrate the representations of Cassandra and Leliana as characters in *DAI*, and the way these representations serve to create or reinforce language ideologies.

The reflexive, critical play aspect involved a full play-through of *DAI*, which was performed by a researcher who had not been exposed to the *DA* series before. Their reflections on character representations were thus unaffected by prior exposure. Importantly, the game designer's intent can only be understood through the active process of gameplay, making play a critical component of analytical game studies. Through gameplay, it became clear that Cassandra and Leliana were uniquely situated in the game and differed greatly from the general population of voiced characters, the vast majority of whom speak with RP or SNAmerican accents.

This was followed by the collection and phonetic analysis of *DAI* audio clips. Five short excerpts of speech (1:32, 0:50, 2:08, 1:23, 0:39 minutes) were recorded from YouTube videos of cutscenes featuring Cassandra or Leliana. One representative speech sample was selected and transcribed for each character in which they were the primary speakers, and in which at least three phonological features of their accents could be heard. Using the International Phonetic Alphabet in addition to Meier's (2012) *Accents & Dialects for Stage and Screen*, these components were examined to contextualize the characters' accent markers. As detailed below, we found that Cassandra's speech uses phonological features associated with RP and German, whereas Leliana's speech dynamically switches between aspects of French-accented English and RP.

Forum-based, written discourse analysis was the final component of data collection and analysis. Fan reactions and perceptions are critical to the success of a videogame, and there are numerous online discussion boards for the *DA* franchise that illustrate players' difficulty in determining accents for many of the game's characters, as well as the passionate stances they convey in debating and negotiating these accents and their social meanings (Tarnarutckaia & Ensslin 2020).

Python was used to collect posts from a number of forums that discussed Cassandra's and Leliana's accents (Reddit, GameFAQs, FextraLife, DragonAge Wiki, and YouTube). The forum threads were divided into two categories: Leliana-centred and Cassandra-centred. The data analysis software Atlas.ti was then used to conduct a word frequency count for each character; this provided a qualitative and quantitative overview of the language used in fan posts related to the characters' accents. Following this, a close reading of the forum posts was conducted to identify discursive patterns in posts, as well as to explore the wide range of beliefs that fans held about the accents from a player's perspective (ie. the pleasantness or realism of the accent, personal connections to the accent, etc.).

Our ensuing analysis will discuss how critical play, as well as the audio, textual, and phonetic data collected all contribute to represent Cassandra and Leliana as enigmatic forces within the *DAI* game world, and how their varied and inconsistent accents feed into their perception as 'other' during gameplay.

### *Characters' accents and multimodal analysis*

Cassandra and Leliana have two of the most distinct accents in *DAI*. While the majority of accents in the game fall within standard British and American accents, these characters are outliers that display similarities and differences in their representations.

#### *Cassandra*

Upon first playing *DAI*, Cassandra was the character that stood out the most due to both her appearance and her accent. She is the only speaking character in *DAI* from the nation of Nevarra in the game world of Thedas. Physically, Cassandra has a look that is stereotypically masculine

and differs from the other female characters. Her hair is very short, and her face is angular and scarred. She wears the most substantial armour of any of the game's female main characters, giving her the appearance of a warrior. Our understanding of her character is one of isolation and devout piety.



*Figure 1.* Front views of Cassandra (left) and Leliana (right). Licensed property of Electronic Arts, Inc.

### *Leliana*

In contrast, Leliana is portrayed as quiet and mysterious through her style of speech, physical appearance, and narrative role, which immediately creates a multimodal juxtaposition between her and Cassandra. In *DAI* she is the spymaster for the Inquisition, and she dresses in a long chainmail robe and a scarf that covers most of her orange hair. She is presented in a more stereotypically feminine manner than Cassandra, with longer hair, softer features, and less armour. Her accent is

mixed, and she represents someone caught between two worlds: Orlais (a powerful nation in Thedas with French inspiration) and Ferelden (a younger and smaller kingdom in Thedas with British inspiration).



*Figure 2.* Cassandra (left) and Leliana (right) during gameplay in *DAI*. Licensed property of Electronic Arts, Inc.

Cassandra's accent combines elements of British English, Germanic, and Slavic accents. The excerpt referenced below in transcript 1 is from a scene in *DAI* where Cassandra is having a heated argument with Varric, a dwarven companion character. In this scene she displays several accent features that seemingly overlap with one another, common to British, German, and Russian accents. In line 2, Cassandra uses non-rhotic colouration associated with RP when saying the word 'first' [fɜ:st] (Meier 2012: 103). She uses the intrusive [j] phoneme in line 1 (for example in 'new' [njü]), which Russian speakers often insert after consonants like [m, n] and is also found in many

British and Canadian dialects (Meier 2012: 321). During her argument, Cassandra pronounces “Hawk”, the name of a character named Hawk, as [hɔk] in lines 1 and 3. Again, the [ɔ] vowel can be associated with both RP and German-accented English (Meier 2012: 104, 292). Further Germanizing aspects of her speech are light vs. velarized [ɪ], accentuated plosives and fricatives, pronounced vowels in preposition words (‘for’ pronounced as fɔ: in line 2), and a tendency to pronounce every syllable in a staccato manner (Meier 2012: 292).

Transcript 1. Excerpt: Cassandra, Varric, and the Inquisitor

Cassandra:

You knew where Hawke was all along!

1 ju: njü weə hɔk wɔz ɔ:l ə' lɔŋ!

We needed someone to lead this Inquisition. First, Leliana and I searched for the hero of Ferelden,

2 wi: 'ni:dɪd 'sʌmwʌn tu: li:d ðɪs ,ɪnkwi'zɪʃən. fɜ:st, lɛliɑ:nʌ ænd aɪ sɜ:ʃt fɔ: ðə 'hɪərəʊ θv fɛrɛldɪn,

but she had vanished. Then, we looked for Hawke, but he was gone too.

3 bʌt ʃi: hæd 'væniʃt. ðɛn, wi: lɔkt fɔ: hɔk, bʌt hi: wɔz gɒn tu:.

As detailed below during the discussion on fan comments, players on *DA* forums and websites have hotly debated Cassandra’s accent, claiming that British voice actress Miranda Raison invented Cassandra’s Nevarran accent and making biased, essentializing statements about Cassandra’s character based on her blended accent. Cassandra is othered by virtue of her accent,

which provides her with no tangible ties to any people or places, and her ambiguity only serves to further separate her from the other characters.

On the other hand, Leliana's accent is the result of a blended French and RP accent. While the combination of accents used is clear, each time Leliana speaks, the features of her accent and her pronunciation of the vowels seem to change. This inconsistency makes it difficult to choose constant phonetic features of her speech, as those features might differ between cutscenes. For the sake of this project, three features were selected from the transcript 2 excerpts below where Leliana is confronting Sister Natalie in Valence. In line 3, Leliana uses the French voiced uvular fricative [ʁ] (Meier 2012: 276) and the French and RP open mid-back rounded vowel [ɔ] (Meier 2012: 103, 281) when saying Maurel [mɔ.ʁɛl], a place name in Orlais. French uses the trilled uvular [R], which often becomes [ʁ], a fricative scrape heard in connected speech that is not found in most dialects of British or North American English (Meier 2012: 276). Leliana also uses the [ɑ:] vowel in line 2 that is associated with RP when saying the word "start" [stɑ:t] (Meier 2012: 103). It should be noted that although Leliana switches accents frequently, her French accent is always much stronger when speaking of and to Orlesians. When speaking with individuals who are not from Orlais, her accent becomes much less pronounced.

#### Transcript 2. Excerpts: Leliana talking to the Inquisitor and Sister Natalie

Leliana: I'm protecting us. They never sing the Benedictions here on Fridays, Natalie. Something so simple...and

1       aɪm prə'tektɪŋ əs. ðeɪ 'nevəʁ sɪŋ ðe benə'dɪkʃən hɪər ən 'fraɪdeɪz, nɑ.ta.li. 'sʌmθɪŋ səʊ 'sɪmpəl...ænd

you got it so wrong. I wanted to believe, but you were lying from the start.

2       ju ɡɒt ɪt səʊ rɒŋ. aɪ 'wɒntɪd tə bi'li:v, bət ju wə 'laɪɪŋ frəm ðə stɑ:t.

...talking about the sun rising through the breach. It all points to a single place. Maurel in the Dales, Grand

3       'tɔ:kɪŋ ə'baʊt ðə sʌn 'raɪzɪŋ θru: ðə brɪ:ʃ. ɪt ɔ:l pɔɪnts tu ə 'sɪŋɡl pleɪs. mɔ.ʁɛl ɪn ðə deɪlz, ɡrænd

Cleric Victoire's bastion. She sent you, didn't she? Victoire was always an opportunist.

4 'klerik viktwarz bastjɔ̃. ʃi sɛnt juː, didnt ʃiː? viktwar wəz 'ɔːlweɪz ən 'ɒpətjuːnɪst.

Leliana's voice actress, Corinne Kempa, is a French-born woman who lives in the United Kingdom, so this fading French accent could be an intentional or unintentional result of the actress' move from France to the United Kingdom. An example of this blending of accents occurs above in transcript 2, line 1. Leliana pronounces the word 'never' with a strong French inflection [nɛvəʁ], ending with the fricative scrape [ʁ] that is common in French and French-accented spoken language; however, later in the same line she says the word 'here' with a typical British inflection [hɪə], deemphasizing the final [r] phoneme. Either way, this blended and fluid accent fits the narrative of Leliana as a child of mixed Orlesian and Ferelden heritage. She is seen as someone belonging to two worlds, and not fully identifying with either.

### *Written Discourse Analysis*

To complement our audio-visual analysis, we used computer-mediated discourse analysis of player written comments in fan forums to identify player sentiments and assessments of the character's performed accents (Herring 1996, 2001, 2004). All of the included commenters have had their usernames changed for the purposes of this study. In order to gain a better understanding of how fans feel about accents in *DAI*, and specifically about the accents of Cassandra and Leliana, forum threads that specifically mentioned their names and accents were brought into this analysis. This included threads from DragonAge Wiki, Reddit, GameFAQs, Fextralife, and YouTube. The immersiveness of videogames makes their fans particularly invested in their characters and storylines (Bogost 2007, Pedraça 2015), and many fans feel entitled to own authoritative



information about the game or feel a sense of power over the characters and their lives (see Ensslin 2012). For example, this fan comment from Fextralife by Commenter 19 suggested the *DA* franchise get rid of performed accents all together: “The accents are getting silly and messed up enough that I kind of wish they'd just forget about them.” Like Commenter 19, fans often use evaluative language when posting about video game characters (Ensslin 2012, Giles 1970, Tarnarutckaia & Ensslin 2020), demonstrating not only a sense of ownership over the material, but the idea that there is one correct way for the character to speak or act. Word frequency counts helped us determine which languages are most associated with Cassandra and Leliana, followed by a content analysis of the forum posts. Our discourse analysis of the forum posts concluded with an examination of the evaluative language used by fans to gain insight into players’ beliefs about the two characters’ accents.

Player comments on Cassandra were particularly enlightening due to the sheer range of responses and opinions regarding her accent. Accent attributions ranged from real countries to fictional worlds, and over 20 different languages and nationalities were given to explain the origin of her accent. The most commonly found language-words in her threads were French (124), followed by German (78), English (61), Italian (44), and Orlesian (41). Less frequent natural language labellings included Romanian (18) and even Farsi (1). Less well defined, fictional and/or historically rooted accents included Orlesian (41) and Prussian (31). These vastly differing attributions echo the general confusion Cassandra’s ambiguous accent has caused fans. While many fans thought she sounded French, others noted that her voice is “rough” and staccato, “like she’s biting off the end of the words” (Commenter 1, Fextralife) – thus using terms of aggression and coarseness to match her general character. Many fans seemed to agree on the German influence of her accent, emphasizing its perceived “brutish and heavy” (Commenter 4, Reddit) nature. Others

vigorously disagreed, calling it “as ungerman [sic, meaning un-German] as possible” (Commenter 6, Reddit). Strikingly, few fans provided any phonetic, or folk-phonetic evidence corroborating their stance. The strong representation of “Prussian” as made-up accent suggests the willingness or even a need amongst players to situate the game’s representational meanings in a fictional world that combines aspects of historical nostalgia and fantasy romanticism. More examples of these fan comments can be found in table 1. Ultimately, there is anything but consensus about Cassandra’s accented speech, which reinforces her enigmatic status both within and outside of the game.

<b>Language</b> <b>(n=Frequency)</b>	<b>Example Comments</b>
<b>French (124)</b>	<p><b>Commenter 1:</b> “I don't think it sounds french/orlesian either. It sounds a bit too... rough for that? It's like she's biting off the end of the words to me.” (Source: <a href="https://fextralife.com/forums/t272699/cassandras-accent/">https://fextralife.com/forums/t272699/cassandras-accent/</a>)</p> <p><b>Commenter 2:</b> “It's a fictional accent I believe. A mix of Russian/Eastern European and French is what it sounds like to me.” (Source: <a href="https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/2tojkl/what_kind_of_accent_does_cassandra_have/">https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/2tojkl/what_kind_of_accent_does_cassandra_have/</a>)</p> <p><b>Commenter 3:</b> “It's definitely not French, whatever it is. "Vaguely European" at best. I feel like it's elements of a few accents mashed together. A hint of German in there, perhaps, though it's definitely not a straight-up German accent either.” (Source: <a href="https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/5ps5gr/no_spoilers_cassandras_accent/">https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/5ps5gr/no_spoilers_cassandras_accent/</a>)</p>

<p><b>German (78)</b></p>	<p><b>Commenter 4:</b> “Cassandra - Germanic maybe Slavic - Very brutish and heavy.” (Source: <a href="https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/2pnn6g/what_is_cassandras_accent/">https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/2pnn6g/what_is_cassandras_accent/</a>)</p> <p><b>Commenter 5:</b> “I find that her accent has some German influence. The way she pronounces vowels are much akin to a German accent. Like when she says "don't" or "what", the o and a are elongated much like how a german would pronounce them.” (Source: <a href="https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/652r7c/no_spoilers_where_is_cassandras_accent_from/">https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/652r7c/no_spoilers_where_is_cassandras_accent_from/</a>)</p> <p><b>Commenter 6:</b> “I am from Germany, and Cassandra's accent would certainly not be considered German here. It sounds as "ungerman" as possible.” (Source: <a href="https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/5ps5gr/no_spoilers_cassandras_accent/">https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/5ps5gr/no_spoilers_cassandras_accent/</a>)</p>
<p><b>English (61)</b></p>	<p><b>Commenter 7:</b> “Yea [sic], the way she sounds reminds me of a German who has lived in Britian [sic] along time and speaks perfect English but never fully adopted English pronunciation, add a few regional quirks from both languages and it can sound pretty unique.” (Source: <a href="https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/2pnn6g/what_is_cassandras_accent/">https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/2pnn6g/what_is_cassandras_accent/</a>)</p> <p><b>Commenter 8:</b> “Cassandra doesn't sound German to me though, nor does she sound glaringly Polish or Russian either. I am currently leaning towards Romanian...” (Source: <a href="https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/4fn4mk/no_spoilers_earth_thedas_connections/">https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/4fn4mk/no_spoilers_earth_thedas_connections/</a>)</p>
<p><b>Italian (44)</b></p>	<p><b>Commenter 9:</b> “We haven't seen many Nevarran characters yet, but the Necromancer trainer seems to have an accent that sounds sort of like Italian? So I guess the actress was given direction to give a Italian/French accent mix?” (Source: <a href="https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/652r7c/no_spoilers_where_is_cassandras_accent/">https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/652r7c/no_spoilers_where_is_cassandras_accent/</a>)</p>

	<p>accent_from/)</p> <p><b>Commenter 10:</b> “I see Nevarra as a mix of Italy, Greece, Swiss, and Germany.” (Source: <a href="https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/2tojkl/what_kind_of_accent_does_cassandra_have/">https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/2tojkl/what_kind_of_accent_does_cassandra_have/</a>)</p>
<p><b>Orlesian (41)</b></p>	<p><b>Commenter 11:</b> “What? You hear Orlesian/French in her accent?” (Source: <a href="https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/5ps5gr/no_spoilers_cassandras_accent/">https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/5ps5gr/no_spoilers_cassandras_accent/</a>)</p> <p><b>Commenter 12:</b> “I don't hear any Orlesian in her accent at all. It sounds more German/Austrian/Dutch to me.” (Source: <a href="https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/5ps5gr/no_spoilers_cassandras_accent/">https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/5ps5gr/no_spoilers_cassandras_accent/</a>)</p> <p><b>Commenter 13:</b> “I don't understand why everyone thinks Cassandra sounds French/Orlesian.. She sounds a touch Slavic to me really.” (Source: <a href="https://fextralife.com/forums/t272699/cassandras-accent/">https://fextralife.com/forums/t272699/cassandras-accent/</a>)</p>
<p><b>Prussian (31)</b></p>	<p><b>Commenter 14:</b> “Prussian influenced is a good guess for Nevarra I think, and her accent to me sounds more like modern Austrian. Especially on "-tion" words like inquisition, location, etc.” (Source: <a href="https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/2tojkl/what_kind_of_accent_does_cassandra_have/">https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/2tojkl/what_kind_of_accent_does_cassandra_have/</a>)</p> <p><b>Commenter 15:</b> “I've always interpreted Nevarra as a sort of Habsburgish Holy Roman Empire. You know, bit of Spanish, bit of Portuguese, bit of Austrian, bit of Prussian, Bavarian and so forth.” (Source: <a href="https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/2tojkl/what_kind_of_accent_does_cassandra_have/">https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/2tojkl/what_kind_of_accent_does_cassandra_have/</a>)</p>
<p><b>Romanian (18)</b></p>	<p><b>Commenter 16:</b> “Yes to Old Prussian, though I saw some people saying Romanian, and I</p>

	<p>thought that sounded reasonable.” (Source: <a href="https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/4fn4mk/no_spoilers_earth_thedas_connections/">https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/4fn4mk/no_spoilers_earth_thedas_connections/</a>)</p> <p><b>Commenter 17:</b> “Yeah she sounds like the Baroness to me too, although I thought the Baroness sounded kind of... Transylvanian? So Romanian then.” (Source: <a href="https://fextralife.com/forums/t272699/cassandras-accent/">https://fextralife.com/forums/t272699/cassandras-accent/</a>)</p>
<b>Farsi (1)</b>	<p><b>Commenter 18:</b> “Sounds like an Arab/Farsi based accent to me, at least the little I heard of it.” (Source: <a href="https://fextralife.com/forums/t272699/cassandras-accent/">https://fextralife.com/forums/t272699/cassandras-accent/</a>)</p>
<b>Other (N/A)</b>	<p><b>Commenter 19:</b> “The accents are getting silly and messed up enough that I kind of wish they'd just forget about them.” (Source: <a href="https://fextralife.com/forums/p3346841/accents-of-thedas/">https://fextralife.com/forums/p3346841/accents-of-thedas/</a>)</p>

Table 1. Fan Comments About Cassandra’s Accent by Language of Origin and Word Frequency

Leliana’s written discourse analysis demonstrated a very different phenomenon than Cassandra’s. Leliana-centred forum threads showed the top language-related words to be French (391), English (203), Orlesian (142), and Ferelden (109), a fair representation of what is generally known about the character from the game itself and meta-information on the Dragon Age Wiki. In line with other characters from Orlais, Leliana’s speech primarily sounds French. That said, the inconsistency of her accent, as well as its gradual fade over time, has drawn ire from some fans, and praise from others. Commenter 20 from GameFAQs commented that in *DAI* Leliana “magically dropped her Orlesian (French) accent for an English sounding one,” noting that it affected their immersion in the game. This connects back not only to the idea of immersion as a fundamental component of RPG’s, but also to the player’s sense of ownership and ability to make

evaluative judgments about Leliana’s speech, based on their preconceived notion of what she should sound like. Speaking on the accent’s inconsistency, another fan commented that “the voice actress doesn’t seem to be able to SETTLE on an accent” (emphasis in original), claiming that at times it has sounded British, French, Slavic, Russian, and even American (Commenter 22, GameFAQs). The capitalized representation of “settle” likely represents dismay or another form of outrage over this perceived cognitive weakness, suggested by the deontic modality of “able to.” On the other hand, positive comments on Leliana’s accent in the forums call it realistic and subtle, making it much more believable than the “over-the-top bad French accents” (Commenter 21, Reddit) of the rest of the game’s Orlesians. Here, again, evaluative judgement of the quality of accented French conveys purist, or at the very least prescriptivist tendencies in fans. More examples of these fan comments can be found in table 2. Notably, though, in both characters’ cases, fans display confusion due to the perceived sociophonetic ambiguity and inconsistency.

Language (n=Frequency)	Example Comments
French (391)	<p><b>Commenter 20:</b> “...However, I am very thrown off in Inquisition because Leliana magically dropped her Orlesian (French) accent for an English sounding one. Was this a decision by Bioware because people complained about her accent, or was there an actual story behind it? Whatever it was, it kind of breaks the immersion for me a bit, because why would they change a fundamental aspect of a character like that?” (Source: <a href="https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/boards/718650-dragon-age-inquisition/70608112">https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/boards/718650-dragon-age-inquisition/70608112</a>)</p> <p><b>Commenter 21:</b> “From what I've read, it seems like the devs deliberately wanted to use over-the-top bad French accents just for laughs with some characters, though aping the</p>

	<p>culture is obviously deliberate and well-done.” (Source: <a href="https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/2ag1r1/accents_in_dragon_age/">https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/2ag1r1/accents_in_dragon_age/</a>)</p>
<p><b>English (203)</b></p>	<p><b>Commenter 22:</b> “Okay, but back to my topic. I like Leliana's character, and her voice acting is good.....but the voice actress doesn't seem to be able to SETTLE on an accent. Sometimes she's got the typical fantasy British accent.....then she'll start to sound French.....then sort of Slavic or Russian. There was one moment that I SWEAR a American Southern drawl crept in. I still like her, but I'm forced to wonder what her accent is SUPPOSED to sound like, because it's a real mish-mash. Not bad, but distracting at times! Maybe the voice actress needed a better accent coach?” (Source: <a href="https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/boards/950918-dragon-age-origins/52096999">https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/boards/950918-dragon-age-origins/52096999</a>)</p> <p><b>Commenter 23:</b> “She doesn't sound French to me at all. Her accent is very unique and I'd say it has some of the overpronouncing tendencies of French accents, but it really stands apart. Almost like she lost most of her French accent but didn't quite end up with a true English one.” (Source: <a href="https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/57nyu4/spoilers_all_french_players_of_dragon_age_how_do/">https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/57nyu4/spoilers_all_french_players_of_dragon_age_how_do/</a>)</p>
<p><b>Orlesian (142)</b></p>	<p><b>Commenter 24:</b> “When you hear Orlesian as French, it is merely the writer (BioWare) presenting a particular language in a way that makes sense to us. Thus Orlesian is not *really* French English, nor is Antivan *really* Spanish English or Fereldan *really* British English. It's just BioWare using familiar frames of reference. Since it is just a device to create clear boundaries between different in-universe languages, having Orlesians use such a caricatured French actually serves the purpose perfectly. The goal with the representation isn't accuracy.” (Source: <a href="https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/2ag1r1/accents_in_dragon_age/">https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/2ag1r1/accents_in_dragon_age/</a>)</p>

<p><b>Ferelden (109)</b></p>	<p><b>Commenter 25:</b> “Why does Leliana speak Feralden [sic] with an Orlaisian [sic] accent? The accent must be an affectation but what purpose does it serve?” (Source: <a href="https://fextralife.com/forums/t111823/lelianas-accent/">https://fextralife.com/forums/t111823/lelianas-accent/</a>)</p> <p><b>Commenter 26:</b> “I believe that's exactly what they were going for. She was born in Ferelden and spent her young years there before being taken back to Orlais and spending much of her younger adult years there. The voice of Leliana has a similar dual English/French background having come to London at 15 to pursue her acting.” (Source: <a href="https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/57nyu4/spoilers_all_french_players_of_dragon_age_how_do/">https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/57nyu4/spoilers_all_french_players_of_dragon_age_how_do/</a>)</p>
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Table 2. Fan Comments About Leliana’s Accent by Language of Origin and Word Frequency

**5. Discussion**

The normalization of SNAmerican and RP accents in the *Dragon Age* universe through linguistic signaling and implicit metapragmatics creates the illusion that there is a hierarchy of accents in the *DAI* game world, and the ideologies that contribute to this hierarchy can bleed into real life. Cassandra and Leliana, whose accents differ from the majority, are thus imbued with different social roles and status, with Cassandra’s accent firmly situating her as an outsider, whereas Leliana’s ties to both Ferelden and Orlais provide her with relative insider status and bi-cultural literacy. Irvine and Gal’s (2000) concept of fractal recursivity can explain how, in players’ mental representations of the game, this can easily create a hierarchy between differently accented characters. Orlais, which is partially inspired by French culture, is known as a cultural hub in the game world, and a stronghold of the Chantry (Theudas’ dominant religious order). Speaking with



an accent associated with Orlais, Leliana's persona can easily be aligned with the cultural capital of Orlais. That said, Orlais is also known for its opulence, showcased by a series of pompous characters who speak with satirically overblown and stereotypical French accents. This duality in cultural meaning assigns Leliana an ambivalent social status from the outset and may explain partly why she chooses to blend in sociophonetic elements associated with hegemonic Ferelden.

As a result of the game creator's normalization of SNAmerican and RP accents above all others in *DAI*, Cassandra and Leliana are othered simply on the basis of their accents not fitting the norm. The myth of the non-accent and the "standard language" alludes to the generally shared belief that there is a correct way of speech, and a normal accent to have, and neither of the studied characters fit within these standards (Lippi-Green 2012). This reproduction of standard language ideology in a fictional universe evokes real-world linguistic power imbalances, where social capital is displayed sociolinguistically through both accent and communication styles; however, through the framing of Cassandra and Leliana as "good guys," sociophonetic othering adopts the positive connotations of rebellious heroines that will lead the player to victory. This effect is reinforced by negatively connoting normalized standard language: the stereotypically pretentious RP speech of Grand Chancellor Roderick of the Chantry, for example, corroborates his authoritarian status and creates a vital contrast with the positively connoted "rogue" characters Cassandra and Leliana.

Enactment of the semiotic modes outlined by Irvine and Gal (2000) plays a large part in the othering of Cassandra and Leliana. Due to her accent, Cassandra is a linguistic anomaly in *DAI*, and this creates a semantic opposition between her and the other characters. Semantic oppositions can be conventional or unconventional (Davies 2007, Jeffries 2009, Jones 2002), and in videogames they are frequently combined to create associations between conventional and unconventional types of differentiation (Ensslin 2010). Game designers often rely on these

combinations to enforce a simplistic and binary construction of good and bad - also known as Manichean economy (JanMohamed 1995). In such Manichean combinations of conventional and unconventional oppositionality, language and sociocultural phenomena are co-deployed to constitute the social group they relate to. These fractally recursive processes (Irvine and Gal 2000) essentialize the relationship between linguistic and social differentiation to create clearly delineated, rigidly structured character classes and cultures. By pairing moral binaries with artificially constructed, socio-phonetic opposites, these inbuilt biases suggest that characters who speak a certain way will look a certain way, or characters that fulfil a certain role will speak differently than those in another role.

The phonological otherness displayed by Cassandra's speech marks her in contrast to the other characters in the game world, situating the majority as normal and her as abnormal or different. In contrast, Leliana's opposition is not against other characters, but within herself. Leliana represents duality, and her accent communicates her mixed background to players through her blending of French and British phonetic features. When comparing these characters, it becomes clear that they have been contrasted in their verbal and non-verbal communication in order to create an unconventional opposition. This is further proven by their positions as the Right and Left Hand of the Divine. Cassandra is pious and righteous to the extreme, living and serving the Divine above all else. Bound to justice, Cassandra will fight for the Inquisition in the name of God, and her steadfast dedication to the Divine gives her a sense of self-assuredness that makes her qualified to be the Divine's "right hand man," so to speak. This strength is reflected in her armoured appearance as well as her staccato speech and Germanic accent, which both exude an air of confidence and power that is clear to the player. Leliana is inconsistent and chaotic in both her personality and her speech, making her appear more 'human' than Cassandra. While both

characters are on the side of the Inquisition and fighting for the same cause, Leliana is more uncertain in her devotion to the Divine. Positioning theory, which posits that identity is constructed through individual communication acts, can help explain this opposition further (Harré & van Langenhove 1999). Cassandra has been positioned by the game designers through speech, stature, and appearance as a strong and just soldier, and is treated as such by the other player and non-player characters. On the other hand, Leliana has been positioned by the game designers as uncertain. She is portrayed as cunning and smart, but her instability betrays her, and as corroborated by fan comments, this has negative effects on her credibility.

The emphasis on narrative language in videogames plays into the sociolinguistic understanding of Cassandra and Leliana as characters. Videogames exist in a liminal space, half-real in the way they combine player agency and possibility to interact with fictional worlds (Juul 2005). In *DAI* Cassandra is the first companion character for the Inquisitor and remains playable throughout the game. In comparison, Leliana is not a playable character, and often does not even speak when she is present during a scene. This medium-specific contrast reinforces the differences in representation of these two characters, as Cassandra is able to openly interact with other party members, while Leliana the spymaster remains in the shadows. Cassandra's role as a soldier and a leader is reinforced by her authoritative Germanic accent, while Leliana's more subdued French accent evokes mystery and secrecy.

Fictional worlds are incomplete and leave players to imagine the world beyond their frame of reference. They imagine through visuals, audio, text, cutscenes, and rules, and the way characters are designed and represented impacts the ways in which players imagine their unspoken stories (Bogost 2007, Juul 2005, Schrier & Gibson 2010). All of these factors play into stereotyping, in which imagined or exaggerated differences become linked to groups or types of

people. Not only do these ‘foreign’ characters have negative personality traits, and are often cast as villains, they are also given physical traits that other them from the ‘standard’ accent characters and solidify the connection between linguistic and visual stereotyping. While Cassandra and Leliana are well established, rounded characters and do not fall victim to the worst of these stereotypes, it can be argued that many Orlesians, who speak with satirically overblown French accents, are profiled this way.

As medium-specific features of videogames, procedurality and player interaction add to the effects of more conventional representational modes, such as animation and sound. In this respect, procedural rhetoric can be thought of as the means by which a game’s rules and parameters guide players’ actions in the game world (Bogost 2007). The game world is one of possibility, but procedural rhetoric looks closer at these possibilities in order to determine the reasons behind certain affordances or restrictions, the reward systems, and the rules. In this context, procedurality should be viewed as a semiotic equal to other established modes of communication such as text, image, and music (Bogost 2007, Hawreliak 2019). In *DAI*, procedural rhetoric is used to demonstrate the differences between Leliana and Cassandra in terms of trustworthiness and credibility. While Cassandra remains righteous and steadfast in her faith and cause throughout the game, Leliana is portrayed as wavering in her faith. This dichotomy is echoed by the fact that Leliana has a character-specific subplot. This storyline is ongoing throughout the game, and can either emotionally harden or soften Leliana depending on dialogue choices made during the Inquisitor’s interactions with Leliana. The emotionally turbulent journey of Leliana’s character is not only showcased through her inconsistent accented speech and personality, but through the ludonarrative structures of the game.

By understanding the semiotic, narrative and pragmatic affordances of videogames as a medium of interaction and mode of discourse, we can see how technology shapes players and the way that they interact with videogames, as well as what we can learn from videogames. The multimodality of new media opens a world of opportunities for understanding the propagation of language ideologies through media, and while videogames may adopt representational practices from other media such as film, the incorporation of procedural and haptic forms of expression is one that is lacking in the study of contemporary pragmatics (Thurlow & Mroczek 2011).

## **6. Conclusion**

BioWare is known for its inclusivity in the *DA* franchise, most notably winning a GLAAD Media Award for its representation of LGBTQ+ characters and storylines (Kane 2014); however, this diversity is not found in all aspects of the game. While cultural and linguistic diversity is abundant, many of the characters' accents rely on linguistic stereotypes, like the regal British upper class and the "exotic" Spanish Merchants (Bleichenbacher 2008, Goorimoorthee, Csipo, Carleton, & Ensslin 2019). Videogames are a mirror of society, regardless of the fantastic worlds they may take place in, and game designers should account for this. They reinforce dominant ideologies through the promotion of the status quo and the devaluing of the 'other' through choices in character design, speech, and narrative perspective. In this chapter, we have used the accented English of Cassandra and Leliana, two of *DAI*'s main characters, as a case study to examine the pragmatic construction of social meaning through speech in mediated context. We also examined the role of performed accents in player immersion. The multimodality of videogames is mediated by both textual and paratextual information, and the combination of these forms of communication creates an

understanding of the pragmatics of the game. This is reflected in our analysis of both in-game speech acts and paratextual fan discourse.

In contemporary visual culture, it is critical that both players and game designers become more aware of the subtly politicizing effects of human speech in character design. Videogames are prime tools to evoke and reproduce hegemonial thought about assumed normative appearances and behaviour. This means that videogames have the power to either reinforce or deconstruct these dominant ideologies. Our aim is for this research to facilitate a deeper understanding of how social binaries and subtle processes of othering are constructed and perpetuated in videogames by way of conventional and unconventional oppositions, and to bring to the fore the previously overlooked importance of speech accents and voice design in these pragmatic and multimodal processes.

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