

Power and Passivity: Analyzing Linguistic Gender Bias in Video Game Narratives

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Video games, as influential forms of digital media, significantly impact cultural narratives and social perceptions, particularly in terms of gender representation. This study critically analyzes the linguistic portrayal and discrimination of female characters in popular video games released between 1985 and 2025, exploring how these representations contribute to wider socio-cultural constructions of gender. Employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as theorized by Fairclough (2013), Wodak (2001) and van Dijk (2001), the study systematically examines dialogues, narrative roles, and linguistic interactions of female characters. CDA offers a comprehensive framework to explore the intersection of language, power, and ideology, particularly suited for identifying underlying gender biases embedded in linguistic portrayals. The research corpus includes influential games such as "Super Mario Bros." (Nintendo, 1985), "The Legend of Zelda" (Nintendo, 1987), "Mass Effect" (BioWare, 2007-2012), "Grand Theft Auto V" (Rockstar Games, 2013), "The Last of Us Part II" (Naughty Dog, 2020), "Red Dead Redemption 2" (Rockstar Games, 2018), Horizon Forbidden West (Guerrilla Games, 2022) chosen based on their popularity, cultural impact, and representational significance. Early game portrayals, exemplified by Princess Peach in "Super Mario Bros.", frequently positioned female characters linguistically and narratively as passive figures awaiting rescue. Such portrayals established a normative framework depicting women as dependent objects rather than autonomous subjects (Sarkeesian, 2013). In contrast, contemporary titles like "The Last of Us Part II" present nuanced female protagonists such as Ellie, who demonstrates linguistic assertiveness, emotional complexity, and narrative agency, challenging traditional stereotypes (Shaw, 2014; Consalvo, 2016). The methodological approach involves qualitative content analysis using NVivo software to systematically categorize dialogues, narrative scenarios, and character interactions. Data analysis will specifically identify linguistic patterns reflecting passivity, dependency, emotional expressivity, or conversely, autonomy, assertiveness, and complexity. Expected findings indicate an evolving but incomplete transition towards equitable representation. While significant progress is anticipated in recent games with stronger female protagonists, persistent linguistic stereotypes related to dependency and passivity are expected to remain prevalent. These patterns reflect broader socio-cultural resistances to full gender equality in digital narratives. This research contributes to the critical understanding of gender representation in digital media, highlighting the necessity for inclusive linguistic practices that promote genuine diversity and equality within gaming narratives.

Keywords: Video games, Female characters, Linguistic discrimination, Critical Discourse Analysis, Gender representation

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