Abstract

The stories of the popular video games include narrations like movies and other various media contents, and of course those contents are ideological. With this study, we are intending to, by making use of the feminist film theory, compare the 1989 and 2003 versions of Prince of Persia in the sense of representation of women. At the first version the story ends with the traditional patriarchal ends; however at the second version the Princess makes her own way. Within that scope it can be asserted that The Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time, despite being a popular text, includes a cracked-line that may be useful for oppositional readings.

1. Introduction

Through the opportunities provided by the developing technologies, the stories of the video games are getting varied. Developments at the digital technology both made the stories more realistic in the audio-visual sense; and the videos that are shown at the beginning, end, and during the game started to take more and more place within the game. The stories of the popular video games include narrations like movies and other various media contents, and of course those contents are ideological. With this study, we are intending to, by making use of the feminist film theory, compare the 1989 and 2003 versions of Prince of Persia in the sense of representation of women. After the copyrights of the game were purchased by Ubisoft in 2003, it had been published as a trilogy, under the titles:

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Sands of Time (2003), Warrior Within (2004) and The Two Thrones (2005). In order to establish definite limits for the study, we have dealt with the first version of 1989 and The Sands of Time (2003), which had been improved with reference to the same story.

2. Feminist theory

The history of feminist film theory begins in the 1970s and parallels the development of film theory itself as an academic discipline. It stems from the woman’s movement of the 1960s and was influenced by germinal feminist works like Simone De Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique, and Kate Millett’s Sexual Politics (Hollinger, 2012: 7). The male gaze theory, developed by Laura Mulvey with the assistance of psychoanalysis, had become one of the most commonly used paradigms in the feminist film theory (Smelik, 2008: 4). According to Mulvey, the pleasure obtained from the cinema is in relation with scopophilia, one of the motives that forms sexuality (Mulvey, 2010: 214). The impressive article of Mulvey, which had been published in 1975, not only puts psychoanalysis into the film theory, also examines the relation of the cinema with the patriarchal subliminal. This study, which enables the deepening of the film theory on the axis of the figuration and pleasure fictions with the questions that “how representations building the masculine and the feminine make themselves accepted by the means of the social myths and norms”, and “how the social gender fictions make the social gender felt and how it effects the life styles”, indicates that in the cinema audience had been placed as the subject of the masculine view and the body of the women had been placed as the subject of the sight; and thus the primary pleasures produced by the cinema are peeping and fetishism (Arslan, 2009: 18). Mulvey had examined the scopophilia at the classical cinema as a functional structure on the axis of effectiveness and passiveness, and had separated those two opposites into their genders. The narrative structure of the traditional cinema establishes the masculine character as effective and powerful: dramatic action opens around the actor and the view organizes with this. In that sense the cinema had previously idealized a visual mechanism being structured and organized according to the western art and westerns aesthetical criteria (Smelik, 2008: 4,5). According to Mulvey the cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking, but it also goes further, developing scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect. The conventions of mainstream film focus attention on the human form. Scale, space, stories are all anthropomorphic. Here, curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body, the relationship between the human form and its surroundings, the visible presence of the person in the world (Mulvey, 2010: 216). Mulvey had revealed narrative and cinematographic techniques that give the right to peep only to men. Within the narration of the movie, the masculine characters direct their sight towards the female character. The audience automatically, and mostly unconsciously unites with this masculine view. This is because the reason that the camera shoots not only from theoptic, but also from the libidinal view of the masculine character. Thus, the cinematographic view has three levels that clarify the female character and turns it into something theatrical, which is the camera, character, and the audience). At the classic cinema peeping explains the women with their being charming (Cited by: Smelik, 2008: 5). Mulvey says that the mirror stage, which is particularly important for Lacan, in other words the moment that the child identifies his/her own image on the mirror is important for the establishing of the ego and for her theory. The mirror phase occurs at a time when children’ physical ambitions outstrip their motor capacity, with the result that their recognition of themselves is joyous in that they imagine their mirror image to be complete, more perfect than they experience in their own body. Recognition is thus overlaid with misrecognition: the image recognised is conceived as the reflected body of self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject which, reintroduced as an ego ideal, prepares the way for identification with other in future (Mulvey, 2010: 216). Because of that reason the forming of the ego is takes shape structurally with imaginary functions. Just like the cinema, even before the assertion of this analogy by Christian Metz at the articles on psychoanalysis and cinema, Mulvey had asserted that the cinematographic identification is structured at the border of gender differences. The figuration of the masculine character, which is more complete, stronger, and has a ideal ego, is a contradiction before the distorted passive and weak female character. Thus, the audiences are manipulated to identify itself with the masculine character rather than the female character (Smelik, 2008: 5,6). Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not
maker, of meaning (Mulvey, 2010: 212). Thus the visual pleasure has two dimensions that are transmitted by the means of gender difference: peeper – scopophilia view and narcissistic identification. Those two creative structures owe their importance to the clarified figuration of the female and the power of the masculine, holding the power. Furthermore, according to Mulvey, in the psychoanalytic sense the image of the women is already ambiguous; and the reason for that is its causing the fear of castration with its charm and seductive appearance. The female character that makes the masculine subject remind the lack of penis is rather the source of deep fears. The classic cinema overcomes the threat of castration by the means of the narrative structure or fetishism. In order to make the threat of castration imperceptible, the female character shall be found guilty. The confirmation of this crime is performed either by punishment or salvation. The reflection of this to the story of the movie is realized by the means of two conventional ends, deemed proper for the women: the woman character either dies or marries at the end of the movie. In both cases catharsis is at the service of the male audience. (Smelik, 2008: 6)

3. Prince of Persia

Prince of Persia is the general name given to the video game developed on by Jordan Mencher at 1989, and the other games derived from this game. The first game of the series had been published for Apple at 1989 first. The game had sold more than two million copies, and many versions adaption of it had been developed. In 2003, Ubisoft had bought the copyrights of Prince of Persia, and released the Sands of Time Trilogy, consisting of the games named The Sands of Time, Warrior Within and The Two Thrones. With this study, we are comparing the 1989 (Prince of Persia) and 2003 (The Sands of Time) versions of Prince of Persia in the sense of figuration of women.

3.1. Narrative structure and fetishism

The narration mainly consists of two parts, the story and the discourse. The story includes the plotline, the characters, and ambiance. On the other hand, discourse is the expression, the tool that transmits the discourse. The story is about “what” is being defined in the narration, and the discourse is about “how” it is defined. The story and the discourse are substantially important in the sense of the ideological construction of the narration, and they are articulated to each other in order to enable this (Abisel, 1994, s. 188-189). At the first version of the game, the story takes place in ancient Persia. The Persian King had gone to a war and left the throne to his Vizier Jaffar. Jaffar wants to marry the Princess, and take the throne. The game begins with the escape of the stranger from the prison. The stranger, who will be the Persian Prince at the end of the game, hurdles various barriers within the palace, and reaches the room of the Princess defeating his enemies. At the end the stranger kills Jaffar and marries the Princess. The game consists of 12 chapters. We see the Princess for 8 times in total, at the beginning while she refuses Jaffar and he locks her in a room, while she waits to be saved between the chapters, and at the end of the game, while being saved by the Prince. The only action of the Princess, other than waiting to be saved by the Prince, is at the beginning of the 8th chapter, giving the task of helping the Prince to a mouse. At the end of the 8th chapter, where the Prince cannot open the exit door, the mouse helps the Prince and enables him to pass to the 9th chapter. This is an exception for the Princess, because she waits for the Prince for salvation for the entire course of the game. Thus, as Smelik remarks, the Princess is given two opportunities at the beginning of the game, to die or to marry Jaffar. At the end of the game she is saved by the Prince, and marries the Prince; and catharsis is presented to the service of the male auditors. In the 2003 version of the game, released by Ubisoft in 2003, new characters had been added to the story, and the story had been improved. The story of the game can be summarized as; the Prince invaded a country and took magic sands from the country, enabling the control of the time. Then the Prince releases the sand, without guessing the results of his act, and then recollects the sands and put the clock back. Different from the first version, at this game the Prince does not receive the title “prince” at the end. At the very beginning of the game he is already a prince, as the son of Shahraman, the Persian Sultan. The Prince invades India, and the Princess is the daughter of the Indian Sultan Maharajah, Princess Farah. This time the Vizier is not the Vizier of the Persian, but Indian Sultan. At this version, the Princess has a more active role in the narration. At the beginning of the game, just like the first
version, the Princess is captured, but then she escapes, and as being the wisest person at the game, tries to warn the Prince about the Vizier. The Vizier wants to get the blade of the Prince, and to become immortal by using the sands of time. It is only Princess Farah who knows the intention of the Vizier, and the evil side of the sands of time. At the beginning of the game she tries to prevent the Prince to unknowingly release the sands of time by using the blade, but she cannot succeed. Everyone turns into monsters, other than the Prince, the Vizier and Farah. The Prince defeats the monsters, passes various mechanical traps, solves riddles, and proceeds in the palace. At the 42nd minute of the game, which takes about 5 hours, Farah and the Prince meets, and they proceed together. At about three and a half hours of the five hours game, Farah takes active roles in the story with the Prince. She passes through narrow passages, opens the doors, and takes various tasks necessary to complete the game. In addition the uses an arrow, and physically fights shoulder to shoulder with the Prince, against the bad characters. Thus, Farah is no more a knick-knack for the story. She gets closer with the Prince as the game progresses, and when the Prince hesitates to place the blade in its place, she fights against him. The Prince loses her faith in Farah for a while, and hesitates to end the terror. Because of the hesitation of the Prince, Farah takes the blade, controlling the sands of time, from him, and, leaving the Prince, takes another way and decides to end the struggle all alone. The Prince moves alone for a while, and at the end of the game meet Farah, fighting the enemies. The Prince tries to help her, but he cannot succeed, and the Princess dies. At this point, the role assigned to Farah is consistent with the masculine roles imposed to the women; die or marry. As we mentioned before, in order to make the threat of castration imperceptible, the female character shall be found guilty. The confirmation of this crime is performed either by punishment or salvation. The reflection of this to the story of the movie is realized by the means of two conventional ends, deemed proper for the women: the woman character either dies or marries at the end of the movie. In both cases catharsis is at the service of the male audience. (Smelik, 2008: 6). Farah dies according to the principles of the conventional ends. Thus, Farah, who uses weapons like professional soldiers, fighting physically, and takes care of herself, is brought back to the point where she was located in the first version of the game. However, the narration does not end at that point. The Prince defeats his enemies, takes the blade back from Farah, and puts the blade in its place, takes the sands back. As he takes the sands he turn back the time, and the story return to the beginning, and thus Farah does not die. Since he held the blade, only the Prince remembers what had happened. Prince kills the Vizier, who did not take any actions yet, and the evil is stopped at the beginning. The Prince tells the story to Farah, but Farah, remembering nothing, does not believe in the Prince. The story ends as the Prince leaves her alone in her room, and move on. The game ends this way, and Farah neither dies, nor marries the Prince. In that sense the game has a cracked-line.

3.2. Subject positions

One of the main problems of the feminist criticism is the subject positions formed within the film watching as a result of the narration structure of the movie and it’s dubbing methods. This is issue is discussed in connection with the issues like identification and peeping (Büker, 2010: 207). According to Mulvey, the pleasure of looking has been divided into two by the patriarchal system; the masculine - the effective, and the feminine – the passive. The determinist male view transfers its fantasy to the female figure, formed suitably. The women, in their conventional exhibitionist roles, with their appearance coded for a strong visual and erotic effect that gives the message “I am worth looking”, are both the one being looked at and being exposed (Mulvey, 2010: 218). At the first version of the game, the Princess has long and frizzy hair, and in fancy dresses. On the other hand, the Princess is nothing more than a subject, waiting to be rescued, and only be seen between the chapters. However, at the version of 2003, Farah wears dresses, exposing her femininity, and assumes a role more than an object, with her tidy hair and bow. Farah, who had been captured at the beginning of the game, becomes the object of the looks of the audience and the Prince, while being carried on a couch, while her body is exhibited. However, rescuing within a short time, Farah becomes the subject by taking an active role at the struggle. At her book “The Acoustic Mirror” Kaja Silverman had moved the focus from the sight to the voice, and thus created the opportunity to approach to the female subject from a unique perspective within the framework of feminist film theory. Silverman asserts that the masculine subject is given the properties of being one and being complete in the cinema, not only by the image and the appearance, but also by the means of the recording and the usage of the voice (Cited by: Smelik, 2008: 15). There are no dialogues at the 1989 version of the game, and the story is told by three messages given at the beginning, middle, and end of the
game, from which we learn that the Princess had refused the proposal of Jaffar, that she loves the Prince, and that she will wait for him to rescue her. At the end we are told that the Prince, who killed Jaffar, marries the Princess and becomes the Prince. At the 2003 version, Farah has been fictionalized as a powerful person, knowing the power of the sands even before the Prince, and trying to tell him what she knows. She tells the facts to the Prince, but the confused Prince does not believe her. At a great deal of the game Farah talks for a substantial time, and sometimes makes fun of the Prince. Different from the first version, Farah, resisting to objectification in the visual sense, strengthens her role as a subject with her voice, representing her will.

4. Conclusion

This study aims at, by making use of the feminist film theory, compare the 1989 and 2003 versions of the popular video game “Prince of Persia” in the sense of representation of women. It has been observed that at the 1989 version of the game the female character did not have an important role, just waited to be rescued as a passive character, and used as an object rather than a subject. On the other hand, regarding the 2003 version of the game, it has been observed that the female character holds a more important and central role within the narration. For the course of the game, she acts with the male character most of the time, accomplishes various missions, and takes active roles at fights by using weapons. According to Mulvey, the classic cinema overcomes the threat of castration by the means of the narrative structure or fetishism. In order to make the threat of castration imperceptible, the female character shall be found guilty. The confirmation of this crime is performed either by punishment or salvation. The reflection of this to the story of the movie is realized by the means of two conventional ends, deemed proper for the women: the woman character either dies or marries at the end of the movie. In both cases catharsis is at the service of the male audience. (Smelik, 2008: 6). At the first version the story ends by the marriage of the Princess, in compliance with the traditional patriarchal ends; however at the second version the Princess defeats the death, and refusing the love of the prince and makes her own way. According to Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner’s statement; conservative cultural or cinematic texts without exception includes a cracked line which overshadows seemingly successfull ideology of texts (Ryan&Kellner 1990: 112,113). Within that scope it can be asserted that The Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time, despite being a popular text, includes a cracked-line that may be useful for oppositional readings.

References