

Analysis of the Reasons Underlying the Fluctuating Reputation of RPG Sequels: Taking the Dragon Age Series as an Example

Xiaolei Cai

*Beijing Jiaotong University, Beijing, China
23322001@bjtu.edu.cn*

Abstract. This study is predicated on the recent surge in sequel creation within the video game industry. This research analyzes the equilibrium between authenticity and innovation in RPG sequels, using the Dragon Age series as a case study, and evaluates its impact on market reception and peer evaluations. It also looks at the precise causes that led to these results, which can help future sequels in the same genre and keep valuable IPs alive longer. It was found that industry evaluations tend to place greater emphasis on the relevance of novelty to new technologies and trends in the industry, while the market focus more on the manifestation of authenticity the sequels embrace. Additionally, while players may have some resistance to novelty, if game developers retain the best elements from the original game while carefully integrating new ones and instead seamlessly blending new elements with the existing foundation to create a 'permeative' dissemination, players' acceptance of novelty will increase, significantly boosting the sequel's evaluation.

Keywords: Digital Games, RPGs(Role-playing games), video game sequel, digital serialty

1. Introduction

This study concentrates on 'sequel' games, which are prevalent and gaining popularity in the industry, particularly within the RPG category, recognized as the most contentious yet highest-value genre among sequel games. This study has important consequences for game developers and investors regarding the creation of future sequels. It also sheds light on how the gaming community views sequels. The Dragon Age series, a classic and very representative example in RPG history, is used as a case study. It uses the case study method, which means gathering and analyzing relevant online data and literature. The benefit of this approach is that it can thoroughly examine typical cases, which gives researchers a better understanding of the whole field and helps them make progress in their work. The primary research aim of this study is to investigate the equilibrium between innovation and authenticity within the Dragon Age series, assessing its performance and influencing factors across various sequels and dimensions, while also conducting a separate analysis of its effects on market reactions and expert evaluations, along with the underlying rationale. This study undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the four games in the Dragon Age series: Dragon Age: Origins, Dragon Age II, Dragon Age: Inquisition, and Dragon Age: The Veilguard. It also looks at

user reviews on sites like the Steam player community and compares them to the industry's reviews of the four works.

2. Background

"Games are a unique art form, as important as books, music, or movies." This statement comes from Swen Vinke, CEO of Larian Studios, the development studio behind the 2023 TGA the Game of the Year, Baldur's Gate 3, during his acceptance speech at the award ceremony. Indeed, since their inception, video games have continued to penetrate every aspect of people's lives alongside the relentless advancement of media technology. Taking the most representative platform, Steam, as an example, according to the game data statistics platform SteamDB, the total number of games released annually has surged year after year since 2014, from 1,713 in 2014 to 18,720 in 2024. In just a decade, the number of game releases has increased tenfold [1]. As a type of cultural product under the creative industry, video games, like music and film, have become an important consumer object in contemporary society [2]. New works are constantly emerging, while video game sequels maintain strong influence in the gaming market by leveraging the established IP reputation and player base of their predecessors. Whether a new sequel adheres to the core narrative framework of its predecessor is one of the key concerns for players. These characteristics distinguish video game series from sequels in other cultural products such as films and music, and confer significant research value on the topic of video game sequels [3]. SteamDB is a well-known statistics website in the gaming industry. As a third-party database, it provides an objective record of data from the Steam gaming platform (Figure 1).

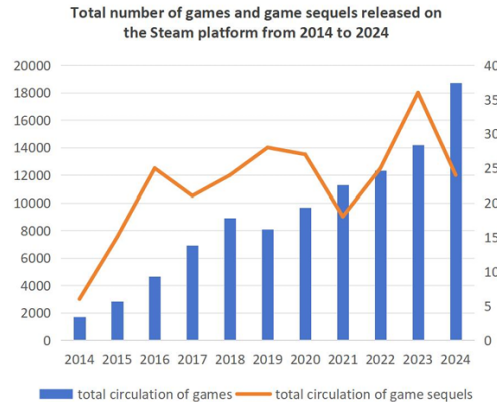


Figure 1. Total number of games and game sequels released on the STEAM platform between 2014 and 2024 [1]

Video game sequels are the product of a serialised production model, referring to the process by which game development companies build upon the core narrative features or constituent elements of a game (such as character storylines or game modes) to create a series of consecutive works. The shared elements between a game and its sequels constitute the key identifier of a game sequel [4]. The definition of video game sequels used in this article is based on the definition framework provided by Denson and Sudmann in Digital Seriality, focusing solely on inter-ludic seriality, which refers to continuity between sequels, prequels, remakes, etc., without discussing intra-ludic seriality, which concerns continuity within a game's level design, or para-ludic seriality, which pertains to cross-media narratives and adaptations [5].

This study found that in academic research on the cultural and creative industries, studies on Digital Seriality have generally focused on film and television works, while research on video games has paid relatively little attention to seriality, and studies on RPGs (Role-Playing Games) are even scarcer. RPG games once gradually faded from the gaming market due to limitations in game modes and the high costs associated with immersive gameplay following the release of next-generation games. However, the 2023 sequel to the Baldur's Gate series, Baldur's Gate 3, made a splash at the TGA and won the top award, proving that sequels to such games still have the potential to return to the pinnacle of success in a fast-paced digital society. The market evaluation of RPG sequels is most significantly influenced by the conflict between 'novelty' and 'authenticity,' which also means that the creation of RPG sequels is more challenging compared to other game genres [3]. Therefore, this study will focus on existing research gaps and concentrate more on RPG games, which were once thought to be in decline. In addition to market indicators (product reputation, awards, sales), it will pay more attention to player feedback.

3. Case analysis

3.1. Case introduction

This paper focuses on the Dragon Age series, a well-known RPG series that has been around since 2009 and is still going strong today. It has seen the gaming industry change over time. The series has won many awards, and the third game, Dragon Age: Inquisition, was named Game of the Year at the 2014 The Game Awards. Also, each of the three sequels shows the trends in the industry and the tastes of the market at the time they were made. The market has reacted very differently to each sequel, which makes them very representative of their own industries.

The first game in the Dragon Age series is Dragon Age: Origins. People love the game for its deep and rich story choices, huge and detailed world-building, unique cultural and political themes, game rules that are easier to understand than DND, and beautiful and classic graphic design. The series has a lot of fans and a good reputation in the business.

Dragon Age II is different from the first game because it was made in just one year, while the first game took five years to make and had a big world and an ambitious opening. Instead, Dragon Age II focuses more on the story that happens in one area of the game. But a lot of bad reviews have been about veteran fans being unhappy with how the worldview got smaller all of a sudden and how the quality went down because they had to rush to meet deadlines.

The second peak of the series is Dragon Age: Inquisition. The second sequel fixes the problems players had with the first one by adding more open-world elements and combining them with traditional RPG elements. This makes the series more appealing to a wider audience. DAI keeps the best parts of the series while finding a new way to balance exploration and story, investment and reward. It uses new types of games, like sandbox games, to make the story of the series more coherent. But the open-world setting has a lot of shallow and overly complicated side quests that have gotten a lot of bad reviews for this sequel.

Dragon Age: The Veilguard is the most controversial sequel in the series. The game was released a decade after its predecessor, during which time the studio underwent multiple restructurings and the production direction was significantly altered on several occasions. DEI issues were the focal point of controversy surrounding the game, but they were not the primary reason for the significant decline in its reception, as similar elements were also present in the previous instalment. The deeper reason lies in the fact that this sequel has almost completely abandoned the series' renowned world-building narrative, shifting its storytelling style toward a more juvenile, simplistic, and superficial

approach that glosses over profound conflicts. It reduces centuries of accumulated in-game tensions and conflicts to a childish, superficial reconciliation, which has truly angered fans who have followed the Dragon Age series for over a decade (Figure 2).

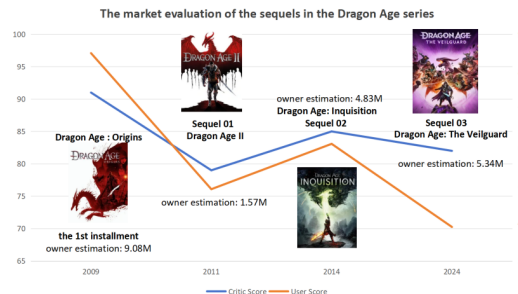


Figure 2. Market evaluation of the sequels in the Dragon Age series, data sourced from SteamDB and Metacritic [1,6]

3.2. Theoretical framework

In the cultural and creative industries, sequels are often evaluated based on changes in the addition, removal, and combination of content elements relative to previous instalments in the series. These changes reflect the developers' innovative considerations and actions, i.e., the degree of innovation (novelty) [3]. Authenticity is a common concept in historical brand marketing, referring to the perceived consistency between a product and its historical counterpart in the minds of consumers [7]. Therefore, in RPG series, the balance between novelty and authenticity is the fundamental factor determining market response. Based on the research framework within the same field, the degree of novelty and authenticity in this study will be analysed based on the extent of updates and changes in game content elements such as release information, production team information, game tags, audiovisual elements, game rules, plot themes, and operational techniques, as well as the extent of novelty in the combination of game elements.

4. Analysis

4.1. The conflict and balance between novelty and authenticity

The Dragon Age series boasts a number of commendable strategies in terms of innovation and tradition. Reusing art assets within the game is a common strategy employed by Bioware and many other game developers, even when sequels use different engines and rendering technologies with significant differences in modelling precision. However, the Dragon Age series has largely achieved visual consistency across its games, such as the reuse of classic statues, weapons, buildings, and organisational logos. Additionally, the series consistently employs an 'character-narrative' encyclopedia, where all in-game codex entries used to expand the world-building are excerpted from in-game characters' writings or oral accounts, such as the pope's speeches, scholars' writings, or commoners' diaries. While this consistent linguistic style cannot guarantee absolute objectivity—often the opposite is true—it creates a sense of historical continuity within the virtual world. These materials evoke a sense of 'history' in the virtual world and use environmental storytelling to trigger fans' memories of related objects, thereby bringing them back to their experiences playing previous games in the series. "The sign refers not only to other signs in the same circle but also to signs in other circles or spirals as well" (ibid.)." [8].

To allow veteran players to better appreciate the impact of their choices and the characters they have created in the previous games on the virtual world they love, Bioware has designed a unique Dragon Age Keep website and save file inheritance mechanism for the first three games. Players can upload save files from previous games into sequels or revisit major plot decisions through the website before importing them into new games. Since the four games in the series are linearly sequenced within the same universe, the in-game time span between sequels rarely exceeds 10 years. This design involves inheriting customised world-building and character relationships from previous games, such as whether a key character has died or whether a new teammate has a romantic relationship with the player character from the previous game—which can affect subsequent quests and rewards. In the first three games, Bioware largely achieved the goal of 'Making Every Difficult Choice Count,' and the outstanding storyline featuring a large number of classic characters throughout the series gave the entire Dragon Age series a strong sense of continuity. Players can even re-customise the appearance of former characters in the new game to align with their previous customisations. However, this inheritance system was not well implemented in the fourth game. On one hand, the accumulation of choices from previous games was substantial, and creating additional branches would have exponentially increased the workload. On the other hand, the fourth game is set ten years after the first three, and the developers believed that simplifying the influence of previous games would help veteran players recall the story faster while lowering the barrier to entry for new players.

In RPG games, while combat and game mechanics may not be as crucial as plot and environmental storytelling, they remain an extremely critical component of the game's performance. The combat mechanics in the Dragon Age series reflect Bioware's balancing act in modernising American RPGs since 2009. The transition of RPGs from classic modes to adapt to console controller operations, 3D aesthetics, and modern combat excitement demands is deeply reflected in each sequel of the series. The first instalment still retained the traditional top-down perspective and CRPG mode similar to the Baldur's Gate. In the second instalment, due to the success of the company's other product, Mass Effect, the sequel reduced the customisation options for the player character and introduced a JRPG mode to cater to contemporary tastes. The third instalment returned to the core RPG element of customisable player character, introducing the latest open-world mode, adding more region exploration, collection, and dragon-slaying elements. The combat mechanics balanced the previous two instalments, retaining traditional RPG time-stop and strategic deployment while introducing a faster combat pace characteristic of the next generation, finding a new balance for RPGs of the era—combining control, character development, and team cooperation. However, the fourth instalment, as a sequel in the new era, almost completely abandoned the traditional RPG combat model of its predecessors. First, it significantly reduced character customisation, limiting player-controllable characters to one, with character development becoming more linear and rigid, entirely focused on combat—an aspect that should take subordinate role in RPG games, thereby reducing the space for creating well-rounded characters; Second, the combat mechanics have become highly action-oriented, emphasising fast-paced action and gameplay, while abandoning the battlefield positioning, team strategies, and resource management that elevate character relationships in RPG games. As a result, each battle becomes highly repetitive, lacking in content richness and instead prioritising the thrill of the combat form.

4.2. Market response to novelty and authenticity

Based on the analysis of the balance between novelty and authenticity in the game itself, the three sequels in the Dragon Age series are ranked from best to worst in terms of balance as follows:

Dragon Age: Inquisition, Dragon Age II, and Dragon Age: The Veilguard. Based on the trend analysis of User Score and sales in Figure 2, it can be concluded that sequels that are more faithful to the original game, i.e., those with stronger authenticity, receive better evaluations from users. Conversely, sequels with stronger novelty often receive more concentrated negative evaluations from users, and the intensity of these evaluations is almost directly proportional to the level of novelty. A representative player review states: "Among so many possible directions for evolution, choosing the least RPG-like and least Bioware-like direction, instead opting for a cheap action game (ACT) formula as the combat system solution, was completely unexpected. This may also be the reason for the significant disparity between media reviews and player scores on Metacritic." However, for expert and industry evaluations, although they generally adhere to this trend, the detrimental effect of novelty on expert evaluations is comparatively less pronounced than on user evaluations. The gaming industry is generally more open to new ideas in RPG sequels.

This is mostly because experts and players have different reasons for playing games and different ways of looking at them. For players, the best thing about new features in game sequels is that they get to see how their favorite IP series has changed over time. Sadly, this often goes against the things and reasons that players first loved about the IP. Playing video games, especially RPGs, takes a lot of time and effort, which is different from other cultural products. How well a player knows the game's rules and lore, which are the heart and soul of RPGs, has a big impact on how much fun they have. So, when a new sequel makes big changes to the rules compared to the last game, players have to spend more time and brain power learning the new rules, which changes the way they play the game [9]. Overly innovative developments will conflict with players' distinct 'path dependence' characteristics, weakening their cognitive experience of the series. This also makes it easier for sequels to be viewed by players as 'outsiders' within the series [3]. Experts and critics of games often look at sequels from the point of view of big trends in the industry. The industry is more interested in how well new works fit in with new technologies and popular gameplay of the time than players' love for IP and virtual worldviews. They focus more on the "hard power" of games than the more subtle "soft power" of IP continuity.

5. Suggestion

It is worth noting that, when looking at the rating curve in Figure 2 in conjunction with sales changes, the Dragon Age series is also unable to escape 'The Curse of the Original.' [7]. The powerful aura of the first game in a series can overshadow its sequels, especially those that follow closely on its heels [10]. From the balance of novelty and authenticity of Dragon Age II, it is not significantly inferior to Dragon Age: Inquisition. In fact, if the release order of the two games were reversed, Inquisition's performance might not have been as outstanding as it is today. It is evident that players' acceptance of novelty is gradual, and Dragon Age II served as the 'stepping stone' following the first game. The strategy of releasing it immediately after the first game was probably part of Bioware's overall planning for the Dragon Age series schedule. This strategy of avoiding, or perhaps weakening, 'The Curse of the Original' is one that future RPG series can learn from. It distributes negative reviews targeted at a single sequel across multiple sequels, thereby cushioning the rise in novelty and the decline in authenticity.

When it comes to RPG series with longer intervals between sequels, which is a common occurrence in the industry, the analysis above also reveals that the balance between novelty and authenticity is not merely a matter of the proportion of innovative elements, but more often a question of how these elements are arranged and presented. For example, in Dragon Age: Inquisition, the open-world exploration features two elements that have received mixed reviews:

'filler-style side quests' and 'Agent recruitment.' Both are innovative elements introduced in the open-world setting and are tied to the main storyline, with the aim of extending gameplay duration and expanding the game's world-building. However, the former was inappropriately overloaded into the main storyline's first chapter map, yet failed to take on the task of further expanding the cultural and geographical elements of other chapters in the latter stages of the game. This resulted in excessive consumption of players' curiosity and patience during the game's initial exploration phase, while lacking the means to leave veteran players eager for more in the later stages. The latter, however, is more evenly distributed throughout each chapter of the main storyline, consistently enhancing players' immersion. Therefore, novelty is not merely about gradually introducing elements from the RPG series but requires strategic 'seamless integration' to allow players to unconsciously accept new elements during gameplay, thereby establishing 'path dependence' in their subconscious, which is an excellent strategy.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that industry assessments exhibit a greater acceptance of innovation in RPG sequels, whereas market assessments prioritize the authenticity of sequels. Also, player communities are not just passive and slow to accept more new things in sequels. One way for game developers to lessen "The Curse of the Original" is to change when sequels come out. On the other hand, new features should be added in a way that doesn't change the game's core strengths too much and keeps players' path dependence in mind.

This study offers significant insights and recommendations for future research in this domain, primarily benefiting game developers, industry critics, and player communities. Future research ought to concentrate on comprehensive analyses of other prominent RPG series, such as the Baldur's Gate series, to disseminate exceptional fantasy narratives to a wider audience. This will help classic RPG series that haven't been able to thrive in the modern era of video games because of historical reasons and technical limitations. They will be able to regain their former glory in this time of video game prosperity.

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