Powerful elderly characters in video games: Flemeth of Dragon Age

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Abstract

As games are becoming an increasingly popular medium in various demographic and professional strata, scholars are discussing their content and how they shape society. However, despite an increase in gender analysis of video games, little has been written about orienting games towards an elderly audience, or game representations of aging and older persons. Games specifically designed for older persons are focused on improving cognitive functions, starting from the assumption that the elderly are in need of special games in order to repair age-related deficits. This repair-focused design philosophy comes at the expense of pursuing a broader understanding of quality of life and non-programmatic entertainment. Games-for-fun that also explicitly target the elderly as an audience are almost invisible. In this article we turn our attention to a powerful elderly feminine character in an AAA game designed for entertainment without a serious mission, namely Flemeth from Dragon Age. We discuss how the game depicts and models older characters: What repertoire of portraits has Flemeth as an old woman, in the Dragon Age games? How does Flemeth contribute to an enlarged repertoire of portrayals of old women in video games? We conclude that Flemeth's gender and age displays in Dragon Age do not impoverish her portrayal but, on the contrary, turn her into a powerful and complex character, thus offering a model for game design to represent and invite older players.

Keywords
Representations of the elderly, subversive stories, gender and age displays, gender and age tropes

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'You have come far, good templar,' purred the young woman, exotic and dark in her beauty. 'And it is time that you should rest.'
'I will rest only when the Witch of the Wilds has been killed,' said the templar, 'Tell me where she is!' The templar pointed his sword at the young woman, who smiled warmly as the templar felt a knife enter his back.
'I am myth, and warning, and the thief of souls,' whispered his killer. 'I am all those things you heard of me, and I was all those people with whom you spoke.' And the templar doubled over and fell to his knees, turning to face the voice and finding but a blur. 'And I am the last thing you will never see.'
("Flemeth - Dragon Age Wiki," n.d.)

Introduction

This research addresses the representations of the elderly in video games. It is based on a case study of a feminine elderly character in an AAA game series, namely Flemeth of Dragon Age. As video games have become increasingly popular among women and older adults, being part of the everyday lives of people from diverse social strata, they have attracted the attention of scholars from both gender and age studies, gerontologists and critical theorists. There are recent studies on gameplay and gaming preferences and motivations in older adults that underline the importance of games as leisure and entertainment, and not only their cognitive benefits. As some scholars argue, based on recent studies, older adults need to be taken into consideration as "serious gamers" (Musselwhite, Marston, & Freeman, 2016). Sarah Iversen (2014) makes a similar argument by critically discussing studies from multiple disciplines, pointing out that they address older players in relation to their potential cognitive benefits, rather than their entertainment. Despite recent efforts in addressing broader needs of the elderly and a focus on more inclusive games, some scholars conclude that the elderly are rarely included in video games (Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009).

In this paper we turn our attention to age and gender representations and stereotypes in an a AAA role playing game series, Bioware's Dragon Age Origins (DAO) (2009), Dragon Age II (DAII) (2011), and Dragon Age Inquisition (DA Inquisition) (2014). We focus our analysis on an elderly feminine character, Flemeth.

Theoretical stakes and research questions

Dorothy E. Smith discusses the socially organizing property of texts, including images and movies, and the power relations they reproduce, thus their ideological force (D. E. Smith, 1978). Games have a similar but specific ideological potential due to their interactivity (Wildt, 2014). Games may encompass complex narratives which support the construction of convincing characters and immerse players into the game universe. Much has been written on the ideological potential of narratives and the power that subversive stories may have (Ewick & Silbey, 1995). In this research, we look at how Flemeth is constructed through game narrative elements, analyzing her story as it unveils through interaction with the playable character and their party. Dragon Age is well suited for paying attention to in-game narratives, especially as the story that we are following in our analysis is

revealed, but not modified by player's actions. In other words, the playable character is not an important character in Flemeth's story and he or she does not influence Flemeth's portrayal and the outcomes of her deeds.

The main concepts we use in our analysis are *gender display* (Goffman, 1979) and its correlate, *age display*, inspired from Laz (1998). We look into how characters present themselves using signs for membership in age & gender categories. Although age and gender displays are routinized practices, they also depend on the "here and now" of the situation and are flexible. They reproduce but also challenge and transform organized, stable social relations. We move further from Goffman's (1979) discussion of gender signs in advertisements, as we look at video games, specifically RPGs, who are more complex media that make use of more time and space in order to send a message than printed ads. Therefore, we expect gender and age displays or representations to be more complex due to medium differences between advertisements and RPGs.

As gender and age refer to classifications of people into different types, portrayals of members in a certain category may rhetorically invoke contrasts with others. Women are often described in contrast with men, in a relationship that Goffman argues that is analogue to the child-parent relationship (Goffman, 1979); the elderly are often portrayed in contrast with the young. We therefore also examine the *contrast structures* (Dorthy E. Smith, 1990) through which Flemeth's character gains contours and depth.

Gender and age displays are used as *rhetorical resources* in stories or accounts that reproduce social and power relations in a way that is instantly recognizable. However, as Dorothy Smith (1990) argues, these texts that are inscribed with social relations depend upon the context in which they are used, the roles of the interlocutors, and their work while performing them. Therefore, we inquire into the construction of Flemeth as a character in Dragon Age, and the role that contextual gender and age displays have in its portrayal.

The new media's pervasive potential has been discussed in the light of their power and affordances and the skills they improve or neglect, the promotion of a specific type of literacy (Jenkins, 2009), but also their content and how they may cultivate a social imagery of a diverse and always changing global society. Thornton (2002) discusses the importance of labeling in promoting ageist attitudes that are negatively affecting the elderly, in a global and ageing society. He argues that stereotypes are essential for our cognition and activity, and the words we use when labeling people or situations are heavily consequential. Myths related to old age gain power especially when used by the mass media. Therefore, negative stereotypes and myths may become self-fulfilling prophecies, which is why it is important to word classifications and descriptions of people carefully.

Older adults are rarely visible in video games, except for the cases where they are used as a resource for humor to encourage reflection on dim aspects of existence – death, disability, decay (Rughiniş, Toma, & Rughiniș, 2015). Representations of powerful elderly characters are an important, yet scarcely developed subject in the field of game studies. Starting from these observations, we propose to pay closer attention to Flemeth, an elderly female non-playable character from the Dragon Age series who is a popular

character, though she has not received a lot of attention in the game review literature. Our research questions, thus, address the portrayal of Flemeth:

- What repertoire of portraits has Flemeth as an old woman, in the Dragon Age games?
  - How do game designers use Flemeth's gender and old age to create rhetorical effects for players – such as surprise or mystery?
  - How does Flemeth display her gender and old age to players' avatars?
  - How does she play with players' expectations and stereotypes about old women? What are the contrast structures (D. E. Smith, 1978) used to portray Flemeth?
- How does Flemeth contribute to an enlarged repertoire of portrayals of old women in video games?

Methods and evidence

This paper is based on a case study of BioWare's Dragon Age series. We analyze the cutscenes in which Flemeth appears, focusing on her physical portrayal and her dialogue lines, the way she communicates and how others interact with her or how they speak about her.

The list of scenes that we analyzed via Youtube:
- Meeting Flemeth, in Dragon Age Origins (2010)
- Flemeth offers Morrigan to join the party, in Dragon Age Origins (2011)
- Morrigan sends you to kill Flemeth, in Dragon Age Origins (2012)
- Flemeth rescues the party in dragon form, in Dragon Age II (2011)
- Releasing Flemeth from her amulet, in Dragon Age II (2012)
- Flemeth is Mythal, in Dragon Age Inquisition – in the case in which she is also a grandmother (2014), and in the case when she is not (2014)
- Flemeth's death, in Dragon Age Inquisition (2015)

Discussion

We start our analysis with Flemeth's story told chronologically. We follow the perspective of the playable character and the information they receive about Flemeth from playing the game. Following her story, we look at two criteria, her physical portrait and dialogue lines, and we discuss her gender and age displays, as there are multiple presentations of Flemeth. We compare them with a set of narrative tropes, which have been discussed online (TVTropes.org Contributors, n.d.-b), like the Wicked witch (TVTropes.org Contributors, n.d.-e) or the Wizard (TVTropes.org Contributors, n.d.-f), examining whether and how she relates to stereotypes of older women in films and games. We also look at her agency and control over her presentations and the success or failure of her actions, discussing whether she is a powerful character and what elements render her as such. We offer a typology of her appearances and discuss their conventionality and potential as part of a subversive story.

Flemeth and her story

Flemeth appears in Dragon Age Origins, the first of the Dragon Age game series, as Morrigan's mother and the Witch of the Wilds. She had taken the treaties that the player's party was looking for and guarded them. The characters know something about the Witch of the Wilds and seem to be scared of her, knowing the old tales. She calls them "such tales", dismissing this identity. Flemeth saves the party at some point, but she does not appear in any cutscene. The playable character meets her after they recover and she convinces them to take her daughter Morrigan on their quest. Later in this game, Morrigan finds Flemeth's grimoire, from which she finds out that Flemeth prolongs her life by taking her daughters' bodies into possession. Morrigan decides to send the playable character to kill Flemeth and bring her the grimoire. Flemeth suggests that the party take the grimoire without killing her. If the player decides to kill her, she turns into a dragon and the fight begins. In Dragon Age II, the party (who are different people) meets Flemeth in her dragon form. Then they encounter Flemeth in human form and one of the characters identifies her as the Witch of the Wilds, an apostate. Flemeth answers that they are apostates as well and persuades them to go on a quest for her and deliver an amulet to the elves, in return for her saving their lives. When they reach their destination, the elves use the amulet to summon her. It is revealed that this was Flemeth's plan all along, and she couldn't have died in battle when the playable character attacks her in the first game, as parts of her were already hidden in various objects, such as this amulet. She does not give further explanations about her transcendental nature, but she does give them some piece of advice, demonstrating that she knows what is about to happen. In Dragon Age Inquisition, Flemeth reveals herself to be Mythal, an elven goddess. She does not tell anybody about her being Mythal. Flemeth appears in her human form when Mythal is summoned. She tells the party that Mythal came to her and lives through her and that she seeks both Mythal's and her own vengeance. She continues to call herself Flemeth, and to talk of Mythal as a different entity. Her story before Mythal is unveiled. She fell in love with a man and her husband tricked her, killed her lover and imprisoned her. This seems to be the moment when Mythal came to her. Flemeth tells Morrigan that a soul cannot be forced upon someone and that she (or her child, in the version of the game when the player chooses to have a child with Morrigan) was always safe from Flemeth. Flemeth dies in the Dreaded Wolf's arms (the elven god of betrayal), who appears for the first time as her lover, and whom she calls "old friend". He seems to have a very important role in the story and a lot of power, as Flemeth does, and they seem to be sorry for their failure to protect the people. He says that he should pay the price but the people need him so he sacrifices Flemeth, who dies willingly in his arms.

As the player reveals her story, there are multiple presentations of Flemeth. She uses her gender and age to position herself differently in interaction in various moments in the game. Sometimes, she uses age and gender stereotypes to persuade the others to follow her plan. On other occasions, she contradicts stereotypes about old women, old witches and mothers. Here we will offer examples and discuss the way old age and

femininity are represented in diverse and sometimes contradictory ways, while still contributing to the construction of an intelligible feminine elderly character.

The Wicked witch, the Vain Sorceress or the Wizard

There are a few tropes that render Flemeth's character intelligible, but she does not fit the entire description of any of them. She may be the Vain Sorceress (TVTropes.org Contributors, n.d.-d), because she is old and powerful, and sometimes displays her gender in a sensual way. Even her daughter, Morrigan, gets to believe that Flemeth is prolonging her life by possessing her daughters' bodies, an idea that fits the Vain Sorceress trope. There are tales about her love affairs and her being extremely aggressive towards men. She may be the Wicked Witch (TVTropes.org Contributors, n.d.-e), as the lore speaks about the Witch of the Wilds, who's stealing children and killing men. However, as the player gets to know Flemeth in time, they can see that she helps both men and women on their quest, and her plans are far greater than casting spells towards men and brewing love potions (the Vain Sorceress trope) or stealing children who get lost into the woods (the Wicked Witch trope). Her sensuality and her attitude towards men are mixed with traits from the masculine Archmage (TVTropes.org Contributors, n.d.-c) or Wizard tropes (TVTropes.org Contributors, n.d.-f). Another masculine trope that fits her description is the Eccentric Mentor (TVTropes.org Contributors, n.d.-a), as she is powerful, wise, and, although sometimes appearing as absent minded or eccentric, the player gradually discovers that her words do make sense and that she knows a lot about the grand scheme of things. As Flemeth's character is constructed using traits that fall in both feminine and masculine tropes, we may say that she is not a stereotypical character regarding her gender and age and that she is transferring the wisdom and power of the stereotypically male magic-related characters to a feminine one.

Flemeth talks with superiority, especially to men, while showing higher expectations from women. This behavior is related to the old witch trope or old hag. Old witches usually live isolated, in a forest, and only work with other witches, who are often their sisters. They do not trust men and they only interact with them in order to trick them, and sometimes to make men fall in love with them. However, witches are usually competitive and jealous on each other, which is not the case for Flemeth.

Age and gender displays are often relational – making one's identity in contrast or in affiliation with one's interactants. The use of specific denominator for gender-age category is a powerful rhetorical tool to define others and to define oneself, at the same time. This is why we looked at how Flemeth addresses men and women. Flemeth addresses men using words like "boy" or "lad". However, she speaks about "women" – "a woman's mind". She uses the word "girl" when addressing Morrigan, her daughter. Morrigan, in turn, calls Flemeth "Mother".

Flemeth and Morrigan often appear to think less of men than women: "And what of you? (addressing the playable character) Does your woman's mind give you a different viewpoint? Or do you believe as these boys do?" (Flemeth, DAO). Morrigan, her daughter, addresses the playable character (when it's a woman) in the first game: "You, there.

Women don't frighten like little girls. Tell me your name and I shall tell you mine" (Morrigan, DAO). Flemeth responds with questions or vague answers each time she is challenged, making the interlocutors doubt themselves. Flemeth addresses the playable using the word "child" – "You need not understand, child." She is sometimes arrogant, responding to the questions of a confused male member of the party who was inquiring about her nature: "Figured that out yourself, did you?" and "Such a curious lad". She also shows her contempt towards men when she addresses the playable character (if they are male) when they ask for the truth: "– *The truth! As if it were nothing. How like a man!*".

Although some aspects of Flemeth's behavior turn our attention to the Wicked Witch or Vain Sorceress trope, her way of communicating with men and women is presented in the game as needing justification. She does not behave in this way just because she is an old or evil witch, but because of her past. She had been betrayed by men and helped by Mythal. In DA Inquisition the player finds out that Flemeth is Mythal, an elven goddess. Mythal is known to be a maternal spirit and a protector of women. In Dragon Age Inquisition, the player finds out that Flemeth seeks vengeance. She seeks Mythal's vengeance, her vengeance and a world's vengeance. Her story starts long ago when she lost faith in men: "– I know the name Flemeth. It belongs to an ancient Fereldan legend. It says, long ago, you left your husband for a lover. Your husband then tricked you, killed your loved one, and imprisoned you. Then a spirit came to offer you vengeance. Mythal – that's what you spoke of." There are many scenes in which Flemeth shows her lack of faith in men and even her contempt towards them. Being Mythal makes Flemeth's arrogant way of addressing men as understandable or at least explainable in the larger context of her story, rather than an instantly recognizable or stereotypical way of addressing men attributable to older women.

Flemeth and her relationship with her daughter Morrigan

Flemeth's portrayal is constructed through her relationships with the other characters in the game. We discussed why she is not a stereotypical old witch because of her story and how she communicates with men and women. An important part of her personality, wisdom and power derives from how she manages her relationship with her daughter, Morrigan. Flemeth's identity as a mother is not stereotypical. She sometimes acts in a stereotypically motherly way towards Morrigan, addressing her by the word "girl", or giving too much information about Morrigan's behaviour to stranges, "Oh, how she dances under the moon!", therefore embarrassing her. However, when she sends Morrigan on a quest to see the world, she does not say goodbye in a motherly way, telling her that they will probably all be dead when Morrigan comes back. When Morrigan reads Flemeth's grimoire and finds out that she possesses her daughter's in order to live longer, Morrigan sends the playable character to kill Flemeth. Still, Flemeth had anticipated this event and had saved a part of herself in an amulet. She is not surprised of her daughter's behaviour, she does not try to find her or make peace with her, neither does she punish her. She fights the party, and only tells Morrigan the truth about her identity (and how Morrigan was always safe with her) when she finds it appropriate.

Flemeth shows that a peaceful relationship with her daughter is not what she struggles for, and that there are greater plans that she has to take care of, as a powerful witch and a goddess. It seems as if she tests Morrigan, but she does not rely on her: "Flemeth: She's a girl who thinks she knows what is what better than I, or anyone. (Laughs) And why not? I raised her to be as she is! I cannot expect her to be less! Playable character: I'm not sure whether she's you daughter or your enemy. Flemeth: Neither is she." Flemeth's identity as a mother is, therefore, not stereotypical. She serves a purpose known only by herself, which is not related to her daughter - but she takes care not to harm Morrigan.

Character evolution

In this chapter we identify Flemeth's gender and age displays and we discuss how they become power displays by looking at her appearance, dialogue lines, and their rhetorical effects in the first two Dragon Age games.

It is important to notice a significant change between the two editions. In the first Dragon Age game (Dragon Age Origins) Flemeth has a humble appearance (Fig. 1 below). The playable character meets her as the Witch of the Wilds and Morrigan's mother. She wears simple clothes and does not have any artefacts, jewellery or other signs of her power, as opposed to the second Dragon Age game (Fig. 2 below). Here she displays physical power, appearing first as a dragon fighting the Darkspawn and then changing into her human form, looking well dressed and being described by some players and critics as "a very eloquent woman" ("DA Talk: Flemeth (Age, Vengeance, and Purpose for Dragon Age: Inquisition)," n.d.). In a marked change, in DA II she is presented in a sexualized manner, as clothes reveal her cleavage and, through strong colour contrast, she appears to wear makeup. The positioning of the camera reflect a *male gaze*, as the audience is put in the perspective of a heterosexual man (Mulvey, 1975).

Fig 1. Flemeth in DAO   Fig 2. Flemeth in Dragon Age II

Because of the stereotypical representations of women and the invisibility of older women in video games, women as a general category are typically illustrated only by young sexualized characters. This may lead to gender becoming less relevant in the self-presentations of older women, the majority of female characters being depicted as young. Thus, young female characters being the norm, there is an emphasis on the age of older female characters and gender is less used as a resource in their portrayal. In other words, old women are more often depicted using old age stereotypes than gender stereotypes. Here we refer to the emphasis that is placed on Flemeth's gender in DA II, in a contrasting manner with her *elderly* physical appearance in DAO. We argue that Flemeth uses gender and age displays in diverse contexts in order to hide or show her power in a way that serves her purpose.

Looking at Flemeth's discourse and the conversation she has with the other characters, we see that Flemeth displays old age in at least two ways, with opposite effects. In the first DA game she displays knowledge about "the grand scheme of things". She also presents herself as wise and experienced through the mystery in her dialogue lines. Her interlocutors often find her difficult to understand. In DAO, however, Flemeth minimizes the expectations of the other characters in order to persuade her interlocutors to take her daughter, Morrigan, with them: „And what if I know a bit of magic?". Therefore, we may say that she uses old age sometimes in association with wisdom, presenting herself as powerful. Other times she conceals her power, displaying herself as absent minded, in order to hide her plans and appear as disinterested, when in fact she is being persuasive. These lines show her ability in influencing people by displaying old age with different rhetorical effects.

Typology of Flemeth's gender and age presentations

Throughout the game Flemeth uses diverse styles in presenting herself. Here we discuss these presentations as they unravel in specific gameplay scenes. In every gameplay scene in which Flemeth appears, she has a complex discourse and it is difficult to say if she plays the part of the "absent minded old witch" or the one of the "mysterious mage" consistently throughout the whole scene. We will discuss Flemeth's discourse and how she manages its complexity to her own advantage. Flemeth's power, as we will see, comes from the immediate result of her utterances. She has the last word and she convinces people to do what she suggests. Flemeth also proves her power by having a plan that she maintains steadily, while the narrative unfolds according to her intentions and actions.

I classified Flemeth's self-presentations according to two criteria: physical appearance and communication style. I identified the following types, ordered by physical appearance:

- Absent minded old witch living in the woods: she acts modestly in order to appear as disinterested in the player's mission, when she actually plans to send her daughter with them.

- Wise old witch living in the woods: she displays her knowledge about the large scheme of things, in order to convince the player to see her as an ally rather than an enemy.
- Powerful warrior: skilled in battle, Flemeth saves the party, but she also has a favour to ask in return.
- Powerful witch: she reveals her transcendental nature but does not wish to give further explanations. The player only finds out about her godly nature in the following game.

Table 1. Typology of Flemeth's gender and age presentations

Communication style Physical appearance	Modest, disinterested	Wise above all	Mysterious
Wise old witch living in the woods Physical portrait: Simple and dirty clothes, wrinkles, messy hair. She speaks words of wisdom.		She presents herself as benevolent and wise, knowing something about the large scheme of things. She guarded the treaties.	She asks herself questions and talks to herself. She seems to know something about the future and the playable character.
Absent minded old woman living in the woods Physical portrait: Simple/dirty clothes, wrinkles, messy hair. She appears as unknowing and naive.	She presents herself as unknowing and modest, in order to convince the party to go on a quest with Morrigan.		
Powerful warrior Physical portrait: sexy armor, cleavage, (dragon) horns, physical power. She turns into a dragon. She asks for something in return of her saving the party – in a persuasive and direct manner.			Mysterious old woman – she hides her intentions and emphasizes the importance of her gesture of saving the party.
Powerful witch revealing her transcendental nature Physical portrait: sexy armor, cleavage, (dragon) horns. She turns into a dragon. She surprises the party with her arcane knowledge and magical powers.		She advises the party and she foretells the future.	She hides her identity under the words "old, old woman".

As we discussed before, Flemeth presents herself as a wise and non-sentimental mother, an isolated witch who thinks less of men than women and "an old, old woman" when she is asked about her nature and plans. She uses age displays in various ways: to hide her power or interest, appearing as rather absent minded, or to create mystery and avoid disclosing her plans and identities, leaving the impression that she knows everything and that her plans are too great to be understood by common folk.

When the party first meets Flemeth (Elysium Fic, 2010), in Dragon Age Origins, she is presented as Morrigan's mother. The characters from the party seem to know something about the Witch of the Wilds and they fear her. She does not fully accept the tales about her, but she does not contradict them either. She shows the fact that she knows something about the future, about the party's quest, but does not want to reveal more when she is asked directly. She speaks as if she has faith in the playable character, but again, she does not explain her thoughts. She presents herself as old, wise and superior to her interlocutors. By showing trust in the playable character and by emphasizing the fact that she guarded the documents that the party is looking for, she is convincing the party to trust her and to be patient. Playing the old wise witch role, she encourages other characters to see her as an ally, and not as the Witch of the Wilds, an old hag stealing children.

In another scene, Flemeth makes hidden suggestions to the characters of the party about what to do, while keeping her intentions hidden under displays of innocence. The cutscene shows Flemeth talking to the playable character and another character from the party. This scene appears in Dragon Age Origins, after Flemeth saved the playable character (FluffyNinjaLlama, 2011). Flemeth tries to influence the other character to go on a quest. She also wants to send Morrigan with the party on this quest. Flemeth displays her old age in opposition with her knowledge and strategic thinking: „I may be old, but dwarves, elves, mages [...] this sounds like an army to me". She guides other characters' stream of thought without claiming to do so. This age display is also a persuasive line as it is based on the stereotypical image of the elderly as unskilled in matters of war. However, *she consciously uses this age display to her advantage* and manages to convince the party to follow her plan without them even knowing it. This self-presentations, although based on a supposed weakness of the elderly women, are rendering her as a powerful and contra-stereotypical elderly female character. She displays old age in order to appear as disinterested, but she can also be aggressive in order to persuade her interlocutors: "If you do not wish help from us, illegal mages, maybe I should have left you on that tower." She negotiates using diverse tactics, from false modesty to threats and accusations.

In Dragon Age II, when Flemeth is released from her amulet (Video Game Sophistry, 2012), *she displays old age in empowering ways* by answering other characters' curiosity with confusing and mysterious lines: "I am a fly in the ointment, I am a whisperer in the shadows. I am also an old, old woman. More than that you need not know." Her emphasis on "old, old woman", having a mysterious and persuasive tone, renders this age display as a sign of power rather than weakness. The fact that she has the last word

in this conversation also adds to the force of her discourse. She outsmarts the playable character and the ones in the party and refuses to disclose her identity.

Her power also stems from the fact that she does not play the wise witch role at other people's request, as it happens in the scene from Dragon Age II, after she rescues the party from Darkspawn, in her dragon form (Marz, 2011). Rather, she speaks words of wisdom in order to confuse the others and to avoid discussions: *"- There must be a catch to this (After Flemeth decides to help them). – Ha ha. There's always a catch. Life's a catch. I suggest you catch it while you can."* This is the answer Flemeth gives when the playable character inquires about Flemeth's intentions, as she wants to send them on a quest to deliver the amulet.

Flemeth does not only present herself in diverse and opposite ways, but she is also sometimes ironical to her own past presentations, showing that she is aware of the parts she plays and their rhetorical effects. In Dragon Age II, Flemeth displays her old age ironically, after showing her power and saving the party from Darkspawn (the forces of evil) in her dragon form (Marz, 2011). There is one member of the party who knows who she is: the Witch of the Wilds. Flemeth responds: "Some call me that. Also Flemeth, Asha'bellanar, an old hag who talks too much". The image of a *mumbling old hag* contrasts with her eloquent, brutal and seductive self-presentation in DA II. Flemeth uses humour and irony towards some of her identities, showing little attachment to how others view her. However, her names have a powerful influence over the members of the party, as they recall the legends.

Flemeth's strategic displays of gender-age

Flemeth displays her femininity and old age in diverse and sometimes contradictory ways and she even displays them ironically. These *contrast structures*, like the image of a mumbling old hag which is opposite to the image of a powerful Archmage who had the form of a dragon minutes ago, show that Flemeth is in control of her self-presentation.

Another argument supporting her agency and control over how she is perceived are the narrative elements, as it seems that the story supports her and unravels to the player as following Flemeth's plans. In the first game, she used her gender and age displays in order to appear as absent minded and convince the party that they need to go on a quest and sent Morrigan with them. She also used her age and gender displays, presenting herself as a wise old benevolent witch in order to gain the party's trust. She knew Morrigan would find out about her and put a part of her in an amulet. She knew she had to save the party from the Darkspawn and convinced them to take her amulet to the elves. Even Morrigan states the fact that her mother may still have plans for her, in Dragon Age Inquisition, after finding out that her mother was never her enemy and that she is Mythal, the elven goddess. Therefore, Flemeth uses old age and femininity to win arguments and avoid questions, to persuade people to do what she wants them to do. These abilities construct her character as agentic, and gender and age displays support her portrayal as a powerful character.

Conclusions

Flemeth is portrayed as a strong, agentic character, in marked contrast with other representations of old women in games, which are either ironic or focused on the perspective of death ("Time to Reminisce and Die: Representing Old Age in Art Games," n.d.). Her power derives, in the game story, from her godly nature. At the same time, her power is not only claimed but also repeatedly made visible in interactions with players' avatars, through several types of actions:

- **Strategic displays of gender & age identities**: Flemeth does not express her identity spontaneously, but deploys it as a strategic resource in communication.
- Her strong strategy is highlighted through a surprise effect, obtained by contrast structures: the interaction with players' avatars is structured such that players become aware of Flemeth's power only later in the game.
- **The narrative supports her intentions and plans**, which she successfully hides, sometimes by using gender and age displays.
- The results of her interactions: she has the last word in a discussion, she avoids answering questions when she wants to, she does not feel constrained by her interlocutors to offer serious answers and, when she wants, she can respond with questions and riddles instead.
- Affirmation of contempt towards men and willingness to engage in violent conflict with men.
- **Success**: Flemeth is effective in reaching her goals.
- **Detachment from others**: Flemeth pursues only her goals, and is not committed to other beings, not even to her daughter.

Flemeth is a **combination of two character tropes** – the hag and the wizard, thus transferring the wisdom and power of the wizard to a feminine character. She is also a counter-stereotypical mother and a sensual old woman. We can also read Flemeth as a **variation on the trope of the strong women character** in video games – which are virtually always young women. Games occasionally include children or teenagers (such as Clementine in The Walking Dead) but there seems to be, for now, no tendency to include older women as strong characters. This is why Flemeth's story may be considered a subversive story.

Flemeth is an important character as there are very few old women represented in video games and there are even fewer older women represented as powerful characters. Flemeth disrupts stereotypical portrayals of old women and mothers in video games, as the funny grandma or the old woman concerned with her or others' death (see Rughiniş et al. 2015). Due to the ideological potential of texts (Dorthy E. Smith, 1990) and video games (Wildt, 2014), subversive stories like Flemeth's are important, as they can challenge dominant ideologies and contribute to a more inclusive society.

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