

The Selfish Selfless Hero: Questing in Dragon Age: Origins

Carolyn Jong

A Thesis in

The Department of Communication Studies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts (Media Studies) at

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

April 2013

© Carolyn Jong, 2013

**CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY**  
**School of Graduate Studies**

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Carolyn Jong

Entitled: The Selfish Selfless Hero: Questing in Dragon Age: Origins

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Arts (Media Studies)**

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Maurice Charland, Communication Studies Chair

\_\_\_\_\_  
Peter van Wyck, Communication Studies Examiner

\_\_\_\_\_  
Bart Simon, Sociology and Anthropology Examiner

\_\_\_\_\_  
Mia Consalvo, Communication Studies Supervisor

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_  
Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director  
Rae Staseson, Communication Studies

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dean of Faculty  
Dean Brian Lewis

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **ABSTRACT**

The Selfish Selfless Hero: Questing in Dragon Age: Origins

Carolyn Jong

Dragon Age: Origins (DAO) is a highly successful single-player digital role-playing game. The player's intervention in this world is structured around a series of quests, which describe and delimit the range of actions that must be undertaken in order to succeed in the game. Through her own subjective experiences of play, the author describes the various ways in which the narrative and ludic structures that make up the quest system in DAO both enable and constrain certain actions, identities, and roles. This thesis provides an in-depth account of how in-game choices, coupled with levelling mechanics, narrative events, and the affective responses of the player, can reflect and potentially reinforce or disrupt dominant ideologies and political beliefs. Drawing on work from the fields of game studies, political theory, feminist theory, literary criticism, and medieval studies, the author describes how her experiences of DAO, including the actions she elected to take within the game, were shaped by an implicit willingness to adopt or accept neoliberal, market-based modes of assessment, ethical binaries, and the domination of the self over the Other. The first two chapters outline previous research on quests, videogames, and the role of subjectivity. The third chapter discusses side quests and levelling systems, while the fourth investigates main quests and the overarching master quest. After examining the neomedieval setting of DAO in the fifth chapter, the author concludes with a discussion of how her own private practices of play are implicated in the process of socialization, resulting in inconsistencies and contradictions.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my wonderful colleagues at the Technoculture, Art, and Games Research Centre for their continued guidance and support. In particular I owe a great deal of thanks to my supervisor, Mia Consalvo, my second reader Bart Simon, and my former reader Jeremy Stolow, for their invaluable insight and advice.

Thanks goes out also to Peter van Wyck and Monika Gagnon for their help and encouragement, particularly in the early stages of my degree.

I am very grateful for the assistance and support of the faculty and staff whom I have had the pleasure of working with over the last few years. I would also like to thank my peers in Media Studies, who have generously provided me with comfort, feedback, and excellent company.

Many thanks to my family, who have always been there for me, and without whom none of this would have been possible, and to my friends, who continue to inspire and sustain me.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>LIST OF FIGURES .....</b>	<b>VII</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>1</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	1
GAMES TELLING STORIES.....	7
VIDEOGAME GENRES.....	8
QUEST GAMES .....	9
A QUESTION OF MOTIVATION: GOALS AND REWARDS.....	12
QUESTS IN POPULAR CULTURE.....	13
QUESTS IN LITERATURE.....	16
INTERPRETATION IN CONTEXT .....	18
<b>CHAPTER 2: ANALYZING DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS .....</b>	<b>27</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	27
“SPIRITUAL PREDECESSORS”: BIOWARE AND BALDUR’S GATE.....	30
GAMEPLAY .....	35
A SERIES OF SOMEWHAT INTERESTING CHOICES.....	38
THE SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE OF PLAY .....	44
(INTER)ACTIVITY, PASSIVITY, AND IDENTIFICATION .....	47
I AM THE PLAYER, BUT WHO AM I? .....	53
(RE)PLAYING AND RECORDING DAO .....	56
<b>CHAPTER 3: SIDE QUESTS .....</b>	<b>60</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	60
FILLING IN AND FLESHING OUT: SIDE QUESTS .....	61
AGENCY AND MORALITY .....	63

A NUMBERS GAME: STATS AND ITEMS .....	73
PERSONAL GAIN FOR THE COLLECTIVE GOOD.....	80
CONCLUSION.....	83
<b>CHAPTER 4: MAIN QUESTS.....</b>	<b>86</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	86
BEGINNINGS.....	88
THERE AND BACK AGAIN: MAIN QUESTS .....	90
THE NATURE OF THE BEAST.....	97
DEFEATING THE DARKSPAWN: THE MASTER QUEST.....	109
CONCLUSION.....	116
<b>CHAPTER 5: NEOMEDIEVALISM .....</b>	<b>118</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	118
PROJECTING THE PAST INTO THE PRESENT .....	119
MAGIC AND TECHNOLOGY .....	125
THE BROKEN CIRCLE.....	127
WHAT’S IN A NAME: DEFINING QUESTS.....	132
CONCLUSION.....	134
<b>CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>136</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>145</b>

## LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1. SELECTING AN ORIGIN STORY DURING THE CHARACTER CREATION PHASE .....	28
FIGURE 2. THE HUD (HEAD-UP DISPLAY) DURING COMBAT.....	37
FIGURE 3. LOCATION MARKERS ON THE MAP OF FERELDEN.....	39
FIGURE 4. DIALOGUE SEQUENCE.....	40
FIGURE 5. THE WARDEN’S JOURNAL .....	41
FIGURE 6. SELECTING COMPANIONS.....	43
FIGURE 7. THE STAGES OF A SIDE QUEST .....	62
FIGURE 8. CHARACTER STATISTICS .....	74
FIGURE 9. COMPARING EQUIPMENT STATISTICS .....	76
FIGURE 10. HEROIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS .....	77
FIGURE 11. CODEX ENTRIES.....	78
FIGURE 12. PICKING SIDES .....	95
FIGURE 13. HELPING A DALISH ELF .....	100
FIGURE 14. THE LADY AND THE WEREWOLVES PLEAD FOR HELP .....	106
FIGURE 15. THE DARKSPAWN.....	110

## CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

*Dragon Age: Origins* (DAO) is a single-player fantasy digital role-playing game (RPG)<sup>1</sup> developed by BioWare's Edmonton studio and released November 3, 2009. By February 8, 2010, over 3.2 million units had been sold worldwide (Electronic Arts 2010). DAO presents the player with a magical, pseudo-medieval world, and casts them in the role of the hero. The player's intervention in this world is structured around a series of quests, which describe and delimit the range of actions that must be undertaken in order to succeed in the game. Drawing on my own subjective experiences of play, I intend to describe the various ways in which the narrative and ludic structures that make up the quest system in DAO both enable and constrain certain actions, identities, and roles, all of which contribute to an overarching storyline that I will provisionally call the master quest.<sup>2</sup>

How players experience this master quest is dependent in part upon the choices they make, creating a field of possibilities that is highly sensitive to an individual player's goals, morals, and style of play, as well as her interpretive framework. Taking as a starting point my own experiences of quests as motivational structures that provide pleasure, I hope to answer the question of how quests motivate action, what sort of

---

<sup>1</sup> RPG is frequently used to refer to a genre of videogames (games which are played on a personal computer or console) but can, in other contexts, refer to non-digital games. In this case, RPG will always be used in the earlier sense, except where explicitly stated otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term master to mean predominant, principal, or controlling, but also in part because I believe the concept of mastery (of a particular skill or discipline, but also domination over others) reflects the game's overarching storyline and indicated goals. This idea will be explored in greater depth in the fourth chapter.



actions they motivate, and why these actions may or may not be pleasurable from the perspective of an actual (as opposed to a theoretical) player embedded in a particular cultural context.

In “From Hunt the Wumpus to EverQuest: Introduction to Quest Theory” game studies scholar Espen Aarseth (2005) argues that, “the quest is the game designer’s main control of the players’ agenda, forcing them to perform certain actions that might otherwise not have been chosen, thus reducing the possibility space offered by the game rules and the landscape.” Quests not only provide players with “concrete and attainable goals,” they also dictate how (and sometimes when) players can achieve those goals. One implication of this argument is that while videogames appear to offer players some degree of agency by allowing them to interact directly with the game world, the designers are the ones who are ultimately in control. This sentiment is echoed in Matt Garite’s (2003) analysis of “the ideology of interactivity,” which suggests that the various choices that are presented to the player in a videogame bolster the impression that the player is acting under her own initiative, while obscuring the heavily structured nature of those actions.

But while the design of in-game goals and rewards might suggest an “ideal” route or best practice of play, personal agendas can produce other, undetermined modes of play. As Allison Gazzard (2011) points out, “it may be the case that players do not feel the need to reach the ultimate end goal,” in which case designed goals may be subverted or ignored in favour of player-defined rewards. Miguel Sicart (2011) further argues that, “the meaning of a game cannot be reduced to its rules, nor to the behaviors derived from the rules, since play will be a process of appropriation of those rules, a dialogue between

the system and the player.” It is precisely this dialogue, this negotiation between player and system, which is the focus of this thesis.

DAO is akin to many other forms of media in that it involves an encounter with a fictional world, an alternate society that differs in important ways from the sociocultural milieu in which it was produced. Unlike many other objects of cultural production, however, DAO allows players to make choices within that fictional world that affect the state of the system that shapes and supports it. In this thesis I will outline some of the ways in which the act of making choices in DAO—along with the attendant sense of belonging and responsibility I attach to my character’s actions as the person choosing and initiating those actions—can both reinforce and disrupt the workings of dominant ideologies.

On the one hand, ideological hailing, or the production of subjectivity through identification, can be conceived of as an ongoing process of negotiation in which the acceptance or “readiness” of the individual being hailed is key (Butler 1995; Hall 1996). Hailing succeeds not in the moment when an individual is called upon to respond, but in the moment of response, that is in the moment when the individual has willingly identified with the subject being hailed and performs or acts accordingly. In this sense ideology is realized in human practice—in the things we *do*, as well as the things we say.

While books and films may provide an opportunity for me to imaginatively identify with a character (or characters) in a fictional world, I am never impelled to believe that the actions, goals, and beliefs of these characters “belong” to me, even if I happen to agree with them. In DAO, however, I have direct (if limited) control over what my character does and says, and this can produce a different form of identification in

which the character becomes an extension of my agency, a surrogate body onto which I can project any number of fictional roles, including an idealized vision of myself. Even when I am aware that my options are limited, the idea that I have a choice at all still prompts me to take responsibility for my actions and to view those actions as expressions of my own values, goals, or desires.

By hinting at the possibility of multiplicity (different characters, different choices, different stories, different goals), in-game choices can give rise to contradiction and resistance, complicating attempts to maintain a dominant voice or worldview. Choice involves me in the action and in doing so it activates a range of factors that can be predicted but never predetermined by the game's developers. A choice that is obvious or important to me may not be so for another player, and at any given time I may experience a desire for more or different choices in reaction to the perceived limitations of the game.

While some players may deliberately push against these limitations by playing the game "against the grain," I am not one of those players. More often than not I have found that the choices offered in DAO are consistent with my own goals to be a "good" person, and a "good" player. These goals, and the choices I make in support of these goals, are shaped by a number of dominant political assumptions, some of which will be outlined in this thesis. While these assumptions are very much a part of the broader sociocultural landscape, it is their specific manifestation in DAO which concerns me here: that is the multiple acts, choices, structures, and stories that frame the world largely in terms of quantification, polarization, and domination.

Throughout this thesis I intend to explore what it means to be positioned and hailed, in very particular ways, as both an entrepreneurial player and a romantic hero in a

pre-industrial, fantasy world. As I will argue, these roles often intersect with one another, influencing how I play the game, as well as how I attribute meaning to my actions. While meaning is derived in part from what surrounds the game—what Mia Consalvo (2007), drawing on Gérard Genette (1997), calls videogame paratexts—I will be limiting the bulk of my analysis to the game itself. At the same time, I must acknowledge that the broader historical and cultural context, including popular medievalism and the range of media that make it up, has greatly impacted my understanding of fantasy worlds, videogames, and quests. By bringing together and drawing upon works by popular medievalists such as Amy Kaufman and Angela Jane Weisl, as well as game studies scholars, literary critics, and political theorists such as Espen Aarseth, Northrop Frye, Frederic Jameson, and Roland Barthes I hope to demonstrate that the historical and social conditions that shape my perceptions and responses to DAO are an important and inseparable part of the experience of playing the game. Jameson (1981) calls this “dialectical analysis” or “historical reflexivity,” meaning “the study of an object...which also involves the study of the concepts and categories (themselves historical) that we necessarily bring to the object” (109).

Northrop Frye’s work on romance as a literary mode provides a useful starting point for identifying some of these concepts and categories, the most prominent of which is, for Jameson (1981), the binary opposition between good and evil, the angelic and the demonic—what he calls “the ideological core of the romance paradigm” (115-116). In the following chapters I will argue that this black and white approach to morality plays an important role in justifying the accumulation of wealth and power, as well as the

domination of the self over the Other, both of which are integral to the choices I have made in playing through DAO.

The first chapter of this thesis consists of a literature review covering quests in videogames, literature, and popular culture, as well as sections that deal with broader issues such as the tension between repeated structures and historical specificity. In chapter two I will outline the general characteristics of DAO as an object of research, its connection to the popular tabletop RPG *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D), and its importance in relation to other videogames. In the second chapter I will also include a short autobiography and examine in greater depth some of the challenges associated with analysing videogames through the subjective response of the player/researcher. Chapter three involves a discussion of side quests, as well as the game mechanics and systems that shape and support quests in DAO. This chapter investigates the link between the game's ludic structures, embedded neoliberal rationalities, and morality. The fourth chapter focuses on the main quests and the master quest. Some of the issues that will be discussed include the sequence of events in main quests, the role of the hero and its relation to racial representations and stereotypes, and the justification of violence and warfare in the context of the War on Terror. Chapter five will position DAO and fantasy role-playing games more generally within the widespread deployment of (neo)medievalism in contemporary popular culture, as outlined by scholars of popular medievalism and media studies. Chapter six will form my conclusion and suggestions for future research.

## Games Telling Stories

The tension between narratology, the study of narratives, and ludology, the study of games, is continually referenced within game studies and has had a significant impact on the early years of this rapidly expanding field. As Jan Simons (2007) points out, much of the contention has been based on a lack of clarification of key terms such as text, narrative, event, and game, as well as a tendency to apply definitions to all videogames (or even all games), rather than particular examples or genres. For my purposes, I will adopt Mieke Bal's (2009) definition of a text as "a finite, structured whole composed of signs" (5) with an identifiable beginning and end. While this definition would not apply to all videogames (the massively multiplayer online role-playing game *World of Warcraft* (WoW), for example, is in some respects a never-ending game), it does apply to *Dragon Age: Origins*. Also unlike some other videogames, DAO contains a story (or rather, several stories), which Bal (2009) defines as "a particular manifestation, inflection, and colouring of...a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors" (5). This definition is very similar to the definitions of narrative provided in other texts (Ip 2011; Prince 1987), and as such I will use the two terms interchangeably. For game studies scholar Jesper Juul (2002), stories and videogames come together most prominently in what he calls progression games:

In progression games, the player has to perform a predefined set of actions in order to complete the game. One feature of the progression game is that it yields strong control to the game designer: Since the designer controls the sequence of events, this is also where we find the games with cinematic or storytelling ambitions.

Gonzalo Frasca (2003), on the other hand, criticizes the tendency to treat “videogames as extensions of drama and narrative” (221). He suggests that while narrative media are representational, videogames are based on the semiotics of simulation—meaning the modelling of a system that maintains a subset of the properties and behaviours of the original system. These models can be manipulated and, most importantly, will respond to input according to a predetermined set of conditions. In *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* media scholar Alexander R. Galloway (2006) provides a general definition of a game as “an activity defined by rules in which players try to reach some sort of goal” (1). Because videogames involve actions—and in fact for Galloway, they *are* actions—they are capable of rendering “social realities into playable form” (17).

### **Videogame Genres**

A similar understanding of videogames underlies Thomas Apperley’s (2006) argument that “market-based categories of genre [i.e. role-playing games, strategy games, first-person shooters, etc.]...obscure the new medium’s crucial defining feature, by dividing them into categories (loosely) organized by their similarities to prior forms of mediation” (6). This primary feature, according to Apperley, is interactivity.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on the concept of *ergodicity*, a term coined by Aarseth to refer to the non-trivial effort required to play a game, Apperley notes that this and other notions of interactivity are often downplayed in favour of representation. In other words, the sounds, text, and images that make up the game’s fictional world often take precedence over the ways in which players interact with that world.

---

<sup>3</sup> I will return to interactivity and its relationship to identification in chapter two.

Dominic Arsenault (2009) suggests that it is not interactivity but gameplay that distinguishes videogames from other media and should be used as a basis for categorization. For Arsenault, “gameplay is partly functional and partly aesthetic,” denoting both a set of operations and a set of responses to those operations. In Arsenault’s formulation gameplay, and by extension videogame genre, is not just structural but phenomenological. As he states, “the genre of a game is tied not to an isolated, abstracted checklist of features, but to the phenomenological, pragmatic deployment of actions through the gameplay experience.” While for Arsenault genre as a concept will always remain intuitive and imprecise, denoting a range of possibilities rather than a single, unified form, genre can still communicate meaning through established conventions and expectations.

### **Quest Games**

While it may be important to classify DAO as a role-playing game in order to position it in relation to other games that are intended to produce or have produced similar sorts of experiences, DAO’s mechanics also suggest an alternative classification proposed by Espen Aarseth (2005): the quest game. In the article “From Hunt the Wumpus to EverQuest: Introduction to Quest Theory,” Aarseth defines a quest game as having “a concrete and attainable goal, which supersedes performance or the accumulation of points” (2). Essential to his theory of quests is the argument that while game engines can generate stories, stories do not produce games. Although quests may be story-like, they are not themselves stories, but rather *devices for controlling the player’s agenda*. According to Aarseth, “quests may be used to convey information that may pass as stories, but these ‘stories’ are not co-told by the players, only uncovered and observed



by them” (9). While he acknowledges that players can still subvert the system by exploiting programming bugs or other flaws, when it comes to stories, player participation is limited to discovering what is already there. While it is true that games such as DAO are designed for narrative customization rather than narrative co-creation, Aarseth’s argument downplays the importance of the process of selection—that is the process of choosing what story branches to follow, in what order, and for what reasons.

Having asserted that all quest games contain variations on the same “skeletal pattern,” Aarseth breaks down the generic category of quests into three basic types: place-oriented, time-oriented, and objective-oriented quests. These basic types can be combined and ordered in numerous ways, forming “the backbone of the gameplay” (4). A quest may require that the player: a) complete an objective such as retrieving an object, b) survive or perform an action within a limited time frame, c) move from point A to point B, or a combination of the three.

Although Aarseth distinguishes between quest types based on what is demanded of the player, game designer Jeff Howard notes that quests are more frequently separated into “side quests” and “main quests” (2008). While the first type are optional and are not required to finish the game, the main quests form the core of the game and are generally accompanied or explained by broader, more extended narratives. The freedom of the player to choose which quests to pursue and in what order varies depending both on the game and the type of quest, although side quests generally allow for greater flexibility. According to Howard, side quests “involve the player in perpetual activity, so that the game does not become a static, linear narrative. At the same time, the main quest keeps this action from becoming random and meaningless” (108). In *Dragon Age: Origins*,

these main quests are all directed at achieving a single objective: defeating the archdemon and ending the Blight.<sup>4</sup> When taken as a whole then, they constitute what I will call a master quest.

Game studies scholar Faltin Karlsen (2008) points out that, “within the field of computer game studies, quests have been the object of just a handful of analyses and theoretical exercises.” Of these, the vast majority have focused on massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) or multi-user domains (MUDs) (Rettberg 2008; Karlsen 2008; Tronstad 2003). Karlsen’s article, entitled “Quests in Context: A Comparative Analysis of Discworld and World of Warcraft,” investigates both the design of quests and their relation to contextual elements, including players, developers, and the overall game environment. Jill Walker Rettberg (2008) focuses specifically on the syntactical structure of quests in WoW, arguing that the game’s quests are largely characterized by the deferral of satisfaction and meaning, and by repetition. As she points out, however, WoW is structurally quite different from many single-player RPGs: “In World of Warcraft the player is not assigned a single, grand, overarching quest... Quests that announce an all-encompassing ultimate goal suit games with clearly defined ends, and World of Warcraft is designed to be endless” (170). In her structural analysis of the MUD *Tubmud*, Ragnhild Tronstad (2003) notes that MUDs are more akin to playgrounds or play environments than to games as such, suggesting once again that the open-ended and social aspects of MUDs and MMORPGs require different analytical frames from those that might be applied to single-player games.

---

<sup>4</sup> The Blight is a term used to describe the invasion of monsters called darkspawn, who are led by the archdemon.

Quests in single-player games have thus far remained largely unexamined. While Aarseth's theory of quests is a helpful starting point, I believe he is too quick to dismiss NPCs and descriptive passages as "narrative ornaments." Though he is attentive to the various types of quests and what they require of the player, he brushes over the ways in which those goals are communicated to the player, as well as questions of choice and motivation. I believe these questions should not be taken for granted, particularly given that different descriptions of quests suggest very different goals and motivations. While for Howard (2008) "quests are about action that is meaningful to a player on the level of ideas, personal ambitions, benefit to society, spiritual authenticity" (xiii), Susana Tosca (2003) takes the opposite stance, arguing that "quests in computer games are very often devoid of any search for meaning (take this letter to the merchant!), there is no meaning to be sought, nothing to be known, but something to be done" (sec. 3.1). Based on my own experiences, I believe DAO contains both types of action, shifting dynamically between routine operations and emotionally impactful performances.

### **A Question of Motivation: Goals and Rewards**

One of the more obvious motivations for acquiring and completing quests is the desire to obtain some form of reward (Howard 2008). This reward may be nothing more than the satisfaction of having achieved a particular goal. Many games, however, also reward the player with new items, narrative events, environments, points, abilities, and so on. Allison Gazzard (2011) notes that both spatial and narrative rewards extend gameplay by allowing players to access new areas and prolonging the "story-world of the game." Spatial rewards can be further divided into "exploration" and "environment" rewards, where the first type allows the players to unlock new paths or "routes between game

architecture” and the later places new obstacles along those paths, creating new challenges to be overcome.

Quests often combine both of these reward types, as well as narrative rewards, at times creating a continuous chain in which part of the reward for completing a quest is the acquisition of another quest. Gazzard (2011) states that the feedback loops created by such reward structures, “help show the player that they are on the ‘right-path’ in the game...[leading] to patterns of knowledge related to completing certain tasks.”

In order to follow this “right-path,” players must make a particular set of choices, many of which are encountered through dialogue. In “Computer Games Have Words, Too: Dialogue Conventions in Final Fantasy VII,” Greg Smith (2002) notes that, along with conveying information about past events, “the interchanges between characters in the game establish a network of motivations, and it is the player’s job to parse this information, to weigh the moral consequences of those motivations.” At times the moral implications of a decision may conflict with gameplay considerations, so that players are forced to choose between doing the “right” thing and receiving a reward that will help to advance their character or otherwise improve their ability to complete in-game tasks. As I will argue in chapter three, however, such choices are relatively few and far between in DAO. In many respects DAO caters to players such as myself, players that want to be both a moral and an entrepreneurial hero: someone who can amass vast amounts of virtual wealth, while also saving the day.

### **Quests in Popular Culture**

Although the structures mentioned above tend to function quite differently in videogames than they do in other contexts, Smith (2002) makes the point that “a young

medium does not solely create its own conventions; it inherits and borrows expressive forms from other media, transforming them along the way.” *Dragon Age: Origins* is part of a long lineage of media that evokes the Middle Ages and what David Marshall (2007) calls “their myriad incarnations” (2). While J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* series and the table-top role-playing game, *Dungeons & Dragons*, might immediately spring to mind, medievalists such as Marshall and Angela Jane Weisl (2003) argue that contemporary medievalism extends far beyond high fantasy genres, encompassing sports fans, heavy metal, science fiction, and horoscopes, to name but a few examples.

In his introduction to *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture*, Marshall (2007) explains that, “as a field of study, medievalism interrogates how different groups, individuals, or eras for various reasons, often distortedly, remember the Middle Ages” (2). While this “new” Middle Ages may not correspond with our historical knowledge of the period, it is worth studying in its own right, in part simply because it provides pleasure.

A more recent essay by Amy Kaufman (Fugelso 2010) suggests that the term neomedievalism might be better suited to describing a “fantasy of medievalisms” that denies history yet longs for return. For Kaufman, neomedievalism encapsulates a sort of contradiction in which “a desire for history [exists] alongside the uncomfortable suspicion that there is no such thing. Neomedievalism consumes the Middle Ages in fragmented, repetitive tropes as a way of ensuring against loss” (3). By dragging the past into the present, or in some cases, the future, neomedievalism projects a vision of the Middle Ages as cyclical, presenting “an ahistorical historical state to which it is possible to return” (6). However, Kaufman also points out that beneath its “scattered and inclusive

surface” (8) is a tendency towards homogenization and the erasure of differences that ignores, demonizes, or assimilates the “other,” producing “essentialized incarnations of the Western imagination” (8). In other words, while neomedievalism appears to represent an intermingling of Western and non-Western cultures across a range of historical periods, the “other” is often represented only through essentialized tropes and symbols (such as the katana in the digital RPG *Baldur’s Gate*). These tokens of exotic otherness are abstracted from the societies that produced them, and transplanted into a Western vision of the medieval.

Kaufman’s attention to the ideological implications of neomedievalism is echoed in Angela Weisl’s (2003) description of the medieval romance, which, through constant retelling and reformulation, has not only survived but also flourished, becoming one of the most pervasive models borrowed from the Middle Ages. According to Weisl, the medieval romance has little to do with what we commonly think of as romance novels. Though often involving love in some form, love is not the primary focus.<sup>5</sup> Instead medieval romances are characterized more by “the movement through space and time” (147), fearless heroes, and most importantly, adventure involving “fanciful depiction[s] of the miracles and dangers awaiting those whom their destiny takes beyond the confines of the familiar world into distant and unexplored regions” (Auerbach qtd. in Weisl 147). While the word “fanciful” may seem to trivialize the genre, Weisl notes that many medieval romances also “display a concern with maintaining hierarchy and status” (149)

---

<sup>5</sup> The same might be said for *Dragon Age*, which allows the player’s character to engage in romantic relationships with his or her companions (i.e. non-player characters that accompany the player’s character and can be controlled by the player in combat) through extended dialogues. While this option may have an impact on narrative events, it is not required in order to finish the game.

through “the affirmation of traditional, conservative values” (27)—a concern that she believes is often replicated in their modern-day counterparts.

Although my project is largely limited to a single videogame, and thus cannot respond directly to questions about the broader social significance of fantasy role-playing games, the writings of Weisl and others suggest that *Dragon Age: Origins* has emerged within a set of cultural, social, and historical conditions that foster an interest in and desire for themes and settings inspired by the Middle Ages. As Eddo Stern (2002) has noted, however, fantasy RPGs seem to maintain a “double fantasy,” presenting the player with “a pre-industrial world using the most advanced post-industrial tools” (262). While Stern’s analysis focuses on MMORPGs, many of the computer artefacts that he claims help to “assimilate unwanted technological residues into the narrative diegesis” (263), as well as those which appear to clash with or dispel the “magi-medieval mise-en-scene” (263), are also present in single-player games. On the one hand, these unexpected and perhaps undesirable technological “disturbances”—which range from unconvincing non-player characters (NPCs) to loading screens—raise questions about the plausibility of digitally mediated medieval fantasies. On the other hand, Stern notes the importance of metaphor in bridging the gap between the technological materiality of a videogame, and the romantic scenarios it supposedly conveys.

### **Quests in Literature**

Northrop Frye’s book *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* is considered to be one of the most thorough examinations of romance as a broadly conceived literary genre, or mode (Jameson 1981). In the third essay, “Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths,” Frye (2007) outlines three organizations of myths and archetypal symbols, which he traces

back through the history of Western literature. The first is undisplaced myth, which usually features gods or demons inhabiting two opposing worlds, the one desirable and the other undesirable. He calls these two worlds the apocalyptic and the demonic, and adds that they are often aligned with the heavens and hells of contemporary religions. The second organization is the romantic tendency to allude to implicit mythical patterns within a world that is more closely affiliated with human experience. The third is “realism,” which throws the emphasis on representation and content, as opposed to the “shape of the story” (129). Connected to these structures are four interrelated mythoi, or generic plots. Many of the narrative structures and imagery identified by Frye as belonging to the mythos of summer, or romance, are apparent in *Dragon Age: Origins*. However there are also important differences, not only in the way in which these structures and images are organized and presented, but also in how I, as the player, attribute meaning to them. Frye’s work is thus useful both as a foundation on which to build new categories and models, as well as a point of comparison.

According to Frye (2007), “the perennially childlike quality of romance is marked by its extraordinarily persistent nostalgia, its search for some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space” (173). This search is perhaps most clearly represented in the archetype of the quest, which is essential to Frye’s formulation of romance in Western literature:

The complete form of the romance is...the successful quest...[which] has three main stages: the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero. (174)



Each of these stages is evident in *Dragon Age*, though they do not necessarily align neatly with individual quests as they are organized within the game. A total of 12 main quests, each one designated by a title indicating the focal point of the quest, seem to form the preliminary “minor adventures,” with the thirteenth quest leading to the final battle and the exaltation of the hero.

While archetypal criticism as a whole has been problematized by more recent postmodern theories, Darrell Dobson (2005) argues that the focus on recurrent imagery and themes does not necessarily eliminate the distinction between specific texts, as some critics have argued. Rather, interest is found, for the archetypal critic, in emphasizing the differential relationships *between* one manifestation of an archetype and another. For Dobson, reconciling Frye with his critics is a matter of balancing the emphasis on similarities with an equal emphasis on differences and particularities, which he does by way of Jungian archetypal theory. As Dobson puts it, “If Frye had Jung’s ability and desire to explain how it is that mythology has elements that transcend ideology and at the same time acknowledge that all manifestations of mythology are ideologically situated, he might have been more successful with his postmodern critics” (8).

### **Interpretation in Context**

Marshall (2007) observes that the “growth of medievalism coincided with the emergence of a school of historical thought that positions history as a constructed interplay of past events and ideologically motivated interpretation” (3). This notion that “histories conceal the past with present concerns” (3) forms the basis for my critical evaluation of *Dragon Age: Origins*. As such, I am more concerned with how the past is

rendered and received in the present, than I am with the historical periods being referenced or the accuracy or “authenticity” of the references.

Interpretations of history, much like interpretations of gameplay, depend a great deal on who is playing the game, when, and in what context. While I will attempt to make some observations about “the player’s” relationship to quests in *Dragon Age*, I must also account for the fact that my experiences of play are filtered through a particular set of assumptions and predilections. How I experience the game is not necessarily how others will experience the game, although there are likely to be some similarities and points of intersection, as well as differences. Gameplay is extremely variable, however this variability is not unlimited, as the game itself is bounded and restricted in numerous ways, not least by its own rules of play. Sara Mosberg Iversen (2009) notes that, while there are many ways of defining a game,

one of the recurrent characteristics shared by most...definitions is the centrality of rules. Games are seen as defined, regulated and governed by rules. These rules...specify illegal actions, game mechanisms and explicit or implicit goals that should be reached while playing. Computer games, moreover, in so far as they simulate space, time and movement even have rules that specify all environmental features, such as how objects react to manipulation and move in the simulated “space” (29).

Although Iversen supports Andreas Greggerson’s distinction between “simulation laws” and “game rules,” the two sometimes appear to work in tandem. In *Dragon Age: Origins*, the player’s character will frequently encounter “invisible walls” that define the limits of

the virtual space, essentially creating a sort of simplified maze that leads the player, through a process of elimination, to the object of the quest.

Although several aspects of the game<sup>6</sup> imply or even require a certain degree of freedom and agency on the part of the player, the stated, designed objective of the game remains essentially fixed, encouraging the player to take on the role of the hero, and at the same time defining that very role. According to Frye (2007):

If superior in *degree* to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of *romance*, whose actions are marvellous but who is himself identified as a human being. The hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him (31).

Frye's description is interesting in that it ostensibly describes the romantic hero, yet focuses attention on the world surrounding him, suggesting that in order to know the (male) hero we must first comprehend the world he operates in. As he states later:

The mode of romance presents an idealized world: in romance heroes are brave, heroines beautiful, villains villainous, and the frustrations, ambiguities and embarrassments of ordinary life are made little of (141).

Based on this statement, I would argue that the "idealized" world of romance, as well as the role of the hero, only acquires meaning in relation to an individual's historically and socially situated understanding of "ordinary life." For example, if I spend several hours every day commuting through the city, and am regularly frustrated by the challenge of

---

<sup>6</sup> These aspects include moral dilemmas, manipulation of the player character, and the re-ordering of quests, all of which will be discussed in the next chapter.

navigating around motorized vehicles, I may view a world in which horses and cobblestone replace cars and pavement as a welcome relief from the mechanical speed, the noise, and the smell of my daily commute. And yet it is also conceivable that if lived in a town in which horses and cobblestone were the norm, I might experience relief or pleasure in relation to something else entirely, having already incorporated smelly horses and uneven cobblestone into my experience of the everyday. How I imagine horses and cobblestone in the first case, and how I feel about them as a result, will be very different from how I respond to them under different social, historical, and material conditions.

According to Jameson (1981), Frye treats romance as a “wish-fulfilment or Utopian fantasy” (110) that envisions a transfiguration of everyday life. In Jameson’s words, “romance...does not involve the substitution of some more ideal realm for ordinary reality...but rather a process of *transforming* ordinary reality” (110). It is important, however, to avoid following Frye’s tendency to treat utopian visions in ahistorical terms. Shaobo Xie (1996) argues that Frye sees history in purely negative terms, and rather than acknowledging “history as a dialectic of the utopian and the demonic, or of alienation and reunification...he separates culture from history and history from culture, allowing the whole cultural history of material complexity to slip into a metaphysical romance of desire for freedom” (122).

Jameson, however, “sees culture as utopian and ideological all at once” (Xie 1996, 124). In *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, he suggests that the production of cultural forms is not simply invested with ideology—it is “an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal ‘solutions’ to unresolvable social contradictions” (Jameson 1981, 79). Jameson’s

argument applies both to the texts that are being analysed as “culture,” and to the writings of the theoreticians and critics who analyse them. As Althusser (1969) puts it in *For Marx*, “Only an ideological world outlook could have imagined societies without ideology and accepted the utopian idea of a world in which ideology (not just one of its historical forms) would disappear without trace” (232).

In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Chela Sandoval (2000) argues that, “Barthes wants his readers to recognize that ideology is a *pattern*: indeed, it is a structured pattern of meaning, of feeling, of consciousness itself” (90). According to Barthes, it is through the workings of ideology that the link between a Signifier and Signified comes to be apprehended as “natural,” transforming a Sign into a naturalized form emptied of meaning that can then be used as evidence to ground a new, imposed concept or meaning. Ideology is thus a second-order semiological system operating on and appropriating first-order Sign systems. When successful, ideological signification produces a “patterned motion of consciousness” (Sandoval 2000, 95) that is both sensuous and satisfying, and it is only by recognizing and analyzing these moments of pleasure that we can, in Sandoval’s words, “understand this socially and culturally produced consciousness, this consciousness-in-ideology” (95).

In the fifth chapter of her book Sandoval describes seven figures or poses that, according to Barthes, constitute a “rhetoric of supremacy.” As she puts it, “each pose for consciousness calls up possibilities and prohibitions for thought and behavior that typify the ‘good citizen-subject,’ one who is capable of functioning well under the imperatives of nationalist state formation” (117). One of these seven poses is “the privation of history” which provides happiness and luxury at the price of ignorance and passivity.

Sandoval draws on Barthes example of a tour book that depicts third world countries through photos of “exotic ‘primitives’” engaged in daily activities. As Sandoval puts it, “In these photos, the intricate and profound differences (in both historical trajectories and present conditions) of the peoples depicted dissolve under their primary appearance as festive objects for Western consumption as entertainment” (119). This domesticated vision of the other also serves to “tame” the imagination of the colonizer, providing a “tantalizing” taste of difference, but always introducing it in small and manageable amounts. Like exotic fruit laid out for our consumption in a grocery store aisle, we are free to enjoy the beauty of these unfamiliar objects without having to wonder where they come from. According to Sandoval it is these everyday encounters, these pleasurable moments of consumption, that animate “the great ideological perversions,” inviting “citizen-subjects to faultlessly consume ideology, and to guilelessly reproduce ‘depoliticized’ and supremacist forms of speech, consciousness, morality, values, law, family life, and personal relations” (119). By paying attention to the link between social realities and their transformation into objects of consumption and entertainment, Barthes’ methodology opens up to scrutiny the pleasure I associate with various attributes of the quest, including progression, accumulation, combat, and “saving the innocent.”

In Michael Holquist’s (1990) study “Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World,” the author states that:

The ‘text itself’ is never...itself: it is always a composite of what the author produced at one given time and in one given place, and the meanings that accrue to the formal features of that text in its later appropriations (121).

Such formal features may come to serve very different functions in different social contexts. At the level of genre, however, “relatively transhistorical figures are possible, enabling a pattern against which perception of any particular text at any particular time allows us to see it as distinct” (Holquist 1990, 145). Within the genre of romance, Frye (2007) argues that the archetype of the quest is one such pattern that helps us to distinguish romance from other genres. In each instance of interpretation, however, that same pattern can come to mean very different things.

Jameson (1981) suggests that Frye’s work is semantic and focussed on “discovering the meaning of the generic mechanism or process” (107-108), an approach which seems to rely on the assumption that there is only one inherent meaning waiting to be “discovered.” Simply replacing meaning with meanings however, risks falling into relativism and a model of reception that characterizes interpretation as entirely free and unconstrained. One way to avoid this dilemma is to pay close attention to the specific ways in which subjects are constituted in and through a text—what for Althusser (1970) represents the primary function of ideology. It is in the moments where an individual is hailed as a subject, and acts in relation to her assigned social position, that we can more clearly see the relationship between subjective experience and social and discursive structures.

Highlighting and problematizing this relationship is, according to Teresa de Lauretis, one of the key points in contemporary feminist theory. In *Technologies of Gender* de Lauretis (1987) argues that the “fundamental feminist notion that the personal is political” eliminates the possibility of maintaining “two spheres of social reality: the

private, domestic sphere of the family, sexuality, and affectivity, and the public sphere of work and productivity” (8).

This statement has at least three important implications for this thesis. One, it suggests that emotional or affective responses to a text have political, as well as personal relevance. Two, it implies that as a female, mixed-race, middle-class player, I am positioned within a particular set of social relations that affect and are affected by the ways I am hailed as a subject and player, which in turn affects the actions I take within a game and my overall experience. As de Lauretis (1987) puts it, “The personal is political because the political becomes personal by way of its subjective effects through the subject’s experience” (152). These subjective effects are related both to the formal structures of the text, which determine what I can and cannot do within the game and shape the representations available for identification, as well as the social and historical conditions of production, play, and interpretation. While previous work on quests in videogames have focussed largely on their structural properties, the subject of my analysis here is the relation between these properties and the broader sociocultural context—a relation which I believe emerges through the subjective experiences and actions of an actual (as opposed to a theoretical) player. While all media can produce a range of subjective effects, in DAO these effects are conditioned to a great extent by the choices I make as a player, as well as the very awareness of the possibility of choice, which impacts the affective power of my actions and their results.

Last but not least, de Lauretis’s statement suggests that the theoretical basis on which I am conducting my analysis needs to be re-examined in terms of how it addresses (or does not address) gender and other “axes of difference.” This issue will be dealt with



in the next chapter in relation to theoretical conceptions of players and videogames, and the often unspoken assumptions surrounding these key concepts.

## CHAPTER 2: ANALYZING DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

### Introduction

According to BioWare co-founder Greg Zeschuk, the developers of *Dragon Age: Origins* envisioned the game's world as being somewhere between "the high fantasy of Tolkien [and] the low-fantasy of George R.R. Martin's works that are brutal and gritty" (Takahashi 2009). Games journalist Dean Takahashi asserts that, "BioWare's pattern is to create a universe first and then build a game around that fiction." If the game is successful, then the company produces more products based in the same universe. This certainly seems to be the case for the Dragon Age universe, which, as of early 2012, has provided the basis for two videogames (DAO and *Dragon Age II*), an expansion pack (*Dragon Age: Origins - Awakening*) and multiple DLCs (downloadable game content), as well as novels, comic books, a tabletop role-playing game, a Facebook game, and a web series. Both DAO and its sequel are available on a number of platforms, including personal computers, the Xbox 360, and the PlayStation 3. While Dragon Age is in many ways a multimedia phenomenon, in order to limit the scope of the thesis my research is based largely on the Macintosh version of the game, and does not incorporate any of the downloadable content or player-produced mods.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> A toolset available for the PC version of DAO allows players to create their own content for the game (EA International 2012). Creating new content, or mods, using toolsets is one of many practices generally referred to as "modding," a term derived from the verb modify. For more on modding see Laukkanen 2005.

DAO begins with a character creation stage in which players customize the appearance of their characters and select their sex,<sup>8</sup> race,<sup>9</sup> and class. In DAO, these selections determine that character's "origin story."



Figure 1. Selecting an origin story during the character creation phase

There are six origin stories in total, each of which is set in a separate location within the fictional kingdom of Ferelden on the continent of Thedas. After completing a series of minor adventures, the PC is recruited by a man named Duncan, and becomes a Grey Warden. As "one of the last of a legendary order of guardians" (EA International 2009), the Warden is tasked with uniting the kingdom of Ferelden against a horde of evil monsters known as the darkspawn. These mindless, "soulless" creatures are led by an

---

<sup>8</sup> Though players must choose either a male or female character, their choice for the most part has no effect on the origin story. The sole exception to my knowledge is the "City Elf Origin," in which the character is always betrothed to an elf of the opposite sex. In other words, the character is either a female bride marrying a male groom, or vice versa.

<sup>9</sup> There are three playable races in DAO: elves, dwarves, and humans.

intelligent archdemon, which must be destroyed in order to end the invasion of the darkspawn, which is known as the Blight,<sup>10</sup> and complete the game.

DAO is composed of multiple, interrelated systems governing combat, dialogue, items, quests, character statistics, and environmental elements, among other things. Many of the more prominent or visible elements in the game are organized hierarchically. For example, character statistics are relatively low at the beginning, and gradually increase as players accumulate experience points and level up by defeating enemies and completing quests. Items are also associated with numerical statistics that increase as the player progresses, while certain environmental elements such as traps require higher skill levels in order to disarm or unlock them.

This leveling pattern, which is prevalent among digital RPGs, is often associated in online gaming literature with the widespread success of the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) (Jones 2012; McNeilly 2008). While I do not wish to reproduce a teleological account of the “evolution” of RPGs, I will nevertheless provide a brief introduction to D&D and the D&D-based *Baldur’s Gate* series of computer role-playing games, which was also developed by BioWare, in order to highlight some of the underlying mechanics and structures, many of which reappear in one form or another in DAO. In this section I will also discuss the importance of BioWare and its impact on the development of RPGs and the game industry as a whole.

---

<sup>10</sup> A Blight occurs once every few hundred years when the darkspawn discover and corrupt an “old god,” transforming it into an archdemon. The archdemon then leads the darkspawn from their underground lairs to the surface, where they taint the land and destroy everything in their path.

As Tychsen et al. (2007) point out, RPGs “have proven an extremely portable concept, and the games are situated across various cultural and format-related boundaries...from the physically embodied live action and tabletop formats to the various digital, mobile and even enhanced and augmented reality formats” (49). Although I will not be able to cover all of these different formats, this chapter will hopefully help to introduce some of the basic terminology and motifs that are generally considered to be specific to RPGs, despite the lack of specificity surrounding the term itself.

As I noted in the previous chapter, videogames present their own unique challenges and opportunities for analysis. Before beginning an in-depth discussion of DAO, a number of ambiguous terms, such as gameplay, interactivity, experience, and identification need to be clarified (or in some cases, complicated) in relation to the game. Defining and unpacking these terms will also be useful in revealing my own preconceptions about what games are and how they are played. The final sections of the chapter describe more about who I am, and how I have played DAO as both a researcher and player.

### **“Spiritual Predecessors”: BioWare and Baldur’s Gate**

BioWare considers DAO to be the “spiritual successor” of their *Baldur’s Gate* series of videogames (Blevins 2004), which is based on the Forgotten Realms campaign setting for D&D.<sup>11</sup> Also referred to as a dice-based or pen and paper RPG, D&D is played in a physical space, often over the course of several sessions. During D&D

---

<sup>11</sup> Gary Gygax and Donald Kaye co-founded Tactical Studies Rules and published the first D&D game in 1974. According to Gygax, his interest in pulp fantasy novels and the medieval period prompted him to create new rules and settings for miniature wargames (strategy games using military tactics and small figurines), which he then adapted to individual characters and published under the title *Dungeons & Dragons*.

campaigns, players take on a fantasy persona and embark on adventures within a fictional world. For each of these personas, or player characters (PCs), the player chooses a class, race, sex, and moral alignment, which determine their abilities and guide their behaviour in the game. Sourcebooks, such as *DM's Sourcebook of the Realms* published in 1987, provide information on fantasy races and character classes, as well as settings that can be used to create campaigns, including sections on history, geography, weaponry, magic and monsters. Games are overseen by a Dungeon Master (DM), who controls all non-player characters (NPCs)<sup>12</sup>, acts as referee, orchestrates encounters with hostile enemies, and generates plots and scripts (Williams et al. 2006). The majority of the game consists of a series of encounters, which players respond to by choosing and executing plausible actions. Dice introduce an element of chance, and the numbers that are rolled are used to determine whether an action chosen by a player has failed or succeeded. Provided a player's character survives the encounter, that character may gain experience points, find new items that can be added to the party's inventory, discover important information, or level up, thus acquiring new abilities and powers.

Many of the conventions established by D&D have carried over to other games, including licensed D&D products such as *Baldur's Gate*. This 1998 computer role-playing game uses an adapted, automated version of the dice notation system from Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (AD&D)<sup>13</sup> to determine the outcome of certain actions,

---

<sup>12</sup> As may be evident by now, acronyms are ubiquitous in discussions of videogames and role-playing games. For a list of common terms and acronyms please refer to the glossary.

<sup>13</sup> In 1977 the game was split into two versions. The less rule-intensive version retained the original name, while the more rule-intensive version became known as *Advanced*

including stealing, attacking, and defending. As with D&D, players begin the game by selecting a class, race, sex, and moral alignment<sup>14</sup> for their character, which affect the PC's abilities but do not have any immediate impact on the game's fiction. The player interacts with the game world by clicking on objects and icons, or by hitting shortcut keys. Throughout the game, past and concurrent events are related to the player through dialogue, journal entries, notes, books, and cut-scenes. The origins of the PC are initially shrouded in mystery, and the main storyline follows a theme of exploration and self-discovery as the PC unearths a conspiracy and learns the truth about her remarkable heritage. Completing quests, defeating monsters and hostile NPCs, exploring new areas, recruiting party members, and collecting increasingly powerful items all lend themselves to a sense of progression, which is fulfilled at the end of the game when the PC defeats a powerful evil character named Sarevok.

*Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* (BioWare 2000) picks up where the first game left off, pitting the PC against a new nemesis by the name of Jon Irenicus. Several characters from the first game reappear, and may rejoin the PC as members of her party. Party members frequently interact with one another, and are programmed to engage in dialogue with the PC or other friendly NPCs at particular points in the game. Overall the game's mechanics do not differ significantly from *Baldur's Gate*, and like its predecessor, the game can be played in real-time or paused at will.

---

*Dungeons and Dragons* (AD&D). Multiple editions of D&D and AD&D rules have since been released.

<sup>14</sup> See Christopher Warnes, 2005 for a critical discussion of race and moral alignment in *Baldur's Gate I* and *II* and their relation to medieval romance and fantasy novels

*Baldur's Gate I and II* are often praised both for their innovative mechanics and their compelling narratives (Gamasutra Staff 2009). *Baldur's Gate* set the standard for many of the D&D-based videogames that followed, and the critical and commercial success of the series helped to establish BioWare, which was founded in 1995, as one of the leading developers in the RPG genre (Kaiser 2012; Welsh 2008; Whitehead 2007). In the promotional material and interviews that emerged prior to the release of DAO, BioWare frequently leverages its reputation for creating well-crafted and engaging storylines (Birnbaum 2008; Peckham 2009). In a 2008 interview, Dan Tudge, the executive producer for the game, suggests that stories are one of the primary features of DAO:

We wanted to take the best elements from classic fantasy RPGs but make a dark heroic fantasy RPG that delivered a gripping story, exciting combat, and emotionally compelling moments...*Baldur's Gate* was based on a very deep and engaging story with fascinating characters, so fans can expect to be thrilled by a bigger and better adventure in *Dragon Age: Origins*. (Birnbaum 2008, 1)

For Mike Laidlaw, the lead designer of DAO, crafting these sorts of stories requires a certain degree of linearity. In an interview with Matt Peckham (2009), he states that, “linearity to me is an important tool for storytelling. It's the only way to maintain a narrative drive, to give your character a goal, to give your character a *raison d'être*.”

BioWare is also well known for its strong focus on moral decision-making, a feature that has become a major selling point for many of its more recent games. In another interview on DAO, Laidlaw describes the game as “aggressively grey” (Sterling 2009), promising to provide players with choices in which there is no clear right or



wrong. On the whole, the combined emphasis on storytelling and moral decision-making appears to have worked relatively well for BioWare. Not only does it help to distinguish the company from other developers, it has also spawned a number of immensely popular games, including the science-fiction themed *Mass Effect* series, and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*.

Dr. Ray Muzyka and Dr. Greg Zeschuk, the co-founders of BioWare, have been credited for “creating some of the most engrossing RPG titles of the last two decades,” (GamesIndustry 2012a) including a number of “genre-defining” (GamesIndustry 2012b) games. This does not mean, however, that all RPGs follow the BioWare model. For example BioWare’s relatively linear, narrative-heavy games stand in sharp contrast to the “open world” RPGs developed by one of its leading competitors, Bethesda. While the team behind DAO may be “story-driven” (Peckham 2009), Bethesda is best known for creating games such as *Fallout: New Vegas* and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, which allow players a much higher degree of freedom in terms of where they go, what they do, what quests they complete, and when. One of the downsides to creating a wide-open environment, however, is that individual characters and storylines tend not to be as highly developed. Because the developers cannot be certain what content players will encounter or when, investing a significant amount of time in any one particular quest (as BioWare did with DAO’s main quests) becomes a much more risky proposition. It also becomes more difficult to string together a series of quests into a coherent narrative arc, as players are generally free to take up and abandon quests at will.

While DAO may not be representative of all Western RPGs, given BioWare's illustrious history, its large and dedicated fanbase, the critical and economic success of

DAO, and the company's influence on the game development industry as a whole, it seems fair to say that it represents a significant and evolving trend. Certainly the BioWare games that I have played have had an enormous impact on my own understanding of the RPG genre, shaping my expectations and beliefs about what exactly constitutes a “typical” RPG experience.

## **Gameplay**

Often games and game genres are distinguished from one another based on something called gameplay. In the glossary of *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*, Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. (2008) define gameplay as an “ambiguous term for the total effect of all active game-elements” (251). Used in a holistic sense, gameplay is often connected to game dynamics and the “feel” of a game, which the authors claim arises from the interplay between the game’s rules and its geography. While game geography accounts for the affordances and limitations presented by the illusory space of a videogame, Graeme Kirkpatrick (2011) also argues for the importance of temporality and rhythm in gameplay. For Kirkpatrick, gameplay involves the movement of the hands over the controller, shifting patterns of activity, and corresponding feelings of excitement, tension, and relaxation. These elements have an important impact on how players experience a game’s geography, and vice versa.

There are significant temporal differences, for example, between real-time gameplay and turn-based gameplay. While real-time play depends on the ability to move one’s hands quickly and precisely in order to respond to events as they occur, turn-based play grants players an unlimited amount of time to assess their options and make selections. DAO, like *Baldur’s Gate*, accommodates both styles of play, allowing players

to switch between the two depending on preference and levels of expertise. If a combat situation becomes too hectic, players can pause the game during a fight in order to survey the scene and issue orders to their party members, or they can set the game to pause automatically between turns. Making tactical decisions about when and how to respond, however, can be challenging even without a time limit. This is particularly true in high-level combat, when players can have up to four characters to control and position, each with around 10 or 15 different abilities to choose from, and a multitude of items that can be consumed, thrown, or otherwise activated during battle. While the artificial intelligence is capable of directing all but one character, the more difficult the battle, the more likely it is that the player will have to intervene and choose actions on an individual basis if they want to win the fight. Importantly players are rarely given a choice as to whether or not to fight, but are instead called upon to make decisions about *how* they will fight, from what position, and with what abilities.

Although these encounters constitute much of the gameplay in DAO, some of the player's time is also dedicated to reading, watching, and hearing about various inter-related events that are or have been taking place in a fictional land called Thedas. While these moments may help the player to construct a coherent model of that fictional world, this world, as Kirkpatrick (2011) has noted, seems to flick in and out of existence during play. While on the one hand I am drawn into what appears to be a three-dimensional space by sensations of movement, perspective, solid objects, and talking bodies, that illusion is constantly disrupted and dissembled by the very artefacts that make it up. Even routine activities, such as the combat scenarios mentioned above, involve rapid shifts in

concentration between events that exist within, and those that exist outside the diegesis<sup>15</sup> or “story-world” of the game. While I am rarely consciously aware of the position of my fingers on the keyboard and mouse, in battle the HUD (head-up display) often becomes the focus of my attention as I carefully monitor the health bars, ability icons, and other elements that make up the visual overlay.



Figure 2. The HUD (head-up display) during combat

These elements supposedly correspond to the health, powers, and movements of my fictional character and her companions; yet the way this information is presented is not and perhaps cannot be accounted for by the fiction of the game.

While this may produce a logical contradiction (the HUD contradicts or dispels

---

<sup>15</sup> I am using the term here in the sense of a time-space continuum or created “world.” While outside the diegesis of DAO I may be clicking a mouse, inside the diegesis I am cutting a monster to pieces with my sword. These two events may be experienced simultaneously, however upon reflection, I am able to distinguish between the two.

the illusion that the player is looking onto a coherent fictional world), it is not necessarily experienced as such. Instead I have tended to view the HUD as a dynamic frame that is responsive to and articulated with other parts of the fictional world, and it is only when one or more of those parts ceases to function or becomes overly limiting that I find myself distracted to the point that I lose the sense of “being there” in the space of the game, a sensation which Gordon Calleja (2007) refers to as “incorporation”. For example, graphical glitches, computer error messages, and some designed features such as invisible walls and repetitive dialogue can be particularly jarring, serving as constant reminders that the game world is still tied to screens, buttons, speakers, and computer chips. While some of these limitations might become pleasurable (glitches are often funny), they are generally not conducive to producing a sense of incorporation.

### **A Series of Somewhat Interesting Choices**

Technological limitations such as those listed above exist alongside, and in some cases determine, fictional limitations. Controllable characters, which include the PC and the companions, are only capable of performing certain actions when under the control of the player, and this restricts what these characters can and cannot do during gameplay. Many of these actions are initiated by clicking on images with the mouse cursor. Basic actions can be combined to form meaningful patterns of activity, including fighting, exploring, and conversing. Of these activities, fighting is perhaps the most prominent, and certainly the most complex in terms of the number of available actions characters can perform in any given moment. As such, the vast majority of the quests in the game require the Warden and her companions to fight and kill NPCs, an issue I will return to in the following chapters.

Travel and dialogue also feature prominently in quests. Travel can involve warping from one area to another by clicking on a location marker on the map, or moving through a three-dimensional environment by directing the Warden and her companions using the mouse or arrow keys.



Figure 3. Location markers on the map of Ferelden

Clicking on or approaching the NPCs that populate these environments may or may not initiate a dialogue sequence. These sequences are organized according to a branching structure, meaning that the player is presented with a list of sentences and must select one for the Warden to “say,”<sup>16</sup> which produces a pre-scripted response, which leads to another list of sentences, and so on.

---

<sup>16</sup> These sentences are never spoken out loud, however the characters respond as if the Warden has just finished speaking.

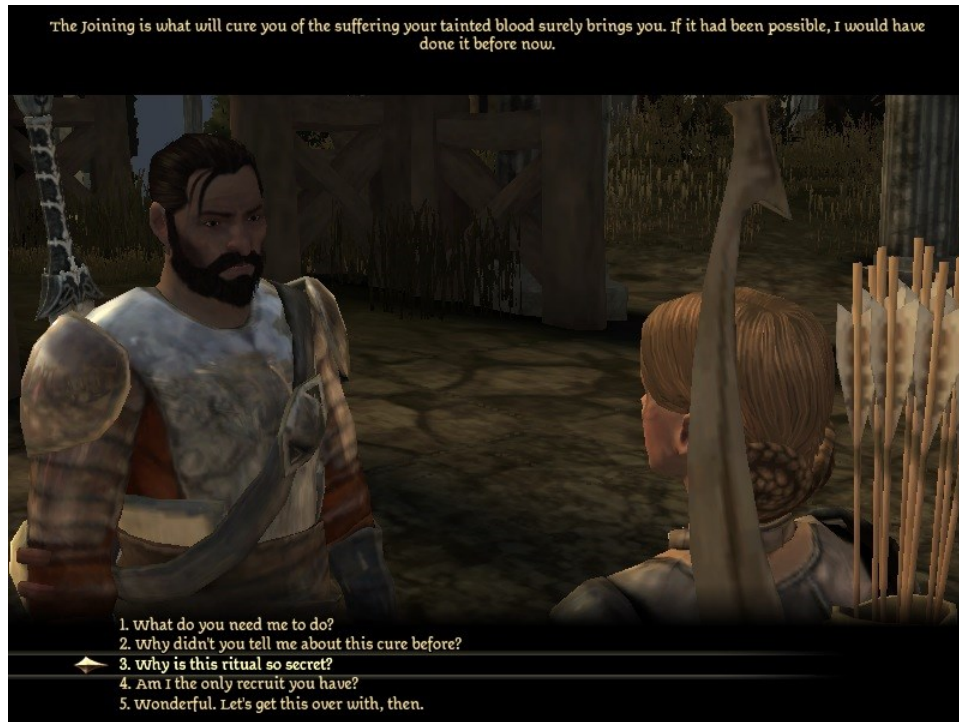


Figure 4. Dialogue sequence

This system is constrained, among other things, by the amount of labour the developers are able and willing to invest in creating individual responses, a limitation that also impacts on the scope of the game's virtual environments. In DAO both outdoor and indoor environments are bounded by invisible walls, which strictly delimit the space available for exploration. When the Warden or a party member strikes one of these walls, he or she appears to be running, but cannot move forward beyond the barrier. Interactions with objects are also limited to examining, speaking, unlocking, disarming, or looting. Other actions cannot be performed unless there is a quest that requires these actions, in which case a cut-scene is initiated.

Cut-scenes are also referred to as in-game movies or cinematics. In DAO they play an important role in advancing the plot, introducing or developing characters, and portraying actions or events that would be impossible to perform during regular

gameplay. During a cut-scene, players are unable to influence the events that take place, though they can choose to skip the cinematic if they prefer. The response of a character in a dialogue sequence is always depicted through cut-scenes, as are many of the actions that prompt or resolve a quest.

Quests are acquired throughout the game and recorded in the Warden's "journal" under individual titles. Quests both describe and delimit the Warden's goals and the steps she must take to achieve them.



Figure 5. The Warden's Journal

While some quests can be completed in one of several ways, and not all of them need to be pursued in order to progress, they nevertheless serve to define the "possibility space" of the game. This does not mean that players cannot imagine that the Warden is doing other things for other reasons, or devise their own goals, however their chances of experiencing new events or encounters in the game will be severely reduced unless they



continue along the paths dictated by the available quests. Thus while the Warden may come across many indications of political, economic, and social inequality, including racial tensions, strict social castes, slavery and human trafficking, poverty-driven crime cartels, and the domination of a religious institution known as the Chantry, the Warden is, for the most part, unable to pursue any initiative that is not somehow connected to a quest. Though BioWare is clearly attempting to integrate contemporary concerns into a pseudo-medieval fantasy world, these issues are ultimately marginalized or brushed aside in favour of the “epic” struggle of good versus evil.

The organization of individual quests is directly connected to the branching pattern of the dialogue sequences. In order to accept, reject, or in some cases complete a quest, players must select the appropriate response while in dialogue with a character. Many of these decisions lead to a new branch in the tree, furthering the plot and opening up new opportunities, while closing off others. At key points in the game, multiple branches are aggressively merged, meaning that all players will experience the same or similar events regardless of the choices they’ve made. The Battle of Ostagar, for example, cannot be avoided unless players decide to stop playing the game. The same is true of the Landsmeet and the final encounter with the archdemon, although the outcomes differ depending on whom players choose to sacrifice and whom they save.

Although defeating the archdemon and reaching the end of the game may be seen as equivalent to winning DAO, completion can mean very different things to different players. Completing all of the side quests, maximizing statistics, exploring every area on the map, gathering extravagant amounts of gold, finding rare items, acquiring achievements, and collecting codex entries are all additional, quantifiable goals that may

be incorporated into the word “completion.” Some of these goals are also tracked by the game and listed under the heading “Heroic Accomplishments.” Having played the game through once as an elven mage, I began my second play-through with the intention of completing every side quest available. I also attempted to maximize the approval ratings of my companions. Although I did not succeed in either of these ventures, my (or rather the Warden’s) conversations with her companions proved to be one of the most rewarding parts of the game from my perspective.

Companions are game characters who accompany the player’s character as members of a party. There are nine potential companions in the game—including the Dog—each with different backgrounds and abilities. Every time the Warden leaves the party’s camp, she must select three companions to bring with her.

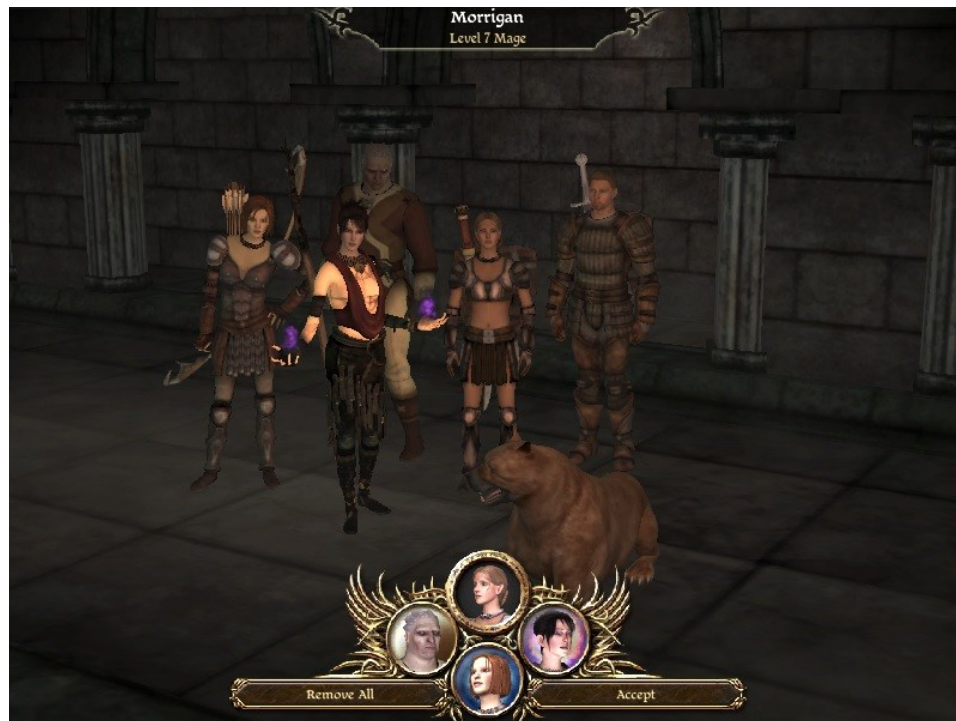


Figure 6. Selecting companions

Although they can be controlled during combat and exploration, these characters have their own unique personalities and will often voice their opinions during dialogue sequences. Sometimes these opinions are tied to approval ratings—numbers that represent the extent to which a companion approves or disapproves of a decision. On a fictional level, increasing a companion’s approval rating improves their relationship with the Warden, eventually leading to a close friendship or romance, while decreasing the approval rating can lead to animosity and eventually betrayal or abandonment. Increasing the approval rating beyond a certain point also unlocks new quests and abilities, allowing the player to access new game content and improving their capacity to defeat enemies in the game.

While strategic advantages can be compelling, the desires that motivated my attempts to win over my companions were for the most part unrelated to objective or game-based measures of success. Often I felt that I was trying to please them simply because I wanted to be liked, or because I was repelled by the blatantly rude or insensitive alternatives. These subjective influences, which might not be immediately evident when examining the game as a system of rules, had an enormous impact on how and why I made the choices I did. For this and other reasons, the following section will deal with the player’s subjective experience of play as an important and inescapable element of videogame research.

### **The Subjective Experience of Play**

In her PhD dissertation, entitled *Between Regulation and Improvisation: Playing and Analysing “Games in the Middle,”* Sarah Mosberg Iversen (2009) argues that computer games and players are co-dependent. The only way to access the computer

game as a dynamic experience is through the player, while the player is only a player in relation to the game. Prior to being played, a computer game exists as a static set of rules and potential events that require a player, or players, in order to be actualized. As Iversen puts it:

On the one hand, then, there are structures and devices constructed to invite and motivate engagement but also to regulate it in various ways, on the other hand there is a player who actualises the potential inherent in the game as artefact, producing a variety of outcomes based on her choices (40-41).

According to Iversen, it is possible to focus on the “game itself” while bracketing players, however the problem with this approach is that it tends to produce an abstracted or idealized player that is based on a set of assumptions which remain implicit or are otherwise left unquestioned.

One way to avoid this potential oversight is for the researcher to become, and position herself as, the player. In his article on game research methodologies, Aarseth (2003) states that, “unlike studies of films and literature, merely observing the action will not put us in the role of the audience.” He argues that many aspects of a game, such as the player’s on-going interpretation and exploration of the rules, cannot be represented visually or aurally, but can only be experienced through play. Following Aarseth, Iversen (2009) suggests that researchers should play a game they are considering researching *prior* to beginning their research. In other words, they should play the game for fun, “in order to get a true feel for the game” (52), before taking a more critical or analytical approach to their play.

Regardless of whether researchers are relying on their own experiences of play (as is the case here), the experience of others, or a combination of the two, they should also be aware that “all accounts of gameplay are partial or reductive” (Carr, quoted in Iversen 2009), and involve a process of selection. Rather than considering this a weakness, Iversen argues that acknowledging the situated nature of experience and “embracing subjectivity” may allow the researcher to produce a deeper and more thorough analysis of a game. In her words:

Computer games, like other cultural products, evoke emotions and memories, instigate chains of associations, stimulate creativity and imagination in the individuals involved with them. All these experiences may well be important elements of playing a given computer game, but they are not easily accounted for with an objectivist jargon. If the goal, along the line of classical humanities disciplines, is to gain understanding and new insights about the object of study, the more subjective approach may offer an advantage. (58)

Returning to the abstracted or idealized player mentioned above, we might consider de Lauretis’s (1984) description of Umberto Eco’s Model Reader, which, she says,

is presented as a locus of logical moves, impervious to the heterogeneity of historical process, to difference or contradiction. For the Reader is already contemplated by the text, is in fact an element of its interpretation. Like the Author, the Reader is a textual strategy, a set of specific competences and felicitous conditions established by the text, which must be met if the text is to be ‘fully actualized’ in its potential content (176).

When no longer seen as a purely logical, rational being, however, the Reader's and player's experiences are opened up to history and the changing material relations and social practices that make it up. De Lauretis uses the term experience "to designate an ongoing process by which subjectivity is constructed semiotically and historically...as a complex of habits resulting from the semiotic interaction of 'outer world' and 'inner world'" (182). Rather than attempting to isolate these two worlds, I will follow her lead in approaching experience as the process through which I place myself, or am placed in (a) social reality.

### **(Inter)activity, Passivity, and Identification**

As James Newman (2002) has noted, "videogames present highly structured and, importantly, highly segmented experiences." Despite the difficulty of adequately describing videogames in terms of one type of engagement or experience, there has been and continues to be a widespread tendency to distinguish videogames from other media based on their capacity for something called "interactivity"<sup>17</sup> (e.g. Apperley 2006; Tavinor 2009; Deen 2011). While the term has been heavily criticized on a theoretical basis for being overly broad and diffuse (Tavinor 2009), it is also worth considering the ways in which insisting on the interactive nature of videogames delineates their relation to other media, producing divergent and often contradictory opinions as to how videogames perform work on players (or vice versa).

---

<sup>17</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) defines interactivity as "the ability to respond to changing conditions [that] are determined by the user's input." While a full treatment of this "ideologically charged notion" (Newman 2002) is beyond the scope of this thesis, a number of articles in the early issues of the online journal *Game Studies*, including those cited here, deal with this concept in greater depth.

As Grant Tavinor (2009) points out, “maintaining that videogames are interactive implies, somewhat problematically, that traditional media are ‘passive’ in some respect” (2009). More precisely, passivity becomes associated with consumption and narrativity, while (inter)activity is used to describe a player’s productive encounter with a rule-based system (Juul 2001, Humphreys 2009). Some of these assumptions about traditional media appear to be based, at least in part, on classical theories of suture, which argue that the systems of identification that align viewers or readers with fictional characters demand a relatively passive audience (Silverman 1983; Butte 2008). However the prominence of cinematic cutscenes in DAO, combined with the central role of the player character, complicates the distinction between passive and active engagement and begs the question as to whether or not players identify with characters in the game, and if so, then when, why, how, and to what extent.

In her discussion of the operations of suture Kaja Silverman (1983) makes the argument that:

The match of subject and cinematic discourse occurs not just at the level of the shot, but at that of the story... films re-interpellate the viewer into pre-established discursive positions not only by effacing the signs of their own production, but through the lure of narrative. (220-221)

When viewed as an effect of “the operations which constitute narrativity” (236), suture extends its reach well beyond the movie screen. In the final chapter of *The Subject of Semiotics*, Silverman aligns suture theory with Barthes’ comparison of the readerly (or classic) text and the writerly text. Silverman says that while the readerly text “attempts to conceal all traces of itself as a factory within which a particular social reality is produced

through standard representations and dominant signifying practices” (244), the writerly text “exhumes the cultural voices or codes responsible for the [readerly text’s] enunciation, and in the process...discovers multiplicity instead of consistency” (246). Simply put, the writerly text opposes suture, while the readerly text supports it. Silverman also states that, “the classic text depends upon a linear reading or viewing” (245) in order to foster a “pleasurable dependence” on the part of the reader or viewer who, in seeking closure, comes to accept the terms of the text and identify with the subjects it projects. In contrast, the writerly text involves segmentation, which Barthes describes as “a series of interruptions which serve to isolate signifying units from each other” (Silverman 1983, 247), inhibiting linear progression and encouraging the reader to participate in the production of meaning and subjectivity.

To quote Barthes (1974) directly (or rather a translated version of Barthes’ seminal book, *S/Z*), in the writerly text,

the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable (meaning here is never subject to a principle of determination, unless by throwing dice)” (5).

As Barthes points out, the writerly text is a “productive model” as opposed to a physical thing we might find on a bookstore shelf. Barthes places value upon this model in part because he believes “the goal of literary work...is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (4). When publishers and other literary institutions



maintain a strict division between author and reader, the reader is, according to Barthes, “plunged into a kind of idleness...instead of functioning himself...he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text” (4).

Many of the terms Barthes uses to describe the writerly text speak to the language often used to distinguish videogames and interactive texts from traditional media. In DAO elements such as the unpredictability of combat and the ability to save and replay segments of the game following different narrative paths are more suggestive of the “indeterminable” and “reversible” writerly text (Barthes 1974). DAO’s six origin stories and the process of character creation also involve the player in a productive capacity and provide her in with multiple, equally relevant entrances to the text. On the other hand, the familiarity of the setting and narratives and the desire for closure that I experienced while playing DAO suggests that the game exhibits at least some of the characteristics of a classic text. While DAO may consist of many interacting networks, my capacity to shape those networks and the interactions that take place between them is limited. If indeed my engagement with DAO lies somewhere between these two poles—between (inter)activity and passivity, new media and traditional media, production and consumption—then we might conclude that I identify with game characters some but not all of the time. However in the case of the player character, I believe the relationship is more complicated than that, becoming less a question of either/or, and more a matter of both/and/also.

Jesper Juul (2001) hints at this complexity when he states that, “the relations between reader/story and player/game are completely different - the player inhabits a twilight zone where he/she is both an empirical subject outside the game and undertakes a

role inside the game.” He goes on to explain that in contrast to narrative media, which motivate investment in the story through identification with a human or anthropomorphic actor, investment in a game is prompted through the performance and evaluation of the player as actor. In other words, the player does not need to identify with an intermediary in the form of a fictional character because she or he is capable of directly influencing the events that take place in the game, and therefore presumably has an emotional stake in the outcome that is separate from that of the game characters.

While Juul’s article implies that the interactive nature of videogames diminishes or even eliminates their reliance on processes of identification, other scholars have argued that interactivity actually strengthens identification (Shaw 2010). According to Adrienne Shaw, the later argument is often made in relation to videogames in which players control a PC or avatar, and may be derived from auto-ethnographic accounts in which researchers describe how they become simultaneously both player and character when playing a game. As Shaw points out, however, the elision of terms that occurs when I describe the Warden’s actions as something “I” did does not necessarily mean I am identifying *with* that character in an empathic sense, nor does it mean that I believe we share certain characteristics or qualities that allow me to see myself in her. While these forms of identification often occur when I watch a movie or read a book, I have never (at least consciously) felt this way in relation to the Warden.

Unlike other characters in the game, the Warden does not have a defined personality, meaning that there is precious little to identify with, aside from what I am able to imagine or project. As a player-created character, the Warden can take on many (but not unlimited) forms, and while the game’s diegesis describes her as a unique

individual, she is also a customizable tool, albeit one that is constrained and positioned in particular ways. As a tool, her capacities are connected with my own during play, and when she kills a darkspawn or wins the Landsmeet, I see these actions as an extension of my agency. However those actions are never freely chosen; they are directed by and contained within the Warden's role as the up-and-coming Hero of Ferelden, a role that she (and by extension I) can only undertake by cohering on some level with the fiction of the game. What I mean by this is that the Warden's actions are only recognized as heroic deeds within the context of the game's fictional world—a world that hails her as a character, not as a functional tool—and I am only “present” in that world through her. My relation to the Warden is thus at least threefold: I relate to her as a repeatable fictional role, an individual character named Lyna Mahariel, and a tool or avatar that I control.

While this relation is variable, I am always on the Warden's side, so to speak, both in conversation and in combat. Because her decisions are my own, I tend to see her allies as my allies, and her enemies as my enemies. That this distinction is reinforced in various ways throughout the game recalls Frye's (2007) argument that “the central form of romance is dialectical: everything is focused on a conflict between the hero and his enemy, and all the reader's values are bound up with the hero” (174). Of course this may not be the case for all readers or all players, but it does suggest that there is a political dimension to the deliberate alignment of players with heroic player characters. While players may have some liberty in terms of how they play with and through their character, they are nevertheless restricted to a limited set of actions that are justified, rationalized, and coded in very particular ways.

In the case of the Warden, cowardly or unheroic acts often come across as uncharacteristic deviations. The Warden's decision to confront the Blight head-on—a decision I am willing to adopt as my own but over which I have no real control—suggests a high degree of bravery and concern for others that is at odds with any attempt on my part to depict the Warden as a selfish coward. How can someone who spends the vast majority of her time fighting terrifying monsters and demons in an effort to save the world then turn around and back out of a fight because she is afraid of engaging with yet another enemy? Though it is possible to create a contradictory character, it is very difficult to act out the role of a character that is unambiguously and consistently afraid, timid, or weak. On the other hand, because I see these characteristics in negative terms, I rarely experience the urge to behave in such a way, and instead will tend to accept the options that are made available to me as both obvious and desirable. This approach is a personal one, and relates significantly to my own history, my desires, my fears, and my ambitions. In the next section I provide a quick outline of my personal history, a story that I hope will help to shed some light on where my dispositions and preferences may have come from, and why they might have led me to make the choices that I did.

### **I am the Player, but Who am I?**

I was born and raised in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, a small, isolated town in the Canadian province of Newfoundland & Labrador. Spread along the sandy banks of the Churchill River in central Labrador, the town is home to a military air base that was, until recently, used by NATO for tactical low-level flight training. My mother was born in Renfrew, Ontario and moved to Goose Bay to work as physiotherapist at the local hospital. There she met my father, who was born in Malaysia and came to work as a

doctor. I arrived on the scene in 1987, not long after my parents were married. Several years later my family moved briefly to St. John's, Newfoundland, before returning to Goose Bay, just in time for the birth of my little brother. Though Goose Bay is a largely English-speaking town, my parents chose to place me in a French Immersion program. I was given my first computer at the relatively early age of 8, and by my early teens, I was spending much of my free time browsing the net, viewing and creating art, and participating in online communities. I also played computer games on an off-and-on basis, and while I begged my mother for a game console, I was never permitted anything more substantial than a Nintendo Gameboy.

For as long as I remember I have been afraid of disappointing others, particularly authority figures I respect or look up to, and perhaps as a result of this I have always strived to achieve good grades and other symbols of "good" behaviour. I also have a strong guilty conscience. Before my final year of high school my mother suggested I go to a private boarding school in Quebec for a year in order to better my chances of getting into university. I willingly agreed (at this point I was eager to get out of Goose Bay) and spent a year at Bishop's College School in Lennoxville, Quebec working harder than I ever had and secretly railing against the strict set of rules I was suddenly being forced to follow. Eventually I decided to focus on art (something people had always told me I was good at), rather than science and math (both of which I also enjoyed), and applied to five art colleges and universities.

From 2005 to 2009 I attended Mount Alison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, a tiny maritime town in which university students seem to outnumber local

residents. Here I concentrated on school and social activities, barely touching videogames, which I saw at this time as dangerous distractions.

Mount Allison was also where I had the first of several important revelations. While I had been bullied intermittently from grade five until the end of junior high, it was not until I was several years into my undergraduate degree that I realized that as a mixed-race girl in a predominantly white town, the bullying might have been about more than just my looks or my grades. Up until that point I believed that racism was something that only applied to others, and discovering that this was not necessarily the case came as a shock. I identify much more strongly with white Canadians than I do with my father's Malaysian-Chinese heritage, and growing up I had never considered that while I might not feel "non-white," I could still be perceived as such.

Near the end of my BFA degree I decided to pursue a master's degree in communication studies in Montreal, and applied to both Concordia and McGill. I had a year off between the two degrees and spent much of it wandering around Europe on my own. I made very few plans ahead of time, and with my rail pass in hand I went anywhere my heart desired, sleeping in my tent, on a stranger's couch, in a hostel, or in a shelter on a mountainside. The sense of freedom and independence was incredible, if exhausting, and by the time I was ready to return, I had already decided I wanted to do more of this, and soon. I came back to Canada having realized the extent to which my life is ordinarily governed by fear—fear of failure, disapproval, and uncertainty—and a desire to break free of that, wherever possible.

After spending a summer living in Fredericton, New Brunswick, I moved with my former partner to Montreal, and began my Master's in Media Studies at Concordia

University, which led to the writing of this thesis. Here I discovered the field of game studies, and became increasingly involved and absorbed in the multidimensional world of videogames. This was also where I became more fully conscious of my own position of privilege and the extent to which this position depends upon structural inequalities and systems of oppression and exploitation.

Suddenly I can no longer see myself as an innocent bystander, someone who is utterly uninvolved in the injustices that are taking place all around me. With this realization has come a crippling sense of guilt and personal responsibility, as well as a strong desire to somehow make it right. As I struggle with the overwhelming nature of the problem and my own lack of knowledge or ability, I find myself ever more attracted to spaces and situations in which I can feel powerful, smart, and perhaps most importantly, capable of being the good person I so desperately want to be. While games do not always provide this (I am not particularly good at platformers, first-person shooters, or real-time strategy games, and this limits my ability to enjoy them), those that do often serve to provide comfort in uncertain times.

### **(Re)Playing and Recording DAO**

The feelings and experiences I describe above are included because I believe they have had a significant impact on how I have played through and experienced *Dragon Age: Origins*. Not only am I approaching the game as a player with a particular history, I am also approaching it as a researcher interested in the personal and social significance of role-playing games. While I often play games because they satisfy my sense of curiosity while providing a pleasurable and much less mentally taxing alternative to academic work, I am also aware that, as a student invested in game studies, any game may become,

at one point or another, an object of study. When I first played through the Macintosh version of DAO, I had not yet decided to make the game the subject of my thesis; something about the game's linear structure piqued my interest, however, and by the time the game was finished, I had changed my mind. I then played the game through again as Lyna Mahariel, a female Dalish elf warrior, this time taking a more critical approach. During this second play-through I took written notes, screenshots, and screen-capture videos, which were useful for keeping track of new items, characters, environments, and as reminders of important cut scenes or dialogues. I also kept spreadsheets listing the items I obtained and descriptions of the quests I acquired.

The next stage of the project involved reading, writing, and replaying relevant sections of the game. At this point I revisited my notes and documents. Although I had initially intended to break down and separate information into the areas defined by Consalvo and Dutton (2006) in their paper on game research methods, I soon discovered that the sheer extent of the game made this an impractical endeavour. By the end of approximately 130 hours of gameplay, I had accumulated over 100 pages of notes describing the gist of conversations, battles, cut-scenes, items, locations, and so on. As a result, I tended to rely more on screenshots, spreadsheets, and the game itself, as well an online resource known as the "Dragon Age Wiki," which primarily served as a memory aid.

Rather than relying on a more systematic approach, I instead allowed those aspects that were the most personally relevant and meaningful in my own play-throughs of the game to rise to the surface. This approach to textual analysis is similar in some respects to the "step-by-step method" proposed by Barthes (1974) at the beginning of *S/Z*.



For Barthes the step-by-step method “is never anything but the *decomposition* (in the cinematographic sense) of the work of reading: a *slow motion*, so to speak, neither wholly image or wholly analysis” (12). Instead of attempting to assemble the text into a coherent whole, Barthes recommends cutting up or “starring” the text by separating it into a series of units called “lexias.” Acknowledging the arbitrariness of this process, he points out that the lexia

will be a matter of convenience: it will suffice that the lexia be the best possible space in which we can observe meanings; its dimension, empirically determined, estimated, will depend on the density of connotations, variable according to the moments of the text. (13)

Though I am analysing much larger sections of the game than the small units of meaning described by Barthes, it is the connection between the act of reading (or playing) and the structure of the analysis that interests me here, the ways in which the latter consciously arises out of and reflects the first. This form of analysis makes no claim to a final, singular truth, but instead recognizes the plurality of possible meanings, their migration and flow, and their dependence upon individual readers and moments of reading.

Rather than basing the entire analysis upon a single critical tradition, Barthes suggests applying several different kinds of criticism, allowing each one to be heard in order to “sketch the stereographic space of writing” (15). In his view critical commentary should be aimed at interrupting the text in order to deny its “naturalness.” The goal here is to obtain “not the *real* text, but a plural text” (16) which emerges through multiple rereadings and by way of multiple entrances.

Though in general the act of reading (or rereading) differs from the act of playing (or replaying), both exercises may be aimed at producing a similar effect: to denaturalize, or rather, to make clear the non-naturalness of the text in question. All of the observations and commentaries contained in this thesis are the end result of playing DAO multiple times, either in part or in full. That being said, they do not represent, in any sense of the word, a *complete* playing of the game; instead they mark a particular trajectory through it. Though my descriptions of various sections of the game and my reactions to them are often presented as singular events for the sake of clarity and brevity, they should be read as an amalgamation of a number of discrete experiences and periods of reflection that occurred over the past two years.

In the following chapter I will describe my experience of side quests and analyse the numerical systems that shape and support them. I will also explain how these elements, when contextualized within the game's broader narrative arc, allowed me to pursue my desire for progress and personal gain, while still satisfying my sense of moral responsibility towards others.

## CHAPTER 3: SIDE QUESTS

### Introduction

Jeff Howard (2008) argues that, “Quests are meaningful because they immerse players in dramas of initiation, defined as a gradual movement up through formalized ‘levels’ of achievement into a progressively greater understanding of the rules and narrative in a simulated world” (26). In DAO these “levels of achievement” are primarily expressed as numerical values that signify the increasing wealth, strength, intelligence, and fortitude of the Warden and her party. New items, new abilities, new environments, and new narrative events also help to convey a sense of progress as the player completes one quest after another, gradually expanding her knowledge of the game world. Though the main quests arguably form the “core” of the experience in DAO, they are interwoven with and vastly outnumbered by the side quests, which involve many of the same activities.

The primary thesis of this chapter is based on Frye’s (2007) observation that, “civilization tends to try to make the desirable and the moral coincide” (144). By examining both the ludological and the narrative underpinnings of side quests, I will attempt to show how these elements satisfied a desire for agency and power, while also appealing to my moral sensibilities. In the first section of this chapter I will describe some of the different varieties of optional side quests, how they are communicated to the player, what choices they involve, and the ethical and ideological dimensions of those choices in relation to notions of player agency. The next section covers the role of the companions and the approval rating system. From here, I will move on to a description of some of the other systems and mechanics that shape and support quests—including

statistics, items, and codex entries—while drawing on Andrew Baerg’s (Voorhees et al. 2012) critique of neoliberal rationalities in the RPG *Neverwinter Nights 2*. Baerg’s arguments are then linked to those of Henry Giroux (2011), who claims that the domination of “neoliberal politics, economics, and public pedagogy” (587) has led to the widespread adoption of “the survival-of-the-fittest ethic and its mantra of doing just about anything to increase profits” (592). While Giroux suggests that ethical consciousness and our sense of social responsibility have suffered as a result of this profit-driven mentality, I believe that DAO projects a vision of a very different society in which personal gain serves to help, rather than hinder, the collective good. As I will argue at the end of this chapter, the negative implications of neoliberalism and advanced capitalism are all but eliminated from DAO, so that “doing just about anything” does not necessarily mean doing something wrong.

### **Filling In and Fleshing Out: Side Quests**

Though much of the game’s pre-scripted narrative content is directed towards ending the Blight, there are also a large number of optional quests that are generally accompanied by shorter and less elaborate storylines. Side quests can help to flesh out the fictional world of the game by incorporating information about game characters, cultures, organizations, histories, and other elements that are not accommodated by the primary narrative arc. They may also disrupt (or simply delay) the linear flow of the main quests, offering a range of alternative adventures that the player can choose to pursue, or not, as she pleases. Side quests involve at least three distinct stages, which are shown in the diagram below: 1) a quest is initiated and must be accepted or (if the choice is available) rejected, 2) the Warden performs a series of tasks, and 3) the quest is completed.

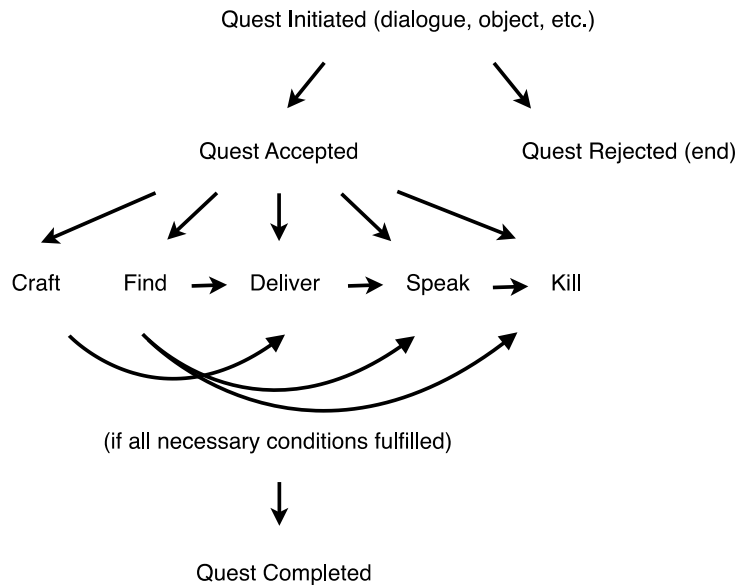


Figure 7. The stages of a side quest

In my second play-through I accepted close to 90 side quests, every one of which involved one or more of five basic activities: craft items, find NPCs or items, deliver items or messages, speak to NPCs, or kill NPCs.

The recombination of these relatively simple components gives rise to a surprisingly wide variety of explanations or backstories, from the somewhat mundane to the highly dramatic. Side quests can be conveyed through objects, public notices, notes, or letters that are either directly addressed to the Warden, or are stumbled upon seemingly by chance. As with the main quests, however, most side quests are initiated by and communicated through conversations with NPCs, who will briefly describe the problem, followed by suggestions for how the Warden might help to resolve it. During dialogue sequences players are presented with a limited number of options that determine how the Warden will behave towards an NPC, and whether or not she will accept a quest. Accepting a side quest does not necessarily mean that the player must complete it—there is no direct punishment for abandoning a quest midway—though some side quests trigger

unavoidable encounters. Rejecting a side quest, on the other hand, generally forecloses the possibility of pursuing the quest later in the game.

Often the manner in which a quest is communicated adds an air of levity to what is otherwise a relatively boring task. Finding or delivering items, for example, commonly involves missing people, powerful artefacts, lethal poisons, dead bodies, and secret organizations. Quests requiring interactions with NPCs are also motivated by a range of different causes, including revenge, self-protection, duty, ambition, or love. Aside from providing relief from repetition, the fictions surrounding quests allow players to contextualize their actions within a broader field of human activity. By focusing on the interactions between characters, rather than the interaction between a player and a machine, a space is carved out for the expression of ethical qualities and behaviours such as kindness, malevolence, and generosity.

### **Agency and Morality**

In *The Ethics of Computer Games* Miguel Sicart (2009) argues that, “the agent of the ludic experience, the player, is not an animal beyond morality. Players are subjects that take place when ethical beings play a game” (77). Though he suggests that all videogames are ethical systems that convey values through their affordances and constraints, not all games challenge players morally or call upon them to make choices based on their capacity for ethical thinking. As I mentioned previously, BioWare is often distinguished from its peers based on the company’s tendency to incorporate “moral dilemmas” into its games. While DAO is indeed advertised as a game that allows players to make complex moral choices, most of the side quests lack moral ambiguity. Even before a quest has begun, I have found that side quests prompting “good” behaviour can

often be clearly distinguished from quests that encourage or demand “bad” behaviour through signals provided by the quest giver. Shady characters in a position of power usually address the Warden as a mercenary that might be interested in performing unlawful or immoral deeds for personal gain, while friendly or helpless characters hail the Warden as a hero or humanitarian. Although all of the side quests are profitable for the Warden in one way or another, providing virtual currency, items, or experience points, more explicit rewards are often tied to corrupt organizations and greedy individuals.

Master Ignacio, the quest giver for “The Trials of the Crows,” openly offers the Warden an opportunity to “make some coin” in exchange for assassinating several targets. In contrast, accepting a quest from a love-stricken elf named Cammen requires that the Warden volunteer her help without any promise of a reward. While Ignacio works for a powerful guild of assassins and attempts to entice the Warden through propositions of financial gain, Cammen freely admits that he “feels so helpless” and will only reluctantly accept the Warden’s assistance. Even before the Warden has a chance to act on her instructions, the quests imply two very different characters, one who is ruthlessly opportunistic, and another who is kind and considerate. From this perspective, accepting or rejecting a side quest can in itself be a moral decision, albeit one that does not seem to require a great deal of ethical reasoning or reflection.

Once a side quest has been accepted, a short summary appears in the journal, along with updates that track the Warden’s progress through the various stages of the quest. The journal acts as a record of past events as well as a glorified to-do list, and can be accessed and read by the player at any time. The text in the journal always refers to the

reader as “you,” possibly implicating the player more fully in the decisions that accompany each quest. For example, the initial description of the “Chanter’s Board” side quest in *Lothering* reads:

You came across a chanter's board in Lothering. Chanter Devons is in charge of the board, which he fills with the villagers’ requests for help. Perhaps you'll be able to help the village with some of its trouble.

Although on a fictional level the journal must refer to the character of the Warden, since the player is not actually “in” *Lothering*, the player is the one who is reading the journal, interpreting the instructions, and making the decisions in the game. The journal’s ambiguous use of the second person pronoun both underlines and denies the player’s role in the game, depending on how it is read. Though this might seem a trivial point, the degree to which I identify with the “you” who is helping (or harming) the villagers has a significant impact on the choices I make, and how I feel about those choices.

Many side quests involve a fixed set of clearly delineated tasks, which heavily restrict player agency. Some side quests, however, may be completed in one of several different ways. According to Matt Garite (2003),

the interactive structure of video games produces that primary ideological effect whereby subjects are interpellated or called upon to (mis)recognize themselves as distinct, autonomous, freely acting individuals. The branching structure of game narratives presents players with a series of options regarding where to go and what to do. Players are made to feel like these decisions matter or have consequence, since the imprisoning code that determines such options always remains hidden from sight. (6)



Garite's analysis of "the ideology of interactivity" suggests that the various choices that are presented to the player via the Warden bolster the impression that the player is acting under her own initiative, while obscuring the heavily structured nature of the Warden's actions. Though many players, particularly those who are familiar with RPG conventions, may well be able to see through the illusion of free choice in DAO, it is still worth considering what impact those limited choices have on gameplay experiences.

For my part, I find it much more difficult to disassociate myself from the Warden's actions when I am presented with a choice, especially when there are compelling moral reasons to choose one course over another. While I have no trouble killing NPCs in combat situations in which there are no alternatives, I have difficulty selecting mean, rude, or violent options when I am face to face with an NPC in dialogue. Although I will occasionally choose the "immoral" route, despite feelings of aversion and pre-emptive guilt, simply to see what happens if I do, more often than not I find myself making decisions that accord with my own morality. This is true despite the fact that I am well aware that the NPCs in DAO are not actually people and that the consequences of my simulated actions in the game are neither real nor permanent. While some players may distance themselves from the character they are playing, I am not one of those players. This bias is important to keep in mind, since the cumulative effect of all of my choices and the desires that drive them shape what elements of each quest I experience, and what elements I miss, which in turn has a fundamental impact on my overall impression of the game.

Noah Wardrip-Fruin et al. (2009) summarize a number of useful concepts that have been proposed for thinking through agency, choice, and desire in videogames.

Beginning with Janet Murray's description of agency in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (quoted in Wardrip-Fruin et al. 2009), the authors go on to ask where we might locate the desires that agency satisfies. Drawing on a 2001 article by Michael Mateas, Wardrip-Fruin et al. argue that a well-designed game provides a dramatic context that motivates or encourages certain actions, which are then supported by the material affordances of the game. In this sense, "Agency is not simply 'free will' or 'being able to do anything.' It is interacting with a system that suggests possibilities through the representation of a fictional world and the presentation of a set of materials for action" (7). According to this model, games that successfully produce the experience of agency are also those that exhibit a close link or coherence between what is probable, what is desirable, and what is possible.

Unfortunately Wardrip-Fruin et al. do not elaborate on the connection between agency in fictional, playable worlds and the socially constructed codes of conduct that guide and constrain our day-to-day decisions. Though the kingdom of Ferelden is very different in some respects from my own social reality, it is characterized by a familiar set of basic moral principles and ethical norms, including the beliefs that: 1) helping others in need is good, and 2) nothing is more valuable than human life. The majority of the quests in DAO directly appeal to these principles, so that when I come across someone in trouble, I not only expect to be able to help them, but I also *want* to help them, in part

because I have come to accept that this is generally the right thing to do in reality, and can easily transfer this belief to the context of the game.<sup>18</sup>

While not all of the decisions made during a side quest have ethical or moral implications, those that do often boil down to a choice between violence and persuasion or intimidation. Though in most of these cases I felt that violence was obviously the “bad” choice, there were a few situations in which the decision to kill an NPC could be interpreted as an act of compassion. In the quest “A Mother’s Hope,” a grieving mother asks the Warden to bring back news of her son, Ruck, who disappeared in the Deep Roads several years ago. If the quest is accepted, the Warden will encounter the missing dwarf in the Deep Roads. Approaching Ruck initiates a cut-scene, which reveals that Ruck’s mind and body have been twisted and warped by his consumption of darkspawn flesh. During the subsequent conversation the player is given several opportunities, through dialogue, to comfort and pity Ruck, to deride him, to express disgust, or to render him hostile and kill him. Killing Ruck removes a potentially useful source of information. He can also act as a merchant, providing a valuable chance to resupply and sell off unwanted items. These benefits, combined with my own aversion to violence, made the decision to keep him alive a relatively easy one. On the other hand, Ruck’s statements of shame and self-loathing, the available dialogue options, and the comments of the companions all suggest a number of reasons why Ruck might be better off dead than alive.

---

<sup>18</sup> It is likely that some players will take the opposite approach, and will deliberately attempt to subvert ethical norms. Because the consequences of an in-game choice are unlikely to have a noticeable impact on the player’s life outside the game, some may see gameplay as an opportunity for risky or transgressive acts.

This type of moral dilemma, which creates a potential conflict between two or more moral imperatives (i.e. killing is wrong, but allowing someone to suffer is also wrong), is relatively rare, however. Most side quests consist of a simple set of instructions for basic actions that are unlikely to invite much in the way of deliberation. For instance, one of the journal entries filed under the quests for the Mages' Collective reads, "Find and activate four mystical sites of power, located in the Brecilian Forest, the Deep Roads, Denerim, and the Circle Tower." The quest, which is accompanied by an explanatory letter, requires that the player either follow the instructions or ignore the quest, since the Warden cannot confront the quest giver or tamper with the sites of power. Like others of its type, this quest involves little or no dialogue. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, this leaves the player with a limited number of available actions, since most of the more complex or context-specific actions and decisions are chosen and expressed through dialogue sequences, which are interspersed with cut-scenes. This does not mean that dialogue sequences are unconstrained, but they do expand the possibilities for interacting with NPCs, which are otherwise little more than moving traps and chests—elements of the environment that must be disarmed, looted, or avoided in order to progress.

### **Making Friends: The Companions**

Generally speaking even the most elaborate side quests have little or no bearing on the game's main narrative arc. If the Warden commits atrocious acts in broad daylight during a side quest, no one (with the possible exception of the quest giver) seems to mind. NPCs, particularly those without proper names, lack the complexity to reflect

anything like popular sentiment towards the Warden, serving more as symbolic stand-ins for a society that must be imagined into existence. There is, however, one group of NPCs who appear to be capable of “remembering” and responding to what the Warden has done. These are her companions: warriors, mages, and rogues who travel with the Warden and can be controlled during combat and exploration by the player. Arguably the most fully developed characters in the game, each companion joins the party under different circumstances, and for reasons that are not always immediately clear. Though the companions all recognize the Warden as their leader (which explains why the player can “order” them to perform different tasks), their relationship with the Warden changes over time as the Warden interacts with them and makes decisions for the party.

This relationship is quantified and tracked through the approval rating system, which provides an alternative to the more common single variable “morality meter.”<sup>19</sup> Almost any decision the Warden makes in dialogue has the potential to independently increase or decrease the respective approval ratings of her companions. After each conversation a number indicating the amount of change is displayed on the screen for all the affected companions. Though the end result is made clear, it may take several attempts before the player discovers which statements trigger positive or negative approval ratings from which companions. The Warden can also influence approval ratings by engaging in conversation with her companions. Conversation, however, is a riskier venture than buying their approval with gifts: specially designated items that

---

<sup>19</sup> Systems for tracking ethical decision-making in games often consist of a single scale, with good positioned on one end of the scale and evil on the other. After completing certain actions the player is awarded “good points” or “evil points,” which shift the position of the marker on the scale.

improve the companions' approval ratings. Once the approval rating is high enough, the player may initiate a companion's personal side quest. The companion will then ask the Warden for a favour, either for the sake of reconciliation or self-protection, or to recover something that was lost.

Following the binary logic that structures much of the game, it is possible to group companions into pairs according to contrasting traits and ethical perspectives. For example, Wynne's altruistic desire to help others contrasts with Morrigan's ethical egoism, and is reinforced by the differences in their appearance, voice, and general behaviour (Fieser 2003). Despite the fact that both are mages, Wynne plays the role of the benevolent fairy godmother, while Morrigan is identified as a witch. The appeal to archetypal characters generates a rather biased value statement in regards to the relative morality of these two perspectives, which is also reflected in the contrast between the two rogues, Leliana and Zevran, the two non-human warriors, Sten and Oghren, and the two human warriors, Alistair and Loghain. While the first companion in each pair is characterized by good or desirable traits, including the desire for virtue, discipline, and loyalty, the other is typified by less desirable characteristics, such as selfishness, bloodthirstiness, or deceitfulness.

Their occupations and social status are also divergent. Wynne is a Senior Enchanter, one of the highest-ranking mages in the Circle of Magi. Morrigan, on the other hand, is a witch and an apostate, a rogue mage who has chosen to live as an outlaw rather than join the Circle. As a human bard, Leliana has a much higher standing in Ferelden society, which is dominated by humans, than Zevran, an elven assassin. Sten, the tall and mighty Qunari warrior, also ranks above Oghren, the short and stocky

dwarven berserker who has been stripped of his warrior caste. Alistair is a Grey Warden and heir to the throne, while Loghain is a general who has committed treason against his king. Splitting companions into clearly divided camps may fit well with the overall theme of the game (i.e. the struggle between good and evil), however the alignment of negative traits with lower social classes supports a problematic worldview in which privilege and morality are closely intertwined.

While I was unaware of this connection while playing the game, my tendency to favour Wynne, Leliana, Alistair, and Sten may have had just as much to do with my willingness to identify with their social standing, as it did with their personalities or moral beliefs. Though it was the later two factors that I consciously considered, it is also possible that I felt more comfortable in the company of characters were more closely bound to and invested in the prevailing social order. The characters I most identified with were also those characters I tended to keep in my party, causing me to actively exclude the others.

Favouring one group of companions over the other may have had a substantial impact on the decisions I made in the game. When present in the Warden's party, the companions act like a circle of peers, exerting social pressures and passing judgment over the Warden's actions, as well as her choice of words. Because each companion maintains a different ethical perspective, their opinions can also help to guide the player in making choices that reflect or oppose those perspectives. For players such as myself, this may complicate or add weight to a decision that would otherwise be relatively automatic. For others, however, the companions may be viewed largely as functional tools whose approval ratings can be manipulated like any other statistic.

## **A Numbers Game: Stats and Items**

In *Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens* (Voorhees et al. 2012), Andrew Baerg points to the essential role of numbers in computer RPGs (CRPGs), arguing that the various forms of quantification in these games model or reflect “neo-liberal governmental rationalities of calculation and risk-management” (154). Drawing on Foucault, Baerg explains how neo-liberalism involves a return to eighteenth century governmental practices that emphasized limited government in the form of a free market in which goods are exchanged at “natural” prices that reflect supply and demand. Under neo-liberalism, the principles of a free market economy are generalized to incorporate “the entire social body” (157), creating a privatized society in which individuals are primarily responsible for their own survival. In order to function within this society, individuals must learn to predict and handle risk through cost-benefit analysis and the maximization of available resources. Baerg argues that in our contemporary situation, “These risks are specifically rendered visible through a scientifically inflected rationality oriented around calculation” (158).





Figure 8. Character Statistics

Turning to the CRPG *Neverwinter Nights 2* (NwN2), which is based on the rules of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, Baerg suggests that character creation, equipment, quests, and combat all participate in naturalizing neoliberal rationality. In character creation, for example, different races are attributed different base statistics, which quantify qualities such as strength, dexterity, constitution, intelligence, wisdom, and charisma. In both DAO and NwN2, the player is given the opportunity to “customize” her character by assigning several additional skill points and unlocking new abilities—a process that is repeated every time the character levels up. Character statistics have a significant impact on a character’s ability to act within the game world, while abilities such as spells and talents are primarily useful in combat. By carefully assessing the risks and benefits of enhancing particular attributes, players can optimize characters according to their profession or class, making them more efficient in combat and therefore better able to carry out the tasks put forward by the game. For instance, warriors generally

perform better with high strength and high constitution, which allow them to deal and take more damage, whereas mages can cast more powerful spells if they have high intelligence.

In both games, optimization can also be applied to equipment: items that can be worn or wielded by characters and constitute part of the player's inventory. Pieces of equipment generally have properties that will be more effective in some gameplay situations than others. A shield that protects against fire may be useful when combatting a dragon, but will not be particularly helpful when trying to intimidate an NPC during a conversation. All pieces of equipment have statistics for traits such as damage, armour, and fatigue, which can be reviewed and compared in the inventory screen. Different equipment in DAO is made from different materials, which are hierarchically arranged according to tiers. Only the lowest tiers are available at the beginning of the game, with progressively higher tiers appearing as the Warden levels up.



Figure 9. Comparing equipment statistics

One of the primary means by which the Warden accumulates goods is by killing and looting the bodies of enemy NPCs. The more fights she wins, the more items she gains. These items help her to win more fights, and the cycle continues. Eventually extra equipment and unwanted items will fill up the inventory, preventing the Warden from accumulating more items, unless the inventory's contents are exchanged for gold. Gold can be held in unlimited amounts and may be used to purchase different items or services in the game. In DAO, the buying and selling of goods is carried out through merchants, who are present in virtually every major location. Often merchants will carry several very expensive items that cannot be found elsewhere in the game, tempting players to spend time gathering and selling loot in order to accumulate the necessary quantities of gold. Because rarity and cost are generally indexed to power, and power is a necessary requirement for the completion of combat-oriented quests, Baerg argues that players may

be encouraged to adopt market-based values and modes of assessment in order to succeed in the game.

Perhaps the simplest way to “succeed” in DAO is to reach the end credits. However, Mikael Jakobsson (2011) suggests that there are some players who “consider games to be unfinished until they have everything...that can be collected in a game.” Certainly I would count myself among their numbers, though I am probably less persistent than some. Collection is often associated with the acquisition of material goods or items, however it can also refer to achievements, which mark in-game accomplishments with virtual images that can be displayed online. Additionally, collection may refer to the various “Heroic Accomplishments” that are tracked by the game and displayed on the “Character Record” screen.



Figure 10. Heroic Accomplishments

Most of the categories included under “Heroic Accomplishments,” such as the number of kills, damage dealt, and stealing successes, appear to have no upper limit. Quests and codex entries, however, are a different story. While much of my time was dedicated to completing side quests, I also spent a great deal of time searching for all of the 329 codex entries that are available in the game. Each entry contains segments of text about the history, lore, geography, and politics of Thedas, as well as notes on individual characters, creatures, items, and game mechanics. The total number of entries is divided into several categories in the Warden’s journal, and shown as a fraction alongside the number of codex entries that have been collected so far, rendering the collection visibly incomplete until all the entries have been found.



Figure 11. Codex entries

Even players who have no desire to read or collect codex entries may be enticed to search them out for the associated gameplay rewards. Every codex entry that the player

unlocks provides the party with 50 experience points (XP). These points denote the quantification of the knowledge gained through experience and contribute towards leveling up playable characters, demonstrating the extent to which knowledge and power are intertwined in DAO. Collecting codex entries—particularly those that are filed under the heading “quest-related”—may also be necessary for unlocking or completing quests. Quests generate even more experience points, bringing the Warden and her companions ever closer to a statistical increase and the acquisition of new spells, talents, and skills.

While wealth and information may be valued for any number of reasons, both markers of success are tied to the Warden’s capacity to survive and win a fight. In many RPGs, as Baerg (Voorhees et al. 2012) puts it, “numbers not only represent life, but are directly equated to life itself” (168). A character’s health, stamina, mana (magical energy), and damage are all represented as numbers or statistical graphs that must be carefully managed in order to succeed in combat.<sup>20</sup> The narrative thrust of DAO further connects proficiency in battle to other forms of power. It is primarily because of her outstanding ability to survive in combat that the Warden eventually gains military might, social renown, and political power, ascending to the ranks of the ruling elite, who also seem to embody their own authority. Duncan, King Cailan, Knight-Commander Greagoir, Zathrian, Branka, Loghain, and other authority figures are depicted as powerful warriors whose physical or magical might is evident the moment a fight begins. All of

---

<sup>20</sup> Of these, health is perhaps the most crucial; once a character’s health meter reaches zero, that character will either die or fall unconscious. If this happens to every character in the Warden’s party, the game over screen will appear, and the player will be forced to reload from the last save.

them, however, are eventually surpassed by the Warden, who in the name of doing what is right, often ends up doing what is best for herself.

As I mentioned above, all side quests are profitable for the Warden in one way or another. Even quests that appear to be based on doing good deeds for the sake of it come with the implicit promise of benefits for both the Warden and the quest giver, often without any appearance of cost. Even the poorest NPCs participate in showering the Warden in rewards, yet they do not appear to be any the worse for wear because of it. This suggests that the Warden can accumulate as much as she likes, without depriving others—an idealized situation that eliminates the ethical quandaries surrounding the unbounded accumulation of wealth and the resulting economic disparities. This is particularly true for treasure-hunting quests, which involve uncovering the location of a hidden treasure or cache by accumulating clues, or collecting pieces of a set. Usually these treasures, like most of the items that can be procured in the game, appear to be all but invisible to other characters, meaning that if the Warden does not collect them, no one else will. The player is thus given an unburdened choice between acquiring a potentially useful resource, and letting it go to waste.

### **Personal Gain for the Collective Good**

If neoliberal principles are indeed embedded in the design of RPGs, and naturalized through the repetitive procedures of play, what might be the social significance of a game that both “mirrors and naturalizes a neo-liberal approach to living” (Baerg 2012, 170)? One possibility is to look at how neoliberalism is romanticized and legitimized through its association with an idealized image of the European Middle Ages, a topic I will discuss in the fifth chapter on neomedievalism. Another possibility, which I

will explore here, is to look at how neoliberalism has impacted our understanding of the individual's role within society. Henry Giroux (2011) has criticized neoliberal capitalism for its emphasis on individual freedom and responsibility, which he believes comes at the expense of communal responsibility and concern for the common good. In "Neoliberalism and the death of the social state: remembering Walter Benjamin's Angel of History," he argues that in contemporary (American) society,

politics is entirely driven by a Darwinian corporate ideology and a militaristic mind set that atomize the individual, celebrate the survival of the fittest, and legitimate 'privatization, gross inequalities, and an obsession with wealth', regardless of the collective moral depravity and individual and social impoverishment produced by such inequities (593).

Though the inverse relationship between individual advancement and the collective good may be an inescapable (if all too frequently ignored) fact in a closed system with a limited supply of resources, the virtual world of DAO does not directly model this system. Instead it presents a cleaned up and trimmed down version of capitalism, in which the Warden's practices of acquisition and consumption are entirely disconnected from the exploitation and poverty of the people she is supposed to save.

This disconnect is relatively easy to accept, given that making large amounts of money in the game appears to have little or no relation to making large amounts of money in real life. The vast majority of the Warden's gold and items are obtained in ways that are difficult to relate to contemporary sources of income—most people do not make a fortune by looting dead bodies or scouring buildings and caves for sparkling chests—and while stealing is a possibility, it is not a necessity. Players may enjoy the thrill of



pickpocketing unsuspecting NPCs, but profits are just as easily gained through more “legitimate” means. The outflow of wealth, on the other hand, is generally expressed through familiar processes, such as purchasing goods and paying for services. In addition, the Warden is given several opportunities to perform charitable acts by donating a few coins to beggars and refugees, promoting the idea that accruing personal wealth also provides a means of helping other people.

While there are some quests that force the player to weigh moral principles against financial gain, many others permit her to play “the good guy,” while also getting ahead. Because consumption and the accretion of personal, political, and military power all bring the Warden closer to her goal of defeating the darkspawn—an act that apparently benefits the world as a whole—the individual well-being of the Warden becomes yoked to the collective good. While Giroux (2011) states that society “no longer has any ethical consciousness” (592), the Warden’s quest to save the world suggests that social and moral responsibility are still important concepts, at least within this game. Yet even as DAO apparently encourages players to take moral considerations into account, it diverts attention away from the very issues that most require critical, ethical thought. Regardless of whether the player makes “good” or “bad” choices during a quest, the problematic focus on individual wealth, power, and success remains in place. These elements are all necessary to achieve the winning condition, making everything the player has done, up until the defeat of the darkspawn, a contribution to the greater good. Hence Giroux is perhaps closer to the mark when he states that, “the utter reliance upon a stripped-down notion of individual freedom and choice coupled with a strong emphasis

on personal responsibility turns people away from those larger forces that nonetheless determine (but not over determine) their varied daily experiences” (591).

## **Conclusion**

Like many other elements in a game, side quests can be approached from a number of different angles. A player who has little interest in the storylines may take a more utilitarian approach, skimming dialogues and descriptions for the information that will allow her to complete the quest and receive the award. A player who is more invested in the dialogue and the narrative aspects may avoid most side quests entirely in favour of advancing the main storyline. Players may also combine different styles of play, or alternate between them. Despite the enormous possibilities for variation on the player’s end, however, the quests themselves, which are fixed and determined by an invisible code, generally work to constrain what can be done, when, how, and by whom.

As I have explained above, the number of activities involved in DAO’s side quests is limited, even if the reasons given for those activities vary substantially. I have argued that the choices available to players are also limited, and may often be easily identified as either good or bad based on the characteristics of the quest giver. Despite these constraints, these choices can still produce a sense of agency by calling upon players to intervene in events in a desirable and believable fashion. The player’s choices are then validated or contested by the companions, who may act as both valued peers and functional tools. In my case, the combination of agency and moral assessment often acted as a source of pleasure, allowing me to take credit for the positive effects of my actions.

According to Baerg (Voorhees et al. 2012), various aspects of neoliberalism, including market-based modes of assessment, risk-management, and a focus on the

acquisition and optimization of resources, are manifested in *Neverwinter Night's* D&D-based system (which is similar in many ways to the combat, quest, leveling, and inventory systems used in DAO) to such an extent that it is difficult, if not impossible, to succeed in the game without adopting these principles. This same argument, I believe, applies to my experience of playing DAO. Certainly I am loathe to question the image of progress put forward by the game, in part because I enjoy engaging in the minutiae of resource management and the positive affirmation that comes with achieving a pre-defined goal. Unlike some players, however, I often invest more time and effort than is necessary in order to achieve these goals because I want to be able to see myself as someone who not only plays RPGs, but also plays them *well*. While this might seem obvious—after all, doesn't everyone want to be good at what they do?—it is also crucial in that it creates in me the willingness and the desire to act upon the principles described by Baerg, even when I am not required to do so. The qualitative difference between doing something that the game is “forcing” me to do, and doing something that I want to do because it brings me closer to a personal goal, should not be underestimated, as it may mark the boundary between resistance and conformity, criticism and compliance.

Expanding on Baerg's work, I have suggested that narratives also participate in naturalizing the basic tenets of neoliberal ideology by aligning a survival of the fittest mantra with the Warden's quest to destroy the darkspawn. By accumulating quantifiable resources and rising to the top of a highly combat-oriented hierarchy, the Warden is able to help individuals in need and ultimately save the world—a goal that is unquestionably “right,” in my view, even if the actions themselves are wrong. For some players the very awareness that they are being pushed into the role of the hero may cause them to push

back, testing the boundaries of the game and its simulated world. For myself, however, a combination of guilt and pleasure makes it all too difficult to resist the call to adventure.

The next chapter covers the main quests and the master quest in greater detail, and continues to examine the ethical nature of the Warden's role as hero alongside the political dimensions of the logics that have shaped my encounter with the game's narrative and ludological systems. In particular I will look at how the game justifies the Warden's assimilation of and domination over various fantasy races, and the links between the depiction of these groups or cultures and contemporary Western (or, more precisely, Canadian and US) perceptions of the Other.

## CHAPTER 4: MAIN QUESTS

### Introduction

Angela Ndalians (2004) has noted that certain nostalgic, postmodern writings tend to establish “an interplay...between closed ‘grand narratives,’ which are seen as culturally productive and brimming with ‘meaning,’ and serial, repetitive structures that are indicative of postmodern culture in the stages of decay asserted to be typical of late capitalism” (59). However Ndalians refuses to view contemporary popular culture in a purely negative light, and instead asserts the importance of evaluating its logic and significance as an art form. In the introduction to her book she argues that “mainstream cinema and other entertainment media are imbued with a neo-baroque poetics” (5) characterized by a collapsing of the frame separating spectator from spectacle, an emphasis on serial narratives and an “aesthetic of repetition,” which involves similarity and invariability, as well as multiple variations on a theme. This notion of a “variation on a theme” applies particularly well to DAO, which is structurally based on slight modifications of repeating patterns—that of the quest, the journey, or the Blight. At the same time, the levelling system described in the previous chapter allows the Warden to gradually accumulate strength, fame, and fortune by repeatedly killing, looting, selling, fetching, and delivering.

According to Frye (2007), “the essential plot of romance is adventure, which means that romance is naturally a sequential and processional form... We may call this major adventure the quest” (173-174). However Frye also notes that a quest often takes place in a world that is “characterized by the cyclical movement of nature” (174), which suggests repetition and return. Kaja Silverman’s (1983) reading of Roland Barthes

indicates that “repetition does the same thing for [the existing cultural] order as constant re-interpellation does for the subject: it creates the illusion of stability and continuity” (239). This may refer both to repetitive narrative events, which hail or interpellate the Warden and produce the illusion of a stable fictional world that pre-exists and extends beyond the player’s involvement, and to the ludic systems, which directly appeal to the player, inviting her intervention and calling upon her to act. DAO, like most videogames, involves a limited repertoire of available actions that must be repeated again and again in order to progress. It can also be played through multiple times, with differing results. Some sections of the game however, are more constrained than others, and while DAO has several different beginnings, which are tied to the origin stories selected during the character creation phase, the end goal, at least as it is communicated within the game, is always the same: end the Blight and save the world. In order to achieve this goal the player must overcome a number of major challenges, which are structured around binary oppositions that almost invariably pit the self against the Other.

Throughout this chapter I argue that these oppositions are primarily articulated in terms that reflect contemporary anxieties and tensions between a universalizing picture of white, Western power, and the racial, ethnic, or religious Other against which that power is defined. Though in most cases the Other is represented as the enemy, who is always evil or monstrous, othering may also involve the dehumanization and disempowerment of an ally, which serves to reaffirm the superiority of the Warden and the civilization she represents. To some extent, this chapter expands upon the argument made in the previous chapter: that appealing to ethical principles and moral beliefs can serve to justify already

familiar patterns of behaviour, including the acquisition of goods, and violence against an enemy Other.

To begin, I will briefly describe the Dalish Elf origin story and the battle at Ostagar, as I experienced them in my most recent play-through of the game. These events set the stage for the master quest, which is composed of numerous main quests. The next section breaks down the main quests into a series of steps and outlines some of the different ways in which this pattern is articulated. This is followed by a more in-depth discussion of one of the main quests, titled “The Nature of the Beast,” which overtly references real world cultures through the reproduction of the myth of the White Messiah and the stereotype of the ecologically noble savage. The next section covers the master quest and the defeat of the darkspawn. Here I argue that these monsters represent the perfect enemy, and their depiction as apolitical beings—as obstacles that stand in the way of freedom and progress—mirrors the logic used to legitimize the use of violence in real life conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere.

### **Beginnings**

Playing as a female Dalish elf warrior, one of six potential origin stories,<sup>21</sup> the game begins in a forest where Lyna, the soon-to-be-Warden, is hunting with her friend Tamlen. The two elves stumble across a group of humans, who tell them about an ancient ruin they discovered in a cave. Lyna must then decide whether to kill them or to let them go. After the decision is made, Tamlen insists on finding and exploring the cave before

---

<sup>21</sup> The other five origin stories include the City Elf, the Human Noble, the Mage, the Dwarf Commoner, and the Dwarf Noble origins. These stories begin in Denerim, Highever, the Circle Tower, or Orzammar, and end when Duncan recruits the future Warden and takes him or her to the king’s camp at Ostagar.

returning to the camp. In the center of the ruin the pair discover a mysterious mirror, which releases a flash of magical energy when Tamlen touches its surface, knocking Lyna unconscious. Lyna wakes up in the camp two days later and discovers that Duncan, a Grey Warden, has rescued her from the ruins and returned her to her clan. Tamlen is still missing, however, and Lyna is sent back to the cave to find him. There she once again encounters Duncan, who informs her that she has been tainted by the magic mirror, and must join the Grey Wardens in order to save her life. When Lyna refuses, Duncan invokes the Right of Conscription, forcing her to leave her clan and travel with him to Ostagar.

Though the circumstances that force the player character to leave her home will vary a great deal depending on the selected origin story, these narrative branches all converge on Ostagar. Aside from a few lines of dialogue and various side quests, every player who completes this section of the game will experience roughly the same events. Like all the other potential player characters, Lyna is sent into the Korkari Wilds along with the Grey Warden Alistair, and two other recruits. Duncan instructs the group to collect three vials of darkspawn blood and recover a set of ancient treaties. When they return, the recruits are commanded to complete the Joining, a ritual that requires them to drink from a vial of darkspawn blood. The other two recruits are killed during the ritual, however Lyna survives and joins the ranks of the Grey Wardens.

The following day, the king's general, Teryn Loghain, betrays King Cailan and the Wardens, ordering his men to retreat and abandoning the king and the Wardens in the midst of a battle with the darkspawn. His actions plunge Ferelden into a civil war, dividing its people and distracting them from the more pressing danger of the Blight. As



the only surviving Grey Wardens, Alistair and Lyna are told to gather an army using the treaties they recovered in the Korkari Wilds. Together with Morrigan, a Witch of the Wilds, and a growing group of companions, the party travels first to the village of Lothering, and then to various other locations across Ferelden.

### **There and Back Again: Main Quests**

The Warden's journey from relative obscurity to legendary fame is guided by the main quests, each of which can be understood as a series of interrelated tasks that must be completed in order to progress in the game. Main quests consist of many of the same activities and interactions involved in side quests, and are structured according to a similar logic, which is outlined in this section. Though the beginning of a main quest is often set in stone, narrative or temporal branching occurs every time the player is offered a dialogue choice, presenting different versions of a story that always concludes with the death of the archdemon and the end of the Blight.

As Jeff Howard (2008) points out, there is a significant difference between spatial and temporal branching, both of which are implemented in DAO. Spatial branching refers to the creation of multiple areas, each of which triggers a specific chain of events. Major areas such as cities or forests can be linked to multiple subsections, such as buildings or caves, which also contain triggers. The major areas or hubs in DAO are depicted as labeled symbols on the map of Ferelden, and each of the main quests is tied to one of these major locations, which include the Korkari Wilds, Lothering, the Brecilian Forest, the Circle Tower, Orzammar, Redcliffe, and Denerim. After the Warden has travelled from the Korkari Wilds to Lothering, the player can choose between any of the remaining hubs, which also serve as distribution points for a multitude of side quests.

Unlike side quests, main quests are frequently introduced by lengthy cut-scenes and dialogue sequences. For example, travelling to Redcliffe Village will trigger “The Arl of Redcliffe” quest and a cut-scene in which a panicked villager tells the Warden about monsters that are attacking the village. The villager then brings the party to see his leader, Bann Teagan, who explains the situation in depth and requests their help in fending off the attackers. After this point, temporal branching occurs, meaning that the story diverges as the decisions made by the player cause different events to take place over time. Often, but not always, the difference is slight and built on elements that are relatively easy to substitute. For instance, a different character may appear, or a different reward will be offered, while the general pattern of events remain the same.

Each main quest involves solving the problems that have befallen the people that the Warden has come to recruit in order to gain their support or allegiance. These problems are accompanied by a clearly outlined set of tasks, which are recorded in the journal and organized under one of six titles. All the main quests follow the same basic design, which is described below:

- 1) The party arrives at a stronghold or refuge, such as a camp, a village, or an underground city.
- 2) Here the Warden is informed that hostiles have overrun a nearby location that was once civilized or safe but has now become wild and dangerous. Meanwhile, internal weakness and monstrous, external forces are threatening to destroy the refuge and its inhabitants. In order to stop this from happening, the Warden must find a powerful individual who is “hidden” somewhere in the wilderness. Generally the plea for help is conveyed through a leader or other important character.

- 3) The party ventures into the wilderness where they must defeat enemies and overcome traps and other obstacles in order to progress.
- 4) After travelling through a series of hostile, maze-like environments, the party discovers the lair of the powerful individual.
- 5) A second plea for help is made and the Warden must choose a side, either before or during the ensuing fight. Generally there is a moral dimension to the decision (one or more of the individuals involved can be “saved”), and some companions will attempt to sway the Warden one way or another.
- 6) When the hostile characters are defeated, there is a dialogue in which the Warden may be presented with another choice or given the opportunity to persuade one of the characters to make a decision. In all cases, the internal weakness is cured, or the sufferers are eliminated.
- 7) The party returns to the refuge and is thanked by the beneficiaries of the quest. This is generally, but not always, the same group who made the initial plea for help. The quest is complete.

Northrop Frye's (2007) theory of myths suggests that we might read these events as representative of the movement from the demonic to the apocalyptic. As Frye puts it, The analogies of innocence and experience represent the adaptation of myth to nature: they give us, not the city and the garden at the final goal of human vision, but the process of building and planting. The fundamental form of process is cyclical movement, the alternation of success and decline, effort and repose, life and death. (147)

In DAO, this cyclical rhythm recurs in multiple forms, as multiple quests, and is prompted in each case by a monstrous external threat (including darkspawn, demons, werewolves, and the undead) and an internal weakness that plagues the community. This weakness takes on multiple forms, manifesting as political deadlock, demonic possession, poison, or a magical curse, however it inevitably creates the condition of necessity that forces the Warden to take on the quest, both for the sake of the people involved, and in order to secure their help against the Blight. Always arriving just in time, the Warden acts as a catalyst, forcing the Wheel of Fortune upwards after a period of decline. Her ability to appear precisely when and where she is needed most, and her capacity to succeed where others have failed, are just two of the properties that distinguish her from the rest of her kind and mark her as a superior being. At the same time, however, the player is also encouraged to empathize and align herself with the civilization she is trying to save. By coming to understand their plight and share their goals, if not their weaknesses, the player/Warden ultimately becomes their champion.

Many of the civilizations the Warden encounters in Ferelden borrow elements from “real world” cultures and societies, and despite the medieval veneer, both their virtues and their flaws appear to reflect contemporary concerns. At the same time, the historical events and power relations that produced those concerns are simplified, abstracted, or removed from the picture entirely. Though a great deal is dependent on the interpretation of the individual player, the Warden’s role in returning the kingdom to a state of order can be understood as enacting an imaginative solution to what Jameson (1981) calls “unresolvable social contradictions” (79). While in real life problems and solutions are often messy and ambiguous, the Warden’s path is smoothly paved and

clearly marked, as are the groups and individuals involved. By employing stereotypes and narratives built around binary oppositions, the game allows the player to quickly determine what must be done and why.

Binary oppositions give rise to binary choices, which means that all too frequently the choices presented to a player during a main quest are restricted to choosing a side in the upcoming fight. Though these sides are not necessarily purely good or evil, characters may still be associated with one or another based on their principle investments or interests. While one side usually stands for honour or peace, the other is interested in attaining power or enacting violence, often for the sake of what appears to be a “good” cause.

This is particularly evident in Orzammar, the city of the dwarves. When the Warden arrives, she discovers that the city has been closed off to outsiders due to an ongoing dispute over who will become Orzammar’s next king. Upon entering the city the Warden must first choose between two candidates for the dwarven throne. One is clearly honest and just, while the other resorts to underhanded tactics such as forgery to garner support. The decision appears to present an obvious choice between a moral character and an immoral character, with one caveat: the later candidate may be more successful in reforming Orzammar’s out-dated and prejudiced policies, a possibility that would theoretically be good for the city as a whole. Initially the Warden may speak to representatives of both parties, however she is eventually forced to pick one or the other in order to proceed with the quest.



Figure 12. Picking sides

Later in the quest the Warden is given another binary choice between Branka, a dwarf who has willingly sacrificed all of her followers in an attempt to acquire a powerful artefact known as the Anvil of the Void, and Caridin, a golem<sup>22</sup> that wants to destroy the artefact Branka is after. Though Branka claims she is trying to restore Orzammar to its former glory, Caridin warns that using the Anvil requires the torture and enslavement of innocent souls. Earlier in the quest it is suggested that Orzammar's military might is of crucial importance, because the city is the first line of defence against the darkspawn, and the only thing preventing them from overwhelming the rest of Ferelden. As such, the decision to save or destroy the Anvil seems to be an important one. However the player cannot do either without killing Branka or Caridin. Selecting

---

<sup>22</sup> Golems are magically animated constructs of metal or stone. According to the lore, Caridin invented golems and created the Anvil of the Void. When Caridin refused to continue creating golems at the behest of the king, he was turned into a golem himself.

either option will initiate a fight and, once the opponent is defeated, resolve the political stalemate that has crippled Orzammar. Regardless of what choice the player makes, combat is still the only means by which she is able to solve the city's problems in her effort to defeat the darkspawn.

The impact of the decision on the rest of the game is minimal, with the exception of the fact that siding with Branka and preserving the Anvil (she can also be persuaded to destroy it) grants the Warden an army of golems to fight against the darkspawn at the end of the game, while siding with Caridin or Branka and destroying the Anvil yields an army of dwarves. Additionally, the text displayed during the epilogue, which appears when the player completes the game, varies depending on the decisions made during the main quests. This same pattern, which acknowledges the player's choice with a different army and a different epilogue text, is repeated for each of the four main quests that take place after the battle at Ostagar, and before the confrontation with Loghain, the traitor, in Denerim.

While these forms of acknowledgment are not necessarily unimportant, they had little impact on my own decision-making. In general I tended to make choices based on my assessment of the moral qualities of the characters involved, rather than the potential long-term consequences. Having never fully bought into the idea that the ends justify the means, I was more inclined to side with "good" conservative characters such as Lord Harrowmont and Caridin, than with more ambitious but also more progressive characters such as Bhelen and Branka. This conservative streak, which I believe is motivated by a fear of social upheaval and unregulated change, is something I have only recently become

aware of (and resistant towards), though it has long shaped how I play RPGs, including the various ways in which I have learned to approach “the Other” in games.

### **The Nature of the Beast**

Though most of DAO revolves around (primarily white) human characters, the recruitment of the dwarves and elves allows the player to align herself with and assimilate racial Others. To illustrate, I will describe a few of the stories and events that occur during one of the main quests, entitled “The Nature of the Beast.” This quest is, I believe, particularly revealing of the ways in which contemporary politics and race relations can become interwoven with moral codes of conduct in DAO. By drawing on the stereotype of the ecologically noble savage and characterizing the elves as helpless, innocent victims, the quest provides a moral justification for a self-aggrandizing quest to “save” the elves. The original description of the quest, which is recorded in the Warden’s journal, reads:

Gain the cooperation of the Dalish clans: The wandering Dalish elves, if brought together, are a force to be reckoned with. While they remain suspicious of outsiders, they may still honor the old Grey Warden treaties. Go to the Dalish elves and seek their help to fight the Blight.

After travelling to the Brecilian Forest by clicking on the appropriate icon on the world map, the Warden is introduced in a cut-scene to Zathrian, the leader, or keeper, of a clan of Dalish elves. Zathrian guesses why the Warden has come, but expresses his regret that his clan cannot live up to the promises they’ve made. As he explains their situation to the Warden, Zathrian places great emphasis on the tragedy of the event, and the innocence of



those involved. During his tale, injured elves cry out in pain, as the camera pans across their writhing bodies, providing a dramatic display of their suffering:

I would have taken the clan north by now, had we the ability to move. Sadly, as you can see, we do not. Do not allow our troubles to burden you, though I suspect they may impact your mission... The clan came to the Brecilian Forest one month ago, as is our custom when we come to this part of Ferelden. We are always wary of the dangers in the forest, but we did not expect the werewolves would be lying in wait for us. They ambushed us, and though we drove the beasts back, much damage was done. Many of our warriors lie dying as we speak. Even with all our magic and healing skill, we will eventually be forced to slay our brethren to prevent them from becoming beasts. The Blight's evil must be stopped, but we are in no position to uphold our obligations. I am truly sorry.

Zathrian concludes by telling the Warden that the werewolves' curse, which has now infected his clan, originated with a possessed wolf named Witherfang, who transformed the humans that lived in the forest into werewolves. He explains that if the Warden can venture into the forest to find and kill this wolf, he may be able to use the beast's heart to cure the injured elves. Zathrian presents this as the only possible solution to a problem that is based on a clear division between good and evil, victims and aggressors, allies and enemies. In this moment there is little ambiguity as to what is the right course of action, and indeed there is little choice. Rejecting the quest will only postpone the inevitable, as the Warden must eventually return and complete the quest in order to end the Blight and complete the game. Accepting the quest, on the other hand, affirms the Warden's role as the brave and virtuous hero.

Before she enters the forest, which is filled with hostile NPCs, the Warden may spend some time interacting with the friendly elves in the camp by clicking on them. As in most locations, NPCs, both friendly and hostile, are divided between those with generic titles, such as “Elf Woman,” and those with individualized names. The first group will say only a few words to the Warden, and though they may help to convey the impression that the camp is an inhabited space, in most respects they resemble moving cardboard cutouts. Clicking on individually named NPCs, on the other hand, will often initiate a dialogue sequence, providing the Warden with a chance to respond. A number of these named NPCs are quest givers, and offering to resolve their troubles will open up multiple side quests that can be pursued alongside the main quest for additional experience and rewards. When a quest giver named Elora expresses her worry that she cannot communicate with one of the halla—deer-like creatures that guide the Dalish clans and help to pull their carriages—because the creature is distraught and possibly sick, the Warden can offer to help by soothing or killing the halla. Athras, another quest giver, explains that he would like to go into the forest to find his wife, who went missing during the attack, but does not want to risk provoking the werewolves and endangering the clan. The Warden can then agree to look for his wife, or she can refuse the quest and forfeit the possibility of a reward.



Figure 13. Helping a Dalish elf

These side quests and the conversations surrounding them appear to offer the player insight into the elves' general concerns and collective values. In most cases, the elves will ask for help out of a love for another, while proffering rewards as tokens of gratitude. The internal conflicts that characterize human societies and are manifested in the game in the form of civil wars, criminal gangs, slavery, etc., are foreign to the elves. They make no attempts to take advantage of one another, despite the desperate situation, and they have little understanding (or at least make little mention) of the world outside their tight-knit community. Taken together, their stories project an idealized image of a proud yet innocent people who maintain a special connection with nature.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Note that city elves are excluded from this characterization, even by the Dalish elves in the game, who refer to their city-dwelling counterparts as "flat-ears." According to the Dalish, the city elves have lost touch with their heritage, and are thus more like humans than true elves.

Though the Warden may only speak to a few individuals, these traits are attributed to the elven race as a whole through historical narratives and legends, which appear to be drawn from aboriginal or tribal cultures, but refer most clearly to the stereotype of the ecologically noble savage (Grande 1999). Sandy Grande (1999) argues that stereotypes serve to simplify the complexities of diversity and diaspora, and can also function to naturalize a current social arrangement. For Grande, the portrayal of Native Americans as primitive, subhuman creatures helps to maintain “the proper distance” between Indians and civilized white society, allowing for the domination and subjugation of the former by the later. While in recent years environmentalists have used the image of a “primitive people living at one with nature” (311) to critique the artificial and oppressive workings of Western society, rather than to assert its superiority, Grande claims that the idea that Native Americans are uncorrupted by and separated from modern civilization remains reductive and dehumanizing, even when it is cast in a positive light. Though the myth of the ecologically noble savage may serve as convenient shorthand for the notion that human beings must learn to live in harmony with the natural world, it produces a set of expectations that are too often applied to real people, complicating efforts to forge “an effective contemporary Indian identity” (319).

Grande’s analysis of the implications of stereotyping for Native American communities suggests that even in a fantasy context, relying on stereotypes can be problematic. The similarities between the representation of the elves and the racialized stereotype of the ecologically noble savage are hard to dismiss, particularly when combined with historical narratives that repeatedly portray the elves as victims of human imperialists. The history of the elves, which is conveyed through cut-scenes, codex

entries, and conversations, describes the enslavement of the elves, the destruction of their homeland, and their struggle to revive their dying culture. One codex entry, titled

“Arlathan: Part One,” contrasts the ancient elves to the humans in the following passage:

Before the ages were named or numbered, our people were glorious and eternal and never-changing. Like the great oak tree, they were constant in their traditions, strong in their roots, and ever reaching for the sky...Called shemlen, or “quicklings,” by the ancients, the humans were pitiful creatures whose lives blinked by in an instant. When they first met the elves, the humans were brash and warlike, quick to anger and quicker to fight, with no patience for the unhurried pace of elven diplomacy.

From the very beginning, the narrative constructs the peaceful elves as Other to the dominant, aggressive, and more technologically advanced human civilizations. This difference, as “Arlathan: Part Two” suggests, led to the fall of the elves and their homeland: “It is said that the Tevinter magisters used their great destructive power to force the very ground to swallow Arlathan whole, destroying eons of collected knowledge, culture, and art.” Positioned against a historical backdrop that parallels the history of European colonialism writ large, the quest to save the Dalish begins to look less like a fantasy trope, and more like an opportunity to imaginatively resolve, or at least alleviate, anxieties surrounding contemporary race relations and the adverse socioeconomic circumstances that continue to plague a disproportionate number of Aboriginal peoples and communities. As with the example of the tour book described in the first chapter, the game presents the Dalish as a domesticated, Westernized version of

the aboriginal Other. Unlike the tour book, however, DAO invites players to *interact* with the Other, to treat them in a way that befits their status as helpless, colonized victims.

As I have stated before, this reading depends as much on the conditions of interpretation as it does on the conditions of production. Having grown up in a Canadian town close to an Innu community, I am perhaps pre-inclined to make a connection between the Dalish and my perceptions of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, as well as contemporary American portrayals of Native Americans—a frame of reference that may be less ready-to-hand for other players from other backgrounds. While I am acutely aware that issues such as residential segregation and cultural assimilation are far too convoluted and divergent to be solved by any one individual, to my mind this makes the simplified depiction of the Dalish and their plight, and the unambiguous role of the Warden as hero, all the more attractive. By rearticulating postcolonial conditions in abstract and stylized terms, and providing the player with a clear initiative, the game enables the Warden to perform a symbolic act of redemption that serves both to maintain the purity of an “uncorrupted” people (by removing the unnatural curse), and to right the wrongs of the past by helping those who were persecuted and oppressed. Siding with the Dalish also allows the player to validate their ecological message, making the Warden the defender of nature as well indigenous culture.

Though the Warden might be Dalish herself, her identity as a Grey Warden supersedes her origins, making her all the more capable of fulfilling what David Brooks (2010) calls “The White Messiah fable,” in which a white hero arrives amongst a group of natives, discovers their spiritual purity, and leads them to victory against the corrupted members of “his” own people, in this case the humans who have been transformed into

werewolves. Brooks argues that this formula can be found in numerous movies, including *A Man Called Horse*, *Dances with Wolves*, *Pocahontas*, and *Avatar*. Like the hero in the movie *Avatar*, the Warden may wear the skin of the people she is trying to save, but as a Grey Warden, a supporter of the Ferelden monarchy, and a representative of the dominant human civilization, she cannot identify with the elves entirely. This difference is emphasized when she proves to be better than every elf in the clan, possessing traits that other members of the race seem to lack. Because of this deficiency, they are incapable of defending themselves, and are thus dependent on the White Messiah's aid. As Brooks puts it, "Natives can either have their history shaped by cruel imperialists or benevolent ones, but either way, they are going to be supporting actors in our journey to self-admiration."

David Baum (2010) pushes Brooks critique further by suggesting that, Films [such as *Avatar*] buttress a shift away from anti-racism political projects, which aim to redress deeply embedded, systematic, racialized inequalities in countries like South Africa and the United States...to multiculturalism political projects. The latter emphasize the need to respect cultural diversity, a worthy goal, but often at the expense of confronting directly histories of racial domination and structured social inequality...While *Avatar* projects Earth-bound racial and colonial conflicts into outer space, the freighted history and legacy of actual racism and colonialism largely drop out of the picture. (628)

In certain respects, the quest "The Nature of the Beast" does not in fact confront the nature of the beast, by which I mean the racialized thinking that allows Zathrian to attribute the crimes of a few individual human-werewolves to an entire race of people.

Rather it serves as a sort of obligatory diversion, a symbolic deliverance that does nothing to address the root of the problem.

Whether or not the quest's introduction succeeds in presenting the elves as a vulnerable people in need of salvation, the player initially has no choice but to follow along and perform the tasks that have been given to her. In order to find Witherfang, the Warden must venture deep into the Brecilian Forest, an ancient wilderness that is stalked by ravenous beasts and haunted by spirits and demons. In contrast to the Dalish camp, which represents a more civilized and carefully ordered form of nature, the "sinister forest," as Frye (2007, 138) names it, is vicious and untamed—the sort of place that only a brave and powerful hero would willingly enter. After fighting her way through several different environments, and numerous groups of hostile NPCs, the Warden discovers the Lair of the Werewolves. Here she meets an NPC called the Lady of the Forest. In a cut-scene, the Lady of the Forest reveals that it was Zathrian who created the curse several centuries ago as an act of revenge for the rape and death of his children, and asks the Warden to convince Zathrian to end the curse. In this final sequence, the division between good and evil, civilized nature and untamed wilderness, is transposed from the environment to the individual characters. As Zathrian explains, the Lady and Witherfang are the same creature: "her nature is that of the forest itself, beautiful and terrible, serene and savage, maiden and beast...two sides of a single being." These two sides are reflected in the werewolves, whose violent, bestial exterior masks a rational and humane soul. Zathrian, on the other hand, is the inverse of the werewolves, for while he appears to be a wise and devoted leader, inside he is consumed by a senseless rage.



Although siding with the werewolves might have seemed unthinkable at the beginning of the quest, the secret shifts the burden of guilt from the werewolves to Zathrian, thus replacing one innocent party (the elves) for another (the werewolves). In order to resolve the conflict between the two parties, the player must select from one of several dialogue options. The Warden may either convince the werewolves to attack the Dalish camp, kill Witherfang with or without Zathrian's aid, or help Witherfang to defeat Zathrian, who can then be killed or persuaded to lift the curse. This final option requires the death of both Zathrian and the Lady/Witherfang, however it also transforms the werewolves back into humans and cures the elves suffering from the curse.



Figure 14. The Lady and the werewolves plead for help

Though players may find other, more creative ways to resist the uneven relation set up between the elves and the Warden, attacking the Dalish camp is the only obvious, playable option that clearly allows the Warden to deviate from the role of the White

Messiah. It is also the most difficult to bring about, requiring significant powers of persuasion<sup>24</sup> on the part of the Warden. Furthermore, the choice can negatively impact gameplay, as it removes the Warden's access to an unlimited supply of elfroot, an herb used to craft healing potions, which are particularly useful in high-level combat. Finally, there is no obvious explanation for why the Warden (as opposed to the werewolves or the Lady) would be the one to suggest killing the elves, forcing players that are concerned with the consistency of their character to invent a motive for the Warden or to rationalize the decision by some other means.

Personally I found this choice repellent, and did not attempt it, likely because I had already accepted the premise that the elves as a whole were innocent. The ability to double-cross the Dalish does, however, present an interesting opportunity to disrupt the binary spatial politics established at the beginning of the quest, apparently allowing the Warden to align herself with the savage side of nature. On the other hand, the divide between the civilized camp and the untamed wilderness has arguably already been transposed, personified, and preserved in the form of Zathrian and the Lady/Witherfang, who are not singular entities, but Cartesian bodies and minds. Like the noble savage who is depicted as both primitive and pure, these dualistic characters embody a particular set of hopes and fears that are reflected first in the contrast between landscapes, then in the conflict between peoples, finally emerging as an inherent division that exists in each individual.

---

<sup>24</sup> Persuasion is one of several skills that can be leveled up during the course of the game. During dialogue sequences, some options may be preceded by the word (persuade) written in brackets. If the Warden has a sufficiently high level of persuasion, and a high level of cunning, she will successfully persuade the character she is talking with to agree to or follow the selected course of action.

If the climactic moments of the main quest allow for a brief transgression or reconsideration of the boundaries that differentiate inside and outside, self and other, good and evil, it is at best a temporary realignment. Upon beginning the next quest, the Warden is always reined in and returned to her rightful place as the hero of Ferelden and the champion of its civilization. As Angela Jane Weisl (2003) notes, while the middle of a romance may provide a world of possibilities, allowing for experimentation and the reassignment and revision of traditional roles, the ending reverses that potential and ultimately reconfirms the status quo (151). At the end of the day the Warden's quest is not about changing the world, but about putting it back the way it was, at least for me. By providing limited room for deviation and presenting change in a largely negative light, often in the form of a disease or invasion, the game potentially portrays a conservative agenda as the only right course of action—a notion which I have already internalized to some degree, and am therefore more than willing to accept.

More specifically, “The Nature of the Beast” contains a lesson: if the humans had only left the elves alone, their problems would not have occurred in the first place. Like *Avatar*, it “presents an all-too-easy moral response to inter-racial or intercultural encounters: simply leave ‘others’ alone in their homelands” (Baum 2010, 632). As Miguel Sicart (2011) argues, however, this meaning is not pre-determined:

Games structure play, facilitate it by means of rules. This is not to say that rules determine play: they focus it, they frame it, but they are still subject to the very act of play. Play, again, is an act of appropriation of the game by players.

Lessons are only effective if players choose to listen and heed their advice. The danger, however, lies in taking the lesson for granted, while ignoring the reality that the fantasy

world obscures. In other words, players such as myself may act because they feel that what they are doing is “right,” without considering why it is right, or examining the motives that led them to choose one course of action over another.

### **Defeating the Darkspawn: The Master Quest**

Though the main quests are adventures in and of themselves, all of them ultimately serve one end. By uniting various distinct races and cultures under a single banner and fighting any enemies that get in the way, the hero accumulates the necessary wealth and power to end the invasion of the darkspawn, otherwise known as the Blight. As carriers of a disease-like taint, the darkspawn destroy or warp every living thing they touch, creating, from the inside out, the inorganic demonic world described by Frye as encompassing “deserts, rocks, and wasteland...dreadful night...the great ruins of pride” (138) and so forth. Frequently referred to as horrible, monstrous creatures by other characters, the darkspawn are rendered as voiceless objects. Surrounded by red circles that mark them as hostile NPCs, they are invariably violent, and will attack on sight, excluding any opportunity for dialogue, even among those that seem capable of speech.



Figure 15. The darkspawn

According to the teachings of the Chantry, which are relayed in the game's opening cut-scene, the first darkspawn were originally men from the Tevinter Imperium—powerful mages who attempted to enter the Golden City, the Chantry's heaven and the seat of their god, the Maker. However the moment they crossed the threshold, it was tainted by their sins, and the mages were cast out, "twisted and cursed by their own corruption." The darkspawn brought the world to the brink of annihilation during the first Blight, until the arrival of the Grey Wardens, "who sacrificed everything to stem the tide of darkness." The darkspawn were then driven underground, but have returned to the surface every few hundred years under the leadership of a draconic creature known as an archdemon. DAO begins in the midst of the fifth Blight, after 400 years of relative peace.

The main focus of the game's narrative arc is the ongoing conflict between the Grey Wardens and the darkspawn, and it is here that the binary oppositions that structure the game are the most evident and perhaps the least complex. As Cory Grewell (Fugelso 2010) observes,

One of the most prominent themes of neomedievalist forms of art and entertainment—including literature, film, and most notably, video games—is the staging of a struggle between good and evil wherein the viewer/player is often encouraged to identify with the good and, in the case of neomedievalist gaming, take an active role in defeating evil, which is often viewed as constitutively 'other' than the forces of good (38).

In his book *Polemics*, translated by Steve Corcoran, French philosopher Alain Badiou (2006) remarks that, “although the idea of radical Evil can be traced back at least as far as Kant, its contemporary version is grounded systematically on one ‘example’: the Nazi extermination of the European Jews” (172). As a measure of absolute Evil and a symbolic call to action, references to the extermination and the Nazis have been repeatedly employed by politicians and the press alongside universalized notions of the West to justify any and all forms of military violence on the part of “democratic” countries, including the invasion of non-democratic or dictatorial countries. This is particularly true of the current War on Terror, which has been imagined variably as a campaign of rightful vengeance, a defensive reaction, and a “war of (democratic) Good versus (dictatorial) Evil” (40). Badiou argues that the war is bought and sold through the lens of an “ethical ideology” that depoliticizes political acts with an appeal to the defense or protection of abstract human rights. By relying on universalized notions of harm and

humanity, this essentially conservative vision of ethics (which is related to the multiculturalism projects identified by Baum) aims to replace difference with consensus, and violence with justice.

A similar logic underlies the epic struggle between the hordes of attacking darkspawn, and the small group of defenders known as the Grey Wardens. As inhuman entities, the darkspawn lack political, cultural, economic, or religious motives and are entirely beyond pity or compassion. In most respects, they are the perfect enemy, and they permit the execution of a perfect violence untainted by guilt or regret. There is no need to depoliticize their actions because they are already apolitical. There is no need to question the necessity of war, because the violence and destruction caused by the darkspawn is evident, omnipresent, and otherwise unstoppable. There is no need to question who the enemy is, because the entire race is uniformly evil. There is no need to worry about civilian casualties because the darkspawn and other red-circled enemies are, for the most part, the only ones who can be killed in the game. There is no need to question how to fight them (this is explained in the tutorials) or whether or not it is right to do so (this is explained in the opening cut-scene). In short, there is no need to ask any of the troubling questions that threaten to undermine attempts to legitimize military interventions in the Middle East and elsewhere. This is not to say that DAO directly fosters support for the War on Terror, but rather by repeating the patterns that form the ideological foundations of pro-war propaganda, and portraying war as an inevitable outcome in the struggle between good and evil, it participates in naturalizing a perception of conflict that is devoid of context, and stripped of political significance or ethical qualms.

The indiscriminate killing of the darkspawn in DAO seems to satisfy an appetite for violence, however I would argue that it is the justification for that violence that is the more satisfying and important element of the experience. This is partly supported by the relationship between the game's environments and its quests, which consistently position darkspawn and other hostile NPCs between the player and the indicated goal. Jeff Howard (2008) suggests that when "the player experiences a drive toward a target in space...every object or character that intervenes between him and this target is an obstacle that must be overcome" (45). Even if the player would rather avoid the darkspawn, narrow corridors within the maze-like environments frequently make it impossible to do so. Cutting them down thus becomes the only way to move forward and progress in the game.

The visual depiction of the areas occupied by large groups of darkspawn is also highly suggestive. Grotesque growths, fires, severed limbs, and stakes contaminate the environment, which is often emptied of all other signs of life. C. Richard King and David Leonard (2010) argue that the "erasure of the consequences of war, [and] the absence of 'civilization' justifies intervention, control, and mastery of unused space both within real and virtual projects of colonization" (91). The authors' argument is meant to apply to war videogames, by which they seem to mean military-themed first-person shooters, however this ambiguous moniker might also encompass a wide range of fantasy and science fiction games that are thematically centred on war. Although DAO is not pretending to represent anything like a real country, or real armies, or real military operations, a great deal of its gameplay consists of moving through and mapping a space while eliminating any and all threats that stand in the way. Meanwhile, the ability to magically heal



wounds, the abrupt shift from life to death, and the disappearing bodies all reinforce what King and Leonard (2010) call an “erroneous vision of the cleanliness of war” (100). There may be plenty of blood spilled during a fight, but when the dust clears, the Warden’s opponents are never left writhing on the ground, screaming or begging for mercy: the game lacks the animations, the sound effects, and the scripting needed to depict this unpleasant reality. Either the enemies are alive, full-bodied, and capable of fighting, or they are dead and motionless, leaving behind nothing but bones and a few sparkling, body-shaped containers that can be looted for items and gold.

Like most NPCs, the darkspawn are portrayed as a relatively homogenous race or species, and behave according to a hive mentality that is more insect-like than human. Though the darkspawn are organized according to loose hierarchies, ranging from grunts to alphas, their presence is associated with chaos and civil war, and they act as the antithesis to the Grey Wardens and the Ferelden monarchs, the representatives of peace and order. Re-establishing order requires the defeat of the draconian archdemon, the leader of the darkspawn. After gathering an army of elves, dwarves, mages, and men, the Warden fights her way to the top of a tall tower, where she confronts the archdemon and defeats him in combat with the help of her allies. For Frye (2007),

This is the symbolic presentation of the point at which the undisplaced apocalyptic world and the cyclical world of nature come into alignment...the point of epiphany. Its most common settings are the mountain-top, the island, the tower, the lighthouse, and the ladder or staircase (189).

In DAO this epiphany, which represents the story’s turning point and a transition from one world to another, is marked by an important decision. Unless the Warden has

previously agreed to allow her companion Morrigan to perform an ancient ritual that will spare the life of the Grey Warden who strikes the killing blow (a ritual which has an unknown but potentially sinister outcome), one of three characters must die. Will the Warden sacrifice herself in order to destroy the archdemon, or will she allow a fellow Grey Warden to take the fall for her?

Though the player's answer to this question determines whether the Warden lives or dies, none of the available options diminish the Warden's status at the end of the game. As Angela Jane Weisl (2003) notes, "the hero can fail to win, but he cannot fail to be heroic" (126). In life or in death the Warden will maintain her position as the Hero of Ferelden, in part because the death of the Grey Wardens is figured much differently from that of their enemies. Though the darkspawn are (literally) programmed to throw themselves against the Warden and her allies, even when they are obviously outmatched, their suicidal actions are only capable of engendering senseless chaos. The Warden's death, on the other hand, brings about order and salvation for the entire continent of Thedas. Like the Biblical stories of the martyred saints, the Warden's self-sacrifice is depicted as tragic and heroic, whereas the deaths of the darkspawn are empty and meaningless.

Several authors have examined videogames set in contexts similar to that of the War on Terror in order to explore how collective fears and desires related to the war are articulated in fictional game worlds (see Sample 2008; Bogost 2007; Galloway 2006). However I would argue that our understandings of these events may also be reflected in settings that have no apparent resemblance to modern-day war zones. Though the implications of DAO's medieval setting will be explored in more detail in the next

chapter, Frye's (2007) observation about romance may be pertinent here. "Romance," he writes, "is characterized by the acceptance of pity and fear, which in ordinary life relate to pain, as forms of pleasure. It turns fear at a distance, or terror, into the adventurous" (35). One of the ways in which DAO succeeds in replacing terror with pleasure is by reducing the deaths of the darkspawn to predictable non-events. When approached in conjunction with terrorism, which according to Jean Baudrillard (2001) relies on the "absolute weapon of death" (135), it is possible to see how the unremarkable annihilation of the darkspawn may provide a comforting alternative to the transformative power enacted by suicide bombers and kamikazes (135). Although the darkspawn remain a threat, they are deprived of the symbolic power of sacrifice, or death in the name of a greater cause. Their wanton destruction apparently lacks political purpose or social significance, and while the Warden is able to transcend the cyclical world of nature in the moment of epiphany, becoming immortalized as a heroic legend, the darkspawn are doomed to endlessly repeat the cycle of life and death, dying and re-emerging with every new Blight.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have attempted to explain the general structure of the main quests as a series of steps. Following this I outlined my interpretation of "The Nature of the Beast," a main quest which I believe is indicative of the ways in which racial stereotypes and binary oppositions can be employed in order to legitimize the Warden's role as a hero of "the people." In some cases, the problematic relation between the superior Warden and the inferior "Other" may lead players to resist this role, by, for example, choosing to side against the elves rather than participating in the myth of the White

Messiah. In my own play-throughs, however, I tended to take this relationship for granted, often taking pleasure in my ability to help the Dalish.

I have also explored the master quest and its relation to current events and conceptions of war. Aside from the shared focus on combat as a means of achieving justice or other forms of resolution, I believe the two quests are interconnected in the sense that they both deal with “foreign” races and cultures in ways that appear, at least on the surface, to be ethically rather than politically motivated. Though there are also numerous other quests that I have not managed to cover thus far, I have had to be selective to account for the fact that the full extent of the game far exceeds the scope of a single thesis.

In the following chapter I will discuss the importance of the game’s medieval setting and how it fits into the broader trend of neomedievalism. drawing on a variety of authors to explore neomedievalism’s relation to history, magic, technology, and pleasure, as evinced through DAO and other neomedievalist products. The final section examines the meaning of the word quest and its nearest equivalent in videogames: mission.

## CHAPTER 5: NEOMEDIEVALISM

### Introduction

The term neomedievalism was first coined by Umberto Eco (Fugelso 2010, 12), who used the term to describe a return to, a search for, or a dream of the Middle Ages. In *Studies in Medievalism XIX: Defining Neomedievalism(s)*, edited by Karl Fugelso (2010), a number of scholars expand upon and refine the term. Many of the articles in the collection deal with the search for history and myth in the postmodern era. M. J. Towsell, for example, suggests that this search

might explain the massive thirst for the Middle Ages that inheres in the modern day, perhaps a thirst for roots and origins, perhaps a search for myth and apocalyptic explanation, perhaps a more complex engagement with the concepts of tradition and modernity (as Brian Stock would have it) as competing impulses in the postmodern world (Fugelso 2010, 54).

This chapter seeks to frame DAO as a neomedievalist product, drawing on researchers who have attempted, from various angles, to discover just what it is that drives us to consume “the Middle Ages in fragmented, repetitive tropes” (Fugelso 2010, 3). The first section explores the implications of projecting a non-existent, ahistorical past into the present or future. According to several authors (Fugelso 2010), neomedievalism’s denial of the distance between past and present has political relevance, in that it also leads to the denial of difference and the absorption of all of the Middle Ages into a homogenized Western vision of the medieval. The second section investigates the uneasy relationship between modern technology, science, and magic in videogames. Drawing on the events of Broken Circle, one of the main quests in DAO, I

argue that game's portrayal of magic and mages allows for a particular type of power fantasy that is disassociated from social, economic, or political concerns. The final section looks at the definition of quests in relation to the word mission, and describes how the connotations associated with the two terms might provide some insight into the widespread appeal of neomedieval fantasy worlds.

### **Projecting the Past Into the Present**

Though the boundaries are somewhat fuzzy, many scholars claim that there is indeed a distinct difference between neomedievalism and prior forms of medievalism (Fugelso 2010). Amy Kaufman suggests that neomedievalism is a deliberate distortion that departs from previous medievalisms in that it makes no attempt to model the Middle Ages, but is instead interested “in assimilating and consuming it” (5). When playing *Dragon Age: Origins*, I am certainly not inclined to believe that what I am experiencing is a genuine representation of the Western European Middle Ages, nor does the game make any claims to that effect. Instead what I perceive is a representation of an alternate world that is inherently malleable and inclusive but nevertheless abides by particular rules, a world that is recognizably “old” yet infused with references to contemporary pop culture. While some suggest that this new, seemingly more honest or self-aware approach to reinventing the Middle Ages may help to address our desire for an irretrievable past, Kaufman warns that it can also be dangerously reductive:

Despite its scattered and inclusive surface, neomedievalism tends to be homogenizing in what it selects from the past. If neomedievalism wants to erase the unknowable, erase distance, then it must also erase difference. Its rejection of history, its spirit of integrating past and present, often cause *all* of the Middle

Ages to be absorbed completely into a Western notion of the medieval: knights, European castles, court ladies, Christian spirituality. The dark side of neomedievalism's lingering attachment to medievalism is that it inherited a school of thought that developed at the height of Eurocentricism and cultural oppression, along with its tendencies to ignore, to demonize, or to assimilate the 'other' (Fugelso 2010, 8).

This tendency to "absorb and redefine" symbols and tropes from other cultures is precisely what seems to be at work in the essentialized representation of the Dalish elves as the "aboriginal people" of DAO. Though my critique in the previous chapter may seem unfair given that many other videogames are far less concerned with demonstrating the ties between racism and social and political inequalities, I believe that there is still a sense in which the Dalish ultimately serve as vehicles for "Western" fantasies of redemption and self-admiration. As helpless victims who are utterly reliant on the Warden's intervention, the elves may reinforce the stereotypical idea that aboriginal peoples are weak and incapable of supporting themselves. While such a stereotype might immediately raise alarms in a "realistic," modern-day setting, the elves are part of a world that is just far enough removed from the world of the people they are clearly supposed to represent that they (and the developers who created them) generally manage to avoid scrutiny.

While the events in the game are taking place, for the player, in the present tense, DAO's pseudo-medieval setting and mythic overtones may imply that the power relations and characterizations exhibited in the game are rooted in the distant past, and are therefore unchanging and, perhaps, unchangeable. But though DAO may draw upon the

trappings of history, it is remarkably ahistorical, making reference to broad sweeps of time rather than particular moments, peoples, or places. Oliver Traxel (Fugelso & Robinson 2008) suggests that this is typical of digital RPGs, which are usually more concerned with “evoking a general medieval ‘air’ than locating the narrative in a particular historical site” (130).

Despite vast differences in sociohistorical and material conditions, economic, social, and political models from different eras often seem to exist side-by-side in DAO. For example, neoliberalism’s focus on the accumulation of personal wealth, individualism, and risk-management is interwoven with elements of feudalism in the game. This historical anachronism ignores the fact that neoliberalism is founded on a notion of “the welfare state” that did not come into existence until well after the transition from feudalism to capitalism in most of Europe (Hall 2012; Wallerstein 1976).

One possible outcome of the conflation of neoliberalism and feudalism is that the former is able to take on the romantic associations generally attributed to the latter. Rather than being the products of a modern world run by CEOs and government officials, neoliberal values are inserted into an idealized feudal society characterized by honourable lords, brave knights, stately castles, and simple-minded villagers. In this context neoliberalism may also be granted the appearance of longevity, potentially legitimizing what is, in reality, a relatively recent development. Given that the statistical systems that Andrew Baerg (Voorhees et al. 2012) identifies with neoliberalism are frequently employed in both medieval fantasy and science fiction RPGs, it is possible that these games, as a whole, promote the idea that neoliberal rationalities are representative of historically transcendent, absolute truths. Aside from relating to contemporary life in a



globalized, free-market economy, neoliberal values are projected back to an imagined past, and forward into a fantastic future. By virtue of being everywhere at once, neoliberalism is represented as *the* way of living in the world, rather than *a* specific, and politically motivated ideological framework.

Similarly, the war against the darkspawn becomes simultaneously representative of no war and every war. Though DAO does make use of a number of familiar tropes that evoke the Western Middle Ages, including low-tech weaponry and armour, warrior kings and queens, and relatively small armies, any commitments to historical accuracy are made null and void by the inclusion of fantasy creatures and magical spells. Set in a parallel universe, the game maintains a significant and symbolic connection to our own world. Yet it is also not restricted to any singular time or place, making DAO's depiction of war potentially applicable to both contemporary and historical conflicts. As I have argued in the previous chapter, DAO redefines war as an unavoidable outcome of the perpetual struggle between the forces of good and evil. This portrayal may encourage players to see warfare as being generally motivated by ethical rather than political or economic concerns. The central conflict between the Grey Wardens and the darkspawn also falls in line with C. N. Manlove's (Schlobin 1982) generic description of fantasy, which he argues "tends to be moral in character, depicting the different natures of good and evil, and centrally concerned with viewing conduct in ethical terms... In science fiction the criterion is often one of adaptation, of adjustment to new situations for survival; in fantasy it is one of conduct, of how well or badly the characters behave by timehonoured standards" (30-31).

His use of the word “timehonoured” is, I believe, particularly important, as it suggests one of the key reasons why fantasy and neomedievalism so frequently overlap and serve to sustain one another. For all that the Middle Ages may be seen as “primitive,” it is also associated with the knightly virtues and chivalric heroes that are distinguished as much by their moral excellence as by their ability to display courage in the face of danger. The clear-cut, and seemingly selfless values exhibited by these knights in shining armour may represent a vision of morality that is, in and of itself, a lost object of desire. In their analysis of *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, another RPG developed by BioWare, Brent and Kevin Moberly (Fugelso & Robinson 2008) suggest that the game fits within “a much larger tradition of nostalgia for the ideals of the imagined past—ideals that are constructed in response to the perceived short-comings of the present” (161).

Oliver Traxel (Fugelso & Robinson 2008) notes that, “the Middle Ages stand out as being near enough to have continuities with modern Western cultures yet distant and ambiguous enough, particularly in the popular imagination, to allow great freedom of interpretation” (138). Interpretation here might refer either to the work of a game’s developers, or to the work of its players. Certainly there is no guarantee that the implicit messages I described above will be received uncritically, or that they will be interpreted in quite the way I have described. In fact many players have been quick to point out problematic representations within the game (as well as its advertising campaigns), which exist right alongside positive shifts towards more nuanced characters and interactions (for examples see Petite Chablis 2010; Introverted Wife 2010; VorpalsBunny 2011). Nevertheless, I believe that Kaufman’s point about neomedievalism helps to further

illuminate the ideological underpinnings of DAO and other commercial products that, to borrow Brent and Kevin Moberly's words, "produce a version of the medieval that can be seen and touched, bought and sold, and therefore owned" (Fugelso 2010, 15).

Once again, however, I must return to the question of why we might want to own a simulated past that has been made to appeal to an audience located in the here and now. One possible avenue of inquiry is to look at the widespread attraction to ruins, which are ubiquitous in DAO and may also serve to signify a long lost past. According to Tanya Krzywinska (2006), who draws on Walter Benjamin, ruins

cast an aura of mystery and nostalgia. The ruins of once splendid temples and cities act within the game (as in real life) as in memoriam signifiers of passed glory, representing in romanticized terms a lost object of desire...The presence of ruined temples to lost gods is one of the ways that World of Warcraft makes use of myth to connect to the real world, in this case drawing on 'magical revivalism' through 'new age' culture's promotion of knowledges and beliefs that fall outside rationalism and Christianity/monotheism, within which myth is often valued as a 'lost' way of seeing the world. (389).

Krzywinska's choice of words is highly suggestive, pointing to mystery and therefore curiosity or a desire for exploration and adventure, as well as anti-rationalism and nostalgia. Certainly I can sympathize with some, if not all of these sentiments. Often I find myself regretting that our planet has been so thoroughly explored, and having bought into the notion that the modern world is "disenchanted" (Saler 2012, 8), I find myself turning to fantasy and my own imagination in search of somewhere new. In "Utopian Effect/Utopian Pleasure," Peter Fitting (1991) argues that the pleasure derived

from novels with elaborate fantasy worlds is “produced by the evocation of the imaginary world itself” (92). The awareness that I am experiencing a “new” time and place causes me to be somewhat more forgiving when I come across unlikely scenarios. Though my critical faculties never disappear from the picture entirely, my longing to believe in an often heavily idealized and exciting new world makes me more likely, I think, to retract my claws for fear of spoiling what might otherwise be a highly pleasurable experience.

### **Magic and Technology**

In *The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art* Gary K. Wolfe points out that, “whatever we are to call ‘fantasy’ must first and foremost deal with the impossible” (Schlobin 1982, 1). Impossibility, however, is a slippery concept, one that, according to Wolfe, has social and affective as well as cognitive dimensions. Wolfe argues that, “since reality...is socially constructed, it follows that the irreality of fantasy must gain some of its power from socially determined notions of what is possible and impossible” (6). He goes on to suggest, however, that irreality is not enough. First the reader or player must be assured that there is an underlying system which constrains what can and cannot happen, and positions the “contravention of reality...somewhere between [individual] psychological fantasy and culturally shared myth” (13). In DAO, for example, mages can cast magical spells, but they cannot fire laser guns or fly to other planets.

Wolfe states that consistency is important in creating believable fantasy worlds, but as I mentioned in the second chapter, there is a sense in which the game’s technological foundations, including its user interface and modes of input and output, are at odds with the medieval fantasy world it appears to project. As Eddo Stern (2002) points out, the confluence of neomedieval fantasy and cutting-edge technology is neither

incidental nor insignificant: “Given the seemingly infinite possibilities that current computer technologies offer it is telling that they have been used to construct...complex settings for pre-industrial medieval fantasy” (262).

Having presumably gotten used to the comforts and affordances made available to us through the use of these technologies, Stern suggests that we are loathe to give them up entirely for the sake of immersing ourselves in a neomedieval world. Instead our desires have fused and multiplied, so that “Tech-savvy game-players make demands for cyber-cultural privileges such as post-human speed, permutable identities, endless virtual regeneration, tele-presence, and access to non-Cartesian space; all the while desiring the experience of a nostalgic fantasy of forgetting in a magical medieval playground” (262). Stern suggests that one way in which game designers attempt to maintain this double fantasy is through the use of “metaphorically patched artifacts,” by which he means “technological narrative elements that are brought to fit into the diegesis by the deployment of a metaphor” (263). In *DAO*, for example, virtual regeneration is accessed through the use of potions—magical substances that allow in-game characters to recover from injuries in the blink of an eye. Though not all elements of the game’s user interface are incorporated into its fictional world, metaphors may help to smooth the edges of an uneasy, but increasingly common juxtaposition between modern computational technologies, and a magical, pre-industrial fantasy world.

Stern notes that both magic and technology serve to render the impossible possible, and that the sense of wonder produced by this transformative power is something they share. But while magic is understood, within a particular historical context, as being capable of defying the laws of physics, technology is seen within that

same milieu as being dependent upon on those laws. Unlike technology, magic of the kind cast by wizards and mages in contemporary fantasy appears, from my own point of view, to offer an escape from the boundaries of the physical world. It is an opportunity, for a selected few, to break what is thought to be unbreakable, without the aid of electrical or mechanical gadgets. Magic represents, in some respects, the ultimate manifestation of the individual mind (or spirit) over matter. It signifies the transfer of power from the scientific community to the magical individual. It needs no scientific explanation, and indeed, it depends on having none, because as soon as we are able to interpret it according to physical laws, it ceases to be magical. Identifying magic with a time period that is commonly believed to be primitive and prescientific (Holsinger 2007) is thus a way of protecting the mystery of magic from science and the fine-edged tools of the modern era. By casting magic back into the Dark Ages, we allow ourselves to forget that magic is conceptually dependent on our own, historically specific vision of the scientific world as the pinnacle of rational thought.

### **The Broken Circle**

Part of the appeal of magic, and the reason we might wish to separate it from present-day technologies, science, and rationality, may be derived from its ability to enable a particular type of power fantasy. In DAO mages are special individuals who are born with the ability to interact with and control magic directly. While in our own world power originates from structural inequalities and the exploitation of the lower classes, magical power in DAO is a natural, inborn trait that is disassociated from the social circumstances of the individual. In this way the game naturalizes the concept of inherited

power and instead directs the player's attention to what people choose to do *with* that power through the events that unfold during the Broken Circle quest.

To be fair, DAO's developers have been comparatively innovative in the ways in which they have incorporated magic into the historical, political, and cultural fabric of their fictional world. Whereas in many RPGs mages suffer no repercussions for their exceptional power, and are simply allowed to roam free, Ferelden's mages are oppressed and largely confined to an isolated fortress called the Circle Tower,<sup>25</sup> which is overseen by specially trained members of the Chantry, who are known as Templars. Both the Chantry and the Templars fear the mages, a fear which is seemingly justified when a powerful mage named Uldred seizes control of the Tower and unleashes a horde of demons and abominations (mages who have been possessed by demons), killing most of the Tower's residents. The Warden arrives in the midst of this chaos and must battle her way to the top of the Tower to confront Uldred and complete the quest.

Along the way the player learns that Uldred has managed to gain support from other mages by promising independence from the oppressive control of the Chantry. However the revolutionary potential of the mages' rebellion is undercut by the revelation that Uldred is, in fact, a madman who is only interested in increasing his own power. As with all of the main quests, the climax of Broken Circle is marked by an ethical dilemma when a surviving Templar attempts to convince the Warden to kill all the remaining mages she finds to prevent them from turning into abominations and endangering everyone. This puts the player in the position of deciding whether or not to kill innocent,

---

<sup>25</sup> The Warden, and her companion Wynne, are the exceptions to this rule. While the mage origin story begins within the walls of the Circle Tower, once inducted into the Grey Wardens, the player character is freed from the constraints of the Chantry.

but potentially dangerous victims—a decision which may be interesting from an ethical perspective, but has little potential for encouraging reflection on the nature of power and the ways in which it is preserved, contested, and transmitted. In suggesting that power is only problematic if one chooses to use it for evil ends, as Uldred has, the game once again forgoes an opportunity for social commentary in favour of universalized, ethical concerns.

While magic may be a way of reinterpreting the cyber-cultural privileges granted to us by computational technologies, it can also provide a means of imaginatively escaping the complexities and social contradictions of the world that produced those technologies in the first place. Though I may maintain a troubled relationship with power and privilege in my own society, playing as a mage in a magical world allows me to satisfy a desire for personal mastery, power, and control without guilt or remorse. The virtue of magical power is that it does not abide by our rules (physical or social) and therefore cannot be explained. Rather than worrying about where it comes from then, I can concentrate on using it for “good,” a goal which is, as I have argued before, relatively easy to achieve in DAO.

## **DELIGHT AND DELUSION**

In order to access the power fantasy offered by magic I must participate in maintaining the illusion that I am part of a fantasy world in which it is possible to cast magical spells and achieve unlimited power. This does not mean, however, that I am unaware that I am accessing this world through a computer. Instead I would argue, based on my own experience, that the game promotes a sort of double consciousness, which is



similar to the state described by Michael Saler (2012) in his book *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality*.

According to Saler, modernity<sup>26</sup> is characterized by what he calls “disenchanted enchantment,” or “a state in which one could be ‘delighted’ without being ‘deluded’” (12). He goes on to argue that a “self-conscious strategy of embracing illusions while acknowledging their artificial status, of turning to the ‘as if,’ has become integral to modern enchantment...rendering the imagination compatible with reason, the spiritual with secular trends” (13). Through the “ironic imagination,” as Saler calls it, readers (and players) can become emotionally immersed in a story, while still being capable of rational reflection. Saler suggests that the turn to imaginary worlds and the subsequent development of the ironic imagination has had a positive effect, creating an “increasing comfort with the notion that the real world is, to some degree, imaginary, relying on contingent narratives that are subject to challenge and change” (21). However he also notes that,

imaginary worlds can still be confused with reality when the protections of the ironic imagination are undercut—not only by the desires these worlds fulfill, but also by the security they provide. Unlike the messy contingencies of ordinary experience, imaginary worlds, for all their exoticism, are manageable and safe, appealing sanctuaries from life’s uncertainties (51).

---

<sup>26</sup> Saler acknowledges that modernity is a highly ambiguous term that has been used in any number of ways. Some of the factors he mentions in his own elaboration of the word include: “the emergence of the autonomous and rational subject; the differentiation of cultural spheres; the rise of liberal and democratic states; the turn to psychologism and self-reflexivity; and the prevalence of secularism, nationalism, capitalism, industrialism, urbanism, consumerism, and scientism” (8).

As Saler points out, though imaginary worlds are primarily based on provisional fictions, they can also be made to conform to “essentialist beliefs,” which offer safety and comfort in the form of a singular truth. Even if the reader or player is well aware that the world itself is unreal, the values and categories that shape that world may be left unquestioned, particularly when they are supported by other fictions (including familiar concepts such as freedom, truth, etc.) that are regularly employed to account for and explain “real” world experiences. DAO’s characters, settings, and narratives tend to blur the boundaries between the real and the unreal, the historical and the ahistorical, the rational and the magical. They reflect both the contemporary conditions of production and consumption that shape and drive the development of big-budget, AAA videogames, and the imaginative spaces that appear to exist “outside” of or beyond this world.

Though I am able to reflect upon my own conditions of consumption, an examination of DAO’s production falls well outside the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, it is probably fair to assume that the game’s fantasy setting was at least partly influenced by financial considerations. Brent and Kevin Moberly (Fugelso & Robinson 2008) note that currently “the costs of developing complex games are such that game studios and publishers are often hesitant to produce games that challenge audience expectations” (163). Because (neo)medievalism has been proven to have widespread, popular appeal, and is also commonly associated with computer RPGs, it represents a safe financial choice for developers like BioWare, who have made a number of successful games in a similar vein. These games include the *Baldur’s Gate* series and *Neverwinter Nights*, both of which have helped to set the stage for *Dragon Age: Origins* by establishing not just the fantasy setting, but the terms, game mechanics, and other

conventions that are often used to distinguish the RPG genre as a whole. One of the most popular conventions is the use of the word quest to describe a series of tasks to be performed by the player. This term, and the various themes or concepts it evokes, will be the focus of the following section.

### **What's in a Name: Defining Quests**

Tanya Krzywinska (2006) discusses the importance of quests in an article on *World of Warcraft* (WoW) and the rhetorics of myth, noting that, “With ancient precedents and popular articulations, the hero quest is something that figures strongly in the collective consciousness and thereby provides a shorthand way of setting expectations and a proven mode for encouraging identification” (386). But what exactly are those expectations? Why do we call a quest a quest and not, say, a mission? Mission has served perfectly well in first-person shooters and science fiction-themed RPGs, and even appears to fit all the requirements of Susana Tosca’s (2003) utilitarian description of quests:

From the designer’s point of view, a quest is a set of parameters in the game world (making use of the game’s rules and gameplay) that specifies the nature and order of events that make up a challenge for the player, including its resolution.

From the player’s point of view, a quest is a set of specific instructions for action.  
(sec. 1)

But while the basic functions are essentially the same, the word quest carries a variety of connotations that differ from those of the word mission. For one, the word quest is suggestive of the distant past, while the term mission evokes a modern or futuristic setting. The former term implies a greater deal of autonomy on the part of the hero and hints at a search with moral or religious dimensions. The latter often refers to a

set of orders imposed on an operative by a government body or military leader, and suggests actions bound by a strict chain of command. Each term advertises travel of some kind, but while a quest is likely to involve the exploration of unknown lands, a mission is more likely to require the infiltration of enemy territory. Finally, quests allude to mystical secrets and magical powers. Missions, on the other hand, owe much of their allure to pseudoscience and the use of cutting-edge technologies.

As with any term, the semantics are likely to vary somewhat depending on previous experiences. However I believe the differences that I've identified are revealing of how the concept of a quest has been culturally constructed in my own time and place, incorporating ideas about history, morality, agency, exploration, and magic. I would also argue that it is no accident that DAO's quests are set in a world that loosely resembles the Western European Middle Ages, and that this can serve to shape the player's understanding of what she is doing and why. The game's sweeping orchestral music, the swordplay, the feudal knights and lords, the empty expanses of land, the runic icons and sepia toned maps all combine to present a truly (distorted) medieval experience which has, perhaps, more to do with Tolkien and Peter Jackson<sup>27</sup> than with any historical period. As Amy Kaufman (Fugelso 2010) puts it, "The neomedieval idea of the Middle Ages is gained not through contact with the Middle Ages, but through a medievalist intermediary...Neomedievalism is thus not a dream of the Middle Ages, but a dream of someone else's medievalism" (4).

---

<sup>27</sup> Peter Jackson is the director of *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy.

## Conclusion

One of the most interesting aspects of these dreams or reincarnations of the Middle Ages is the ways in which they reflect the societies that created them. As Brian Stock (1990) states,

The Renaissance invented the Middle Ages in order to define itself; the Enlightenment perpetuated them in order to admire itself; and the Romantics revived them in order to escape from themselves. In their widest ramifications ‘the Middle Ages’ thus constitute one of the most prevalent cultural myths of the modern world (69).

In my own time and place, the fantastic reinvention of the Middle Ages clearly has a role to play. It provides pleasure in the form of a safe and comfortable alternative to my day-to-day “reality;” it inspires a sense of wonder while reaffirming what I already know; it makes room for magic and mystery in a seemingly rational and secular world (thus reinforcing the idea that our world is in fact rational and secular); it transforms modern concepts into time-honoured traditions; and, perhaps most importantly, it presents me with a world in which individuals are not powerless, but powerful. Individualism, for me, is an important part of the appeal of neomedieval fantasy, and in this respect it ties in well with neoliberal ideology.

Wolfe (Schlobin 1982) describes a form of fantasy in which “‘the impossible’ may be little more than a surface structure; the works themselves concern things that could not be more real” (14). Underlying the dragons and spells that mark DAO as a fantasy world is a solution to the very real contradiction between the ideal of freedom and self-determination, and the dangers of ethical egoism, laissez-faire capitalism, and other

modern systems that supposedly protect individual rights. While in the real world our personal desires and social responsibilities are often at odds, DAO aligns selfishness with selflessness, allowing players to reproduce the ideological foundations of neoliberalism. It does so in part by appealing to the popular image of the medieval hero as an embodiment of the knightly virtues: a hero who wants what is best and does what he wants. By aligning this desirable image with the irreality of fantasy and the mystery of the Middle Ages, the game also makes room for inconsistencies, infidelities, and all manner of conceptual slipperiness.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

As a player and a fan of fantasy RPGs, I am all too aware of how easy it is to overlook the political assumptions underlying my enjoyment of the games I play. Yet I believe the role of a critic is to reveal these assumptions for what they are: not apolitical truths or simply “the way things are,” but cultural constructions that are perpetuated through the workings of ideology. In the introduction I argued that the player’s actions, and, in particular, the choices she makes, play a crucial role in reinforcing and resisting dominant ideologies. In my case it was more often the former than the latter. By tracing my decisions and their relation to my own personal history and the sociocultural context in which the game was played, I hope to have revealed some of the ways in which the quests in DAO enable at least some players to respond to culturally embedded fears and desires by acting out fantasies of domination, power, and progress. On the other hand, my personal ambitions and desire to conform to the ideal role of the player/hero means that I have generally failed to see latent opportunities for resistance or subversion, even when attempting to take a more critical approach to the game.

In the process of writing I have learned that accessing a critical perspective in relation to my own gameplay, even after the fact, is no easy task, particularly when dealing with a game that is as expansive as DAO. The few quests that I have managed to describe, and the aspects of those quests that I have attempted to draw out, were chosen in part because they stood out to me as personally significant, and because they seemed to connect to one another in important ways. Still there are many other elements I have not touched upon that might just as easily have been the focus of my critique. For example, I have neglected to discuss issues surrounding the game’s depiction of gender, class

boundaries, religion, and so forth—topics that I hope will be tackled in future research on this game and others like it.

The field of game studies is still relatively new, and in-depth critiques of individual titles are few and far between (especially if we exclude studies of online, multiplayer games). This thesis is intended to help address this gap. Like many others, I believe that videogames—like literature, film, and other forms of media—are an important form of cultural expression, and as such, they ought to be subject to the same standards of critical analysis. While AAA videogames in particular may be condemned for a lack of “maturity” (e.g. Fahey 2012), as both objects and experiences they nevertheless encompass a wide range of elements that work together in complex and often surprising ways. The unique mechanisms by which these games perform work on players, and vice versa, should not be taken for granted, but should instead be explored in all their rich variety, while acknowledging the contingent and ever-shifting nature of gameplay.

Though this thesis makes no attempt to examine DAO’s influence on groups of players or player culture, it could potentially contribute to such an investigation by highlighting some of the ways in which the game hails the player/Warden as a hero or saviour, a moral agent, and an entrepreneur, as well as the ways in which the personal history and sociocultural context of the player conditions the actions she performs in response to these calls. In essence I have used my experience of the game as a case study, taking advantage of the fact that I have access to information about myself that I would have difficulty garnering had I attempted to work with other players. I do not mean to say that all the statements I have made about myself are unquestionably true; they are as



honest as I can make them, but they remain interpretations of events that were not transparent to me in the first place, and can never be fully recaptured. I do believe, however, that there is value to be had in bridging the roles of player and researcher, subject and observer. Not only do I understand the game better as a researcher, having played it through both as an enjoyable distraction and an object of study, but, as a player, I am also better able to reflect upon that role, to apply what I have learned to my understanding of why I made (and may continue to make) some choices and not others. This has changed both the questions I have asked of myself, and my answers to those questions. It has also changed how I play games, and how I think about gameplay. Understanding what actions are available within DAO, as well as what actions are actually taken and under what circumstances, is an essential part of understanding how players interact with the game, which in turn impacts the broader cultural and paratextual interactions which surround it.

Of course not all players will interpret their acts in the same way, nor will they necessarily identify with the subject positions listed above. Some may even play “against the grain” by ignoring, subverting, bending, and breaking the rules that supposedly govern their interactions with DAO. As Miguel Sicart (2011) points out, meaning and play can never be reduced simply to an organized system or set of rules. But while the system cannot determine what players do or why, it can nudge them one way or another by highlighting a particular course of action and aligning it with a set of cultural associations drawn from the social milieu of the game’s developers—associations which may be shared, or not, by its players. As a designed object, DAO possesses embedded

values, and whether we recognize it as such or not, play is partly a process of engaging with, responding to, and in some cases acting upon these values.

I have argued here that DAO takes as one of its central themes the struggle between good and evil, and while the overarching narrative tends to position the Warden on the side of the good, the game also challenges players to distinguish between right and wrong by presenting them with a series of moral dilemmas. This focus on moral decision-making within a relatively linear storyline is one of BioWare's signature moves, and something that helps to distinguish DAO from its peers. Like its sci-fi cousin *Mass Effect*, the game has achieved both commercial and critical success, suggesting that there are at least some aspects of this formula that appeal to a large number of players.

As I have stated, the impression that I have a choice within the game encourages me to see myself as an individual agent, to take responsibility for my actions, and to see those actions as expressions of my own personal ambitions, my desires, and perhaps even my identity as a "moral" human being. Believing that the decision is mine to make changes my affective response to its outcome, while also potentially reinforcing the logic that led me to make the choice in the first place. In DAO I am rarely given cause to question those decisions, or to desire different options, because the choices that I want to make are not only available, but also have outcomes that are, from my perspective, often positive. By directly implicating me in the events that take place in the game, the decision-making process turns *a* story into *my* story, and it is this which makes the experience of playing DAO, for me, quite different from the experience of reading a book or watching a film.

Of course this may only hold true for players who decide to play the game as an idealized version of themselves. Keeping in mind that I am not the type of player that likes to experiment with different roles, and that those players would likely have a very different experience of the game, it is interesting to note that the heroic ideal I have aspired towards generates actions which run counter to many of the beliefs and values I claim to hold in “real life.” Before discussing the contradictions between my stated political beliefs and the ways in which I act within the game, however, I will first provide a brief recap of what I have said about my experiences thus far.

In the first chapter of this thesis I attempted to lay the groundwork for an investigation of how values may be communicated to and expressed by players through the ludic and narrative systems that shape and enable quests in videogames. The second chapter focused more specifically on DAO as an object of analysis, and made an argument for why my own subjective experience of play was an important, and to some degree inescapable element of my analysis.

In the third and fourth chapter I looked at how certain quests play into racial stereotyping, neoliberal rationalities, the logic of pro-war propaganda, and ethical binaries. I argued that, despite an apparent emphasis on political intrigue, racial tensions, and social inequalities, DAO’s quests allow players like me to rise above and overcome these difficulties through a series of symbolic acts that seem to reflect a sense of concern for the common good. At the same time, however, the mechanics built into the quests promote an individualized view of progress and success, potentially encouraging players to ascend through the ranks by accumulating personal wealth and power. In aligning selfish desire with selfless action, the game often provides an all too easy solution to

problems that resemble, but do not directly model, “real” social contradictions and power relations.

The victimized elves, for example, may evoke the stereotype of the noble savage, but the game offers no direct means of confronting, let alone changing, the conditions that gave rise to the stereotype in the first place. This constraint may produce resistance amongst some players, while remaining entirely invisible to others. Though attempts are made to complicate matters for the sake of creating viable moral dilemmas for the player, the game repeatedly falls back on an overly simplistic binary or antinomy, with good on one side and evil on the other. This allowed me, as the player, to maintain a position of moral superiority, while still engaging in the pursuit of power through violent means.

In the fifth chapter I drew connections between DAO and the broader trend of neomedievalism in popular culture, suggesting that DAO is not the first to take the struggle between good (self) and evil (Other) as its primary theme, nor is it likely to be the last. Though it is tempting to see this pattern as a timeless trope that pervades Western culture as a whole, the ways in which the binary structure operates in DAO, and the desires it serves to fulfill, speaks very much to present-day concerns. Still, the references to a homogenous Western vision of the Middle Ages may serve to legitimize relatively new ideas about how the world works by implying that dominant ideologies have been around much longer than they really have. In this sense neomedievalism is more than just a nostalgic desire for a long lost, magical past; it is a political strategy that involves justifying, assimilating, and depoliticizing a wide range of cultural tropes and political constructs.

Like many others, I grew up hearing stories about courageous heroes fighting the forces of evil, and while I may have grown suspicious of the white male figures in suits of shining armour, I admire, and desire, the ideals they supposedly represent. While I am just one of the many who have played, or will play, *Dragon Age: Origins*, I doubt I am the only one who wants, at least on some level, to be the Warden that saves the day. But I also believe it goes deeper than that. If a quest is indeed a journey towards a meaningful goal, then perhaps it is the meaningful goal itself that I am after: something to dream of, something to work for, and something that matters to others as much as it does to me.

And yet despite this desire for social impact and social recognition—for being good to others and having others recognize that I am good—the privacy of DAO, the fact that it is a single-player game, is just as important. It may be that the things that we do in private, when no one is watching and no one can be affected by our actions, are the things that most reveal the power of dominant ideologies. For example, I still step on the scale to weigh myself on a regular basis, even when I fundamentally disagree, both morally and politically, with the image of female beauty that I am hoping to achieve. If we were to turn this into an analogy, DAO would not be either the scale or the media messages and social forces that compel me to step on it, but the bathroom that contains the scale. In this bathroom I can choose to step on the scale, or not, but I cannot throw it out the window, or flush it down the toilet. The very presence of the scale, combined with environmental affordances and constraints, prompts me to step on it, not because I am being told to do so, but because the process of socialization has created the expectation that: 1) I can step on the scale, and 2) doing so will reaffirm the fact that I am (lucky for me) “acceptably” thin. By stepping on the scale to reassure myself that I am maintaining

a desirable weight, I reproduce the social practices that emanate from and work to reinforce the belief that “thin is beautiful,” even if only for myself.

In the process of analysing DAO I have discovered that the decisions I have made within the game reflect a set of political values and beliefs that I actively oppose. I still spend extra time collecting every last gold coin in the game, even though I claim I want nothing to do with wealth, status, or power in the “real world.” I still enjoy the simplicity and clarity of statistics and approval ratings, even though I hate the idea of applying market-based values to all aspects of social life. I still want to believe that the Dalish elves need my help, even though I am critical of the implicit racism embedded in the myth of the White Messiah. I still side with conservative characters, even though I believe there is a need for radical social change. I still enjoy defeating the darkspawn, even though I do not believe in the dichotomy of good versus evil. These contradictions suggest not only that, desiring some culturally constructed ideal, I chose to reinforce dominant ideologies through my actions within DAO, but that I might have done so (and will perhaps continue to do so) in spite of myself. In wanting to be a better person, I ended out betraying the very values and beliefs that I strive to maintain as part of my everyday existence.

While this conjures up an image of the game as a sort of sinister trap, it is important not to interpret this phenomenon in purely negative terms. The very fact that videogames like DAO might allow me to express desires and beliefs that I must otherwise actively suppress implies that the game may serve some cathartic purpose, perhaps providing the breath of release that I need in order to continue to uphold beliefs that compromise and condemn my own position of privilege. Perhaps it might act as a

sort of testing grounds, providing a different context or alternate reality that allows me to discover more about my own assumptions, my strengths and my failings, than I had previously been aware of. Perhaps the very fragility of this world, its conceptual gaps, its contradictions, its glitches, and its glaring tropes, might encourage critical reflexivity, even if I was not already engaged in a form of academic critique. For all that I may have fit comfortably within the snug embrace of the game's quests, accepting their demands, their goals, and their choices as my own, it may have been only a matter of time before the pressure became less of a comfort, and more of a tired constraint. It may be that I was already beginning to feel that constraint, and that it was the desire to push back against something I could not yet name that led me to write this thesis.

As I argued earlier, DAO seems to lie somewhere along the continuum between the readerly and the writerly text, as described by Barthes, perhaps oscillating between the two from moment to moment, and player to player. On the one hand then, it can serve to reaffirm what we already think we know about the world, providing closure and relief. On the other, it can spur us to continuously imagine new possibilities, to give up on the idea of a singular reality and view the world in terms of provisional fictions, as Saler puts it. It would be far too simple to say that it functions only one way or only the other, and while I have attempted to trace the path of the "good" entrepreneurial player and the "good" romantic hero, I am also aware that for every road taken, there is another road not taken, as well as roads that might not yet exist, but could, and this awareness is, in itself, an important realization.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aarseth, Espen. 2005. "From Hunt the Wumpus to EverQuest: Introduction to Quest Theory." In *Lecture Notes in Computer Science 3711: Proceedings of Entertainment Computing - ICEC 2005, Sanda, Japan, September 19-21*, 496-506. doi: 10.1007/11558651\_48.
- . 2003. "Playing Research: Methodological approaches to game analysis". In *Digital Arts & Culture Proceedings*. Melbourne: RMIT University. Accessed January 19 2012.  
<http://www.spilforskning.dk/gameapproaches/GameApproaches2.pdf>.
- Althusser, Louis P. 1969. "Marxism and Humanism." In *For Marx*, translated by Ben Brewster. Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books.
- Althusser, Louis P. 1970/2006. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)." In *Media and Cultural Studies KeyWorks: Revised Edition*, edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Apperley, Thomas H. 2006. "Genre and game studies: Toward a critical approach to video game genres." *Simulation & Gaming: An International Journal of Theory Practice and Research*, 37 (1): 6-23. doi:10.1177/1046878105282278.
- Arsenault, Dominic. 2009. "Video Game Genre, Evolution and Innovation." *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 3 (2): 149-176.  
<http://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/viewArticle/65/125>.
- Badiou, Alain. 2006. *Polemics*, translated by Steve Cocoran. London, UK: Verso.
- Bal, Mieke. 2009. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative, 3rd Ed.* Toronto,



- ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Barthes, Roland. 1974. *S/Z*, translated by Richard Millar. New York, NY: Hill and Wang.
- Baudrillard, Jean. 2001. "The Spirit of Terrorism." *telos*, 2001 (Fall): 134-142. <http://journal.telospress.com/mercury.concordia.ca/content/2001/121/134.full.pdf>.
- Baum, Bruce. 2010. "Hollywood on Race in the Age of Obama: Invictus, Precious, and Avatar." *New Political Science*, 32 (December).  
doi:10.1080/07393148.2010.520448.
- Blevins, Tal. 2004. "E3 2004: Dragon Age - BioWare's new RPG is familiar, but different." *IGN Entertainment*. <http://pc.ign.com/articles/514/514514p1.html>
- Biddle, Bruce J. 1986. "Recent Development in Role Theory." *Annual Review of Sociology*, 12: 67-92. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2083195>.
- BioWare. 1998. *Baldur's Gate*. Videogame.
- BioWare. 2000. *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn*. Videogame.
- BioWare. 2009. *Dragon Age: Origins*. Videogame.
- Birnbaum, Jon. 2008. "Dragon Age: Origins Interview." *GameBanshee*.  
<http://www.gamebanshee.com/interviews/dragonageorigins1.php#null>.
- Bogost, Ian. 2007. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Bolter, Jay D., and Richard Grusin. 2000. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Brooks, David. 2010. "The Messiah Complex." *The New York Times*.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/08/opinion/08brooks.html>.
- Butler, Judith. 1995. "Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All." *Yale French Studies*,

- Depositions: Althusser, Balibar, Macherey, and the Labor of Reading*, (88): 6-26.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930099>.
- Butte, George. 2008. "Suture and the Narration of Subjectivity in Film." *Poetics Today* 29 (Summer). doi:10.1215/03335372-2007-026.
- Calleja, Gordon. 2007. "Revising Immersion: A Conceptual Model for the Analysis of Digital Game Involvement." *Situated Play, Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference*. <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/07312.10496.pdf>.
- Campbell, Joseph. 2004. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Consalvo, Mia. 2007. *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Consalvo, Mia and Nathan Dutton. 2006. "Game analysis: Developing a methodological toolkit for the qualitative study of games." *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 6 (December). Accessed March 19, 2011. [http://www.gamestudies.org/0601/articles/consalvo\\_dutton](http://www.gamestudies.org/0601/articles/consalvo_dutton).
- Consalvo, Mia, Timothy Todd Alley, Nathan Dutton, et al. 2010. "Where's My Montage? The Performance of Hard Work and Its Reward in Film, Television, and MMOGs." *Games and Culture*, 5 (February). doi:10.1177/1555412009360413.
- Cowie, Elizabeth. 2007. "Specters of the Real: Documentary Time and Art." *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 18 (1): 87-127. doi 10.1215/10407391-2006-024.
- Deen, Phillip A. 2011. "Interactivity, Inhabitation and Pragmatist Aesthetics" *Game*

- Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 11 (May).  
Accessed March 1, 2012. <http://gamestudies.org/1102/articles/deen>.
- De Lauretis, Teresa. 2007. "Eccentric Subjects." In *Figures of Resistance: Essays in Feminist Theory*, edited by Teresa de Lauretis and Patricia White. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- . 1984. "Semiotics and Experience." In *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- . 1987. "The Technology of Gender." In *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Dobson, Darrel. 2005. "Archetypal Literary Theory in the Postmodern Era." *Journal of Jungian Scholarly Studies* 1 (1).  
<http://www.thejungiansociety.org/Jung%20Society/e-journal/Volume-1/Dobson-2005.pdf>.
- "Dragon Age Wiki." [http://dragonage.wikia.com/wiki/Dragon\\_Age\\_Wiki](http://dragonage.wikia.com/wiki/Dragon_Age_Wiki).
- EA International. 2009. "BioWare | Dragon Age: Origins." Accessed January 19, 2012. <http://dragonage.bioware.com/dao/>.
- EA International. 2012. "Dragon Age Origins Toolset." Accessed February 6, 2012. <http://social.bioware.com/page/da-toolset>.
- Electronic Arts. 2010. "BioWare's Dragon Age: Origins Reaches Triple Platinum Sales." *EA News*. Accessed February 8, 2012. <http://www.ea.com/news/bioware-dragon-age-origins-reaches-triple-platinum-sales>.
- Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Simon, Jonas Heide Smith, & Susana Pajares Tosca. 2008.

- Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*. New York: Taylor and Francis Group.
- Fahey, Rob. 2012. "A Question of Maturity." *GamesIndustry International*.  
<http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2012-07-06-a-question-of-maturity>.
- Fitting, Peter. 1991. "Utopian Effect/Utopian Pleasure." *Utopian Studies* (4). 90-96.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20718953>.
- Frasca, Gonzalo. 2003. "Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology." In *The Video Game Theory Reader*, edited by Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, 221-135. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Frye, Northrop. 2007. "Third Essay—Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths." In *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays, Volume 22*, edited by Robert D. Denham, 121-123. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press. <http://0-site.ebrary.com.mercury.concordia.ca/lib/concordia/docDetail.action?docID=10269849>.
- Fugelso, Karl, ed. 2010. *Studies in Medievalism XIX: Defining Neomedievalism(s)*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer.
- Fugelso, Karl and Carol L. Robinson, eds. 2008. *Studies in Medievalism XVI: Medievalism in Technology Old and New*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.
- Galloway, Alexander. 2006. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gamasutra Staff. 2009. "Gamasutra's Games of the Decade: Honorable Mentions."

*Gamasutra*.

[http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/132616/gamasutras\\_games\\_of\\_the\\_decade.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/132616/gamasutras_games_of_the_decade.php).

GamesIndustry International. 2012a. "Roundtable: The Legacy of The BioWare Doctors." *GamesIndustry*. <http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2012-09-20-roundtable-the-legacy-of-the-bioware-doctors>.

GamesIndustry International. 2012b. "Jaded Empire: BioWare doctors' departure 'an enormous loss.'" *GamesIndustry*. <http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2012-09-19-bioware-doctors-departure-an-enormous-loss>.

Garite, Matt. 2003. "The Ideology of Interactivity (or Video Games and Taylorization of Leisure)." *Level Up Conference Proceedings*, Utrecht: University of Utrecht, November. <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/05150.15436.pdf>.

Garratt, Patrick. 2009. "Ray Muzyka Vs VG247 Vs GamesCom." *VG247*. Accessed April 8, 2011. <http://www.vg247.com/2009/08/25/ray-muzyka-vs-vg247-vs-gamescom/>.

Gazzard, Alison. 2011. "Unlocking the Gameworld: The Rewards of Space and Time in Videogames." *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 11 (February). Accessed March 26, 2011. [http://gamestudies.org/1101/articles/gazzard\\_alison](http://gamestudies.org/1101/articles/gazzard_alison).

Genette, Gérard. 1997. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. London: Cambridge University Press.

Giroux, Henry A. 2011. "Neoliberalism and the death of the social state: remembering

- Walter Benjamin's Angel of History.” *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, 17 (4): 587-601. doi:10.1080/13504630.2011.587310.
- Grande, Sandy. 1999. “Beyond the Ecologically Noble Savage: Deconstructing the White Man’s Indian.” *Environmental Ethics*, 21 (Fall): 307-320.  
<http://www.valdosta.edu/~asantas/Texts/Environment/Noble%20Savage.pdf>.
- Graves, Robert. 1949. “Review: A Motley Hero.” Review of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, by Joseph Campbell. *The Sewanee Review* 57 (Autumn): 698-702.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27537960>.
- Hall, Stuart. 2012. “The neoliberal revolution.” In *The Neoliberal Crisis*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford and Sally Davison. Soundings.  
[http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/ebooks/The\\_Neoliberal\\_crisis.pdf](http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/ebooks/The_Neoliberal_crisis.pdf).
- . 1996. "The problem of ideology." In *Stuart Hall: Critical dialogues in cultural studies*, edited by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen. London: Routledge.
- Holquist, Michael. 1990. *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Holsinger, Bruce. 2007. *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror*. Chicago, IL: Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Howard, Jeff. 2008. *Quests: Design, Theory, and History in Games and Narratives*. Wellesley, MA: A. K. Peters.
- Humphreys, Sal. 2009. “Norrath: New Forms, Old Institutions.” *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 9 (April).  
<http://gamestudies.org/0901/articles/humphreys>.
- Introverted Wife. 2010. “More games like this, please!” January 20.  
<http://www.introvertedwife.com/2010/01/more-games-like-this-please.html>.

- Ip, Barry. 2011. "Narrative Structures in Computer and Video Games: Part 1: Context, Definitions, and Initial Findings." *Games and Culture* 6 (May). doi: 10.1177/1555412010364982.
- Iversen, Sara Mosberg. 2009. "Between Regulation and Improvisation: Playing and Analysing 'Games in the Middle.'" PhD diss., IT University of Copenhagen.
- Jakobsson, Mikael. 2011. "The Achievement Machine: Understanding Xbox 360 Achievements in Gaming Practices." *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 11(February).  
<http://gamestudies.org/1101/articles/jakobsson>.
- Jameson, Frederic. 1981. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York, NY: NYU Press.
- Jørgensen, Kristine. 2010. "Game Characters as Narrative Devices. A Comparative Analysis of Dragon Age: Origins and Mass Effect 2." *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* 4(2): 315-331.  
<http://eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/viewArticle/vol4no2-13/192>.
- Jones, Evan. 2012. "Evan Jones's Blog - Ruminations on Leveling." *Gamasutra*.  
[http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/EvanJones/20120116/9245/Ruminations\\_on\\_Leveling.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/EvanJones/20120116/9245/Ruminations_on_Leveling.php).
- Jones, Steven E. 2008. *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies*. New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
- Juul, Jesper. 2001. "Games Telling Stories?—A brief note on games and narratives."

- Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 1 (July).  
<http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/>.
- . 2002. "The Open and the Closed: Games of emergence and games of progression." In *Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference Proceedings*, edited by Frans Mäyrä, 323-329. Tampere: Tampere University Press.  
<http://www.jesperjuul.net/text/openandtheclosed.html>.
- Kaiser, Rowan. 2012. "Baldur's Gate: Enhanced Edition review: Flawed, but still classic." *Ars Technica*. <http://arstechnica.com/gaming/2012/12/baldurs-gate-enhanced-edition-review-a-flawed-classic/>.
- Karlsen, Faltin. 2008. "Quests in Context: A Comparative Analysis of Discworld and World of Warcraft." *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 8 (September). <http://gamestudies.org/0801/articles/karlsen>.
- King, C. Richard & David Leonard. 2010. "War Games as a New Frontier: Securing American Empire in Virtual Space." In *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games*, edited by Huntemann, Nina B. and Matthew Thomas Payne. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kirkpatrick, Graeme. 2011. *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Krzywinska, Tanya. 2006. "Blood Scythes, Festivals, Quests, and Backstories: World Creation and Rhetorics of Myth in World of Warcraft." *Games and Culture* 1 (October). doi:10.1177/1555412006292618.
- Laukkanen, Tero. 2005. "Modding Scenes - Introduction to user-created content in computer gaming." <http://tampub.uta.fi/tup/951-44-6448-6.pdf>



- Marshall, David W., ed. 2007. *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co.
- McNeilly, Joe. 2008. "10 Things Videogames Learned from D&D." *GamesRadar*.  
<http://www.gamesradar.com/10-things-videogames-learned-from-dd/>
- Ndalianis, Angela. 2004. *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*.  
Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Newman, James. 2002. "The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame: Some thoughts on player-character relationships in videogames." *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 2 (July). <http://gamestudies.org/0102/newman/>.
- Northup, Lesley A. 2006. "Myth-placed priorities: religion and the study of myth." *Religious Studies Review* 32 (1): 5-10. ATLA Religion Database with  
ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed July 21, 2011).
- Peckham, Matt. 2009. "Why Storytelling in Dragon Age Origins Might Not Suck." *PCWorld*.  
[http://www.pcworld.com/article/173329/dragon\\_age\\_interview\\_p1.html](http://www.pcworld.com/article/173329/dragon_age_interview_p1.html)
- Petite Chablis. 2010. "Gaming as a woman and Dragon Age Origins." February 1.  
<http://petitechablis.wordpress.com/2010/02/01/gaming-as-a-woman-and-dragon-age-origins/>
- Prince, Gerald. 1987. *A Dictionary of Narratology*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Rampton, David. 2009. *Northrop Frye: New Directions from Old*. Ottawa, ON: University of Ottawa Press.
- Rausch, Allen. 2004. "Gary Gygax Interview - Part I." *Gamespy*. Accessed January 19,

2012. <http://pc.gamespy.com/articles/538/538817p1.html>
- Remo, Chris. 2009. "The Story Thing: BioWare's David Gaider Speaks." *Gamasutra*.  
[http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/132436/the\\_story\\_thing\\_biowares\\_david\\_.php?page=4](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/132436/the_story_thing_biowares_david_.php?page=4)
- Rettberg, J. W. 2008. "Quests in World of Warcraft: Deferral and Repetition." In *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*, edited by Hilde G. Corneliussen & Jill W. Rettberg, 167-184. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Saler, Michael. 2012. *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Sample, Mark L. 2008. "Virtual Torture: Videogames and the War on Terror." *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 8 (December).  
<http://gamestudies.org/0802/articles/sample>
- Sandoval, Chela. 2000. *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Schlobin, Roger C. ed. 1982. *The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art*. Notre Dame: IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Shaw, Adrienne. 2010. *Identity, Identification and Media Representation in Video Game Play: An Audience Reception Study*. PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania.
- Sicart, Miguel. 2011. "Against Procedurality." *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 11 (December).  
[http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/sicart\\_ap](http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/sicart_ap)
- . 2009. *The Ethics of Computer Games*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Silverman, Kaja. 1983. *The Subject of Semiotics*. New York, NY: Oxford University

Press.

Simons, Jan. 2007. Narrative, Games, and Theory. *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 7 (August).

<http://www.gamestudies.org/0701/articles/simons>.

Smith, Greg M. 2002. "Computer Games Have Words, Too: Dialogue Conventions in Final Fantasy VII." *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 2 (December). <http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/smith/>.

Sterling, Jim. 2009. "Dragon Age's moral choices will be 'aggressively grey.'" *Destructoid*. <http://www.destructoid.com/dragon-age-s-moral-choices-will-be-aggressively-grey--147976.phtml>.

Stern, Eddo. 2002. "A Touch of Medieval: Narrative, Magic and Computer Technology in Massively Multiplayer Computer Role-Playing Games." In *Proceedings of Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference*, edited by Frans Mäyrä. Tampere: Tampere University Press.  
<http://www.digra.org/dl/db/05164.03193.pdf>.

Stock, Brian. 1990. "Romantic Attitudes and Academic Medievalism." In *Listening for the Text*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.

Tavinor, Grant. 2009. "Videogames, Interactivity, and Art." *American Society for Aesthetics*. [http://aesthetics-online.org/articles/index.php?articles\\_id=44](http://aesthetics-online.org/articles/index.php?articles_id=44).

Takahashi, Dean. 2009. "BioWare's founders envision Dragon Age Origins as dark heroic fantasy universe." *VentureBeat*.  
<http://venturebeat.com/2009/04/07/biowares-founders-envision-dragon-age-origins-as-dark-heroic-fantasy-universe/>.

- Tosca, Susana. 2003. "The Quest Problem in Computer Games." In *Proceedings of Technologies for Interactive Digital Storytelling and Entertainment*, edited by Stefan Gobel, Norbert Braun, Ulrike Spierling, Johanna Dechau, and Holger Diener. Stuttgart: Fraunhofer IRB Verlag. Available at <http://www.it-c.dk/people/tosca/quest.html>.
- Tronstad, Ragnhild. 2003. "Defining a Tubmud Ludology." *Dichtung Digital* 30. <http://www.dichtung-digital.org/2003/4-tronstad.htm>.
- Tychsen, Anders, Ken Newman, Thea Brolund, Michael Hitchens. 2007. "Cross-format analysis of the gaming experience in multi-player role-playing games." *Situated Play, Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference*. <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/07311.39029.pdf>.
- Voorhees, Gerald A., Joshua Call, and Katie Whitlock eds. 2012. *Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens: The Digital Role-Playing Game*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- VorpallBunny. 2011. "Queer Characters: Dragon Age: Origins." *GayGamer*. March 8. [http://gaygamer.net/2011/03/queer\\_characters\\_dragon\\_age\\_or.html](http://gaygamer.net/2011/03/queer_characters_dragon_age_or.html).
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. 1976. "From Feudalism to Capitalism: Transition or Transitions?." *Social Forces* 55 (December): 273-283. Oxford University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2576224>.
- Wardrip-Fruin, Noah, Michael Mateas, Steven Dow, and Serdar Sali. 2009. "Agency Reconsidered." *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory: Proceedings of DiGRA 2009*. <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/09287.41281.pdf>.

- Warnes, Christopher. 2005. "Baldur's Gate and History: Race and Alignment in Digital Role Playing Games." *Proceedings of DiGRA 2005 Conference: Changing Views—Worlds in Play*. <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/06276.04067.pdf>.
- Weisl, Angela J. 2003. *The Persistence of Medievalism: Narrative Adventures in Contemporary Culture*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Welsh, Oli. 2008. "Dragon Age: Origins Preview." *Eurogamer.net*. 23 July. <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/dragon-age-origins-preview>.
- Whitehead, Dan. 2007. "The History of BioWare." *Eurogamer*. <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/the-history-of-bioware-article>.
- Williams, J. Patrick, Sean O. Hendricks, & W. Keith Winkler, eds. 2006. *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co.
- Xie, Shaobo. 1996. "History and Utopian Desire: Fredric Jameson's Dialectical Tribute to Northrop Frye." *Cultural Critique*, 34: 115-142. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1354614>.
- Zagal, José P. 2009. "Ethically Notable Videogames: Moral Dilemmas and Gameplay." *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory: Proceedings of DiGRA 2009*.