Remediation of Cultural Memory in the *Dragon Age* Videogame Series

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[source: *The Enduring Fantastic – Essays on Imagination and Western Culture*, edited by Anna Höglund and Cecilia Trenter]

Introduction

This essay examines the creation of a fictitious past by studying *Dragon Age* (BioWare 2009-), a roleplaying videogame series in a fantasy-medieval context, based on an interview with lead designer Mike Laidlaw and lead writer David Gaider at the head office of BioWare in Edmonton in 2012.[1] By illuminating how developers of videogames either intentionally or unintentionally use memories when creating storyworlds, the essay endeavors to show how remediation of memories is complex and far from predictable[2].

Memory as an unruly beast: Conditions for the remediation of memory in fantasy storyworlds

"[M]emory can be an unruly beast, and won't always obey the restrictions placed upon it" (Harvey 2015, 183). This somewhat resigned comment sums up the intricate relation between memories and modern media and the conditions for the creation of fantastic storyworlds. The well-established medievalism in fantasy is perhaps the most significant practice of memory in the building of fantastic universes. Not only particular details such as knighthood, castles, and weapons, but additionally the mimetic use of social systems, notably feudalism, and mentalities, for instance the culture of chivalry, make up the recognizable fantasy world (Byrne 2016). The delicate use of medievalism in fantasy has evoked the idea of using fantasy fiction as case studies in medieval history. Maksim W. Kyrchanoff even suggests a short cut between academic analyses of fantasy storyworlds, for instance *Game of Thrones* studies, and fantasy literature to provide case studies of feudal societies as qualified alternative medieval studies, given that fantasy literature is a growing field, as is academic research on fantasy literature (Kyrchanoff 2018, 88).

Heritage is furthermore used in adaptations of whole genres, among which the use of gothic elements stands out, inherited from nineteenth-century novels and the influences of central fantasy works by Tolkien and others (cf. Klingberg, this volume). Thus, the relation between medievalism and creative processes in the making of storyworlds is extensive. The complexity is exposed in Tolkien's nexus of links to medievalism and the fantasy world of his creation. Drawing on Tolkien studies by Jane Chance, Jakovljević and Lončar-Vujnović argue that the influences were steered by his academic profession as a medievalist, including his relations with colleagues in the field, and his creative personal adaptation of medievalism into his storyworld. The blurred relations between medievalism in fantasy and the Middle Ages are further stressed in Tolkien's ambition to make up for an absent British mythology; the storyworld offered a Celtic culture and mythology that could function as "the pathos formula", loaded with an aura of medieval high culture (Jakovljević and Lončar-Vujnović 2016). Tolkien additionally deepened the authenticity and truthfulness by ascribing the fantasy world to God, because the fantasy stems from human creativity, and humans are inevitably products of God's will (Tolkien in Flieger and

Anderson 2008). Medievalism is present in video-game culture, with Anglo-Saxon influences as well as slavish cultural imitations (e.g. Wolterink 2017).

The remediation of memories is furthermore efficiently constructed in the magical-historical double effectiveness by using collective imaginations bound to historic city locations in a blurry area of magic and heritage. Oxford has become a place for experiencing the authentic Harry Potter franchise, for example, the "Great Hall" at Christ Church College that inspired the film producers in the making of Hogwarts. The locations for televised adaptions of the novel series *The Discovery of Witches* by Deborah Harness and Philip Pullman's series HBO adaption of *His Dark Materials* have in similar ways turned Oxford into an authentic magical geographic site (Lovell 2019).

Modern media additionally governs the creation of storyworlds of today. The concept of storyworld in narratology means narratives arranged simultaneously in different media (Ryan and Thon 2014) and includes designers, creators, audience, and participants (Klastrup and Tosca 2014). Configurations of memories appear in franchises, spin-offs and re-makes that remediate an established canon in the Western fantasy storyworld in a variety of ways (Harvey 2015). The idea of remediation of memories goes back to the theory of memories shared by a collective, a collective memory, which refers to shared memories that are significantly connected to a group's identity (see Erll 2011 for a fuller discussion). Aby Warburg's pioneering work on memory in art and remediation of images and symbols in different historical epochs is a prominent contribution to the theoretical map of collective memory. He calls the reuse and return of artistic forms "the pathos formula". According to Warburg the pathos is correlated to the inherent pagan emotional intensity in ancient symbols. These symbols stored "mnemic energy", that is, an ability to retain memory that could be released in other times and circumstances (Warburg 1999).

While Warburg assumed that the pathos of antiquity was internalized in the objects, present-day media researchers discuss the remediation and configuration of heritage in relation to the context in which the memory is used. Aleida and Jan Assmann have made a great impact on the research field of memory studies by distinguishing cultural memory from collective and everyday memory, thereby underlining that commemoration of memories is a powerful and selective process. A culture memory is, broadly speaking, the institutionalized master narratives produced by an elite such as professional persons or institutions (e.g., J. Assmann 1995; A. Assmann 2008). Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney elaborate the concept further by underlining that no memory is thinkable without other acts of mediation. They refer to the dynamic cultural memory (Erll and Rigney 2009), a circulation of artifacts, visual representations, symbols, and motifs that affect the environment. Memory is an epistemological approach to the present rather than knowledge about the past. The function of memories in the building of fantastic storyworlds is therefore an important aspect for understanding such creative processes.

Medievalism in the storyworld of Dragon Age

The use of established heritage, or cultural memory, as the Assmanns theoretically define canon and established master-narratives, is a crucial element for everyone who creates a fantasy world. Guidelines in fantasy writing emphasize the importance of visualizing what the reader experiences as real. The feeling of being in an alternative reality is created by, among other things, the invention of historical contexts both to fill up the world with cultures and politics, and to make sense of the causality and

circumstances of the story. “Whenever you invent an alien creature, you should invest a great deal of effort in determining *why*, in evolutionary terms, its unusual features would have developed,” says Orson Scott Card in his classic poetic on how to write fantasy and sci-fi (Card 2001, 50). He continues:

> You can’t just put a demagogic preacher in your town, leading a mob of self-righteous church people into a book-burning frenzy; the result is invariably caricature. Instead, take the time to figure out *why* these people are following the preacher, why they trust him and believe in him [Card 2001, 52].

The Canadian video-game developers BioWare, if anyone, are well aware of the conditions for creating storyworlds. With substantial experience of developing story-driven role-playing games (RPGs) such as the science fiction *Mass Effect* (2007-) and the fantasy *Baldur’s Gate* (1998), they knew what might be in store when they started to work with the franchise for the series *Dragon Age* (2009-). Lead designer Mike Laidlaw says:

> We had made *Baldur’s Gate*, which was very successful and pretty well loved, and we had just finished *Star Republic*, and we very consciously decided, “We think we could build a fantasy world,” and that’s where *Dragon Age* began, and we wanted to turn some of the tropes of the fantasy world on their side. Familiar enough there are elves…. The purpose was to create a fantasy brand that we owned and that could trigger the same things as *The Lord of the Rings* but without having to pay for. When doing *Star Republic*, they had to ask, “Can we do this with a Jedi?”

The storyworld *Dragon Age* (DA) consists of three games, including extensions, a wiki on the storyworld, novels, and fan fiction. The first game, *Dragon Age Origins* (DAO), was released in 2009. The game puts the player in the role of a warrior, mage, or rogue coming from an elven, human or dwarven background. The player character (PC) is recruited into the Grey Wardens, an ancient order that stands against movement called the Blight under the lead of the ancient dragon, the Archdemon. The story begins with the oncoming fifth blight and the player, as a Greywarden, has to stop it in order to save the world. The sequel *Dragon Age II* (DAII) is set in the town of Kirkwall, and the player controls a human named Hawke, a refugee during the Fifth Blight, who has a central role in the outbreak of a civil war between the mages and the templars. The latest game in the series is *Dragon Age: The Inquisition* (DAIII), released in 2014, was less story-driven than the predecessors. The gameplay was inspired by *Skyrim* (2011) in the fantasy videogame series *Elder Scrolls*, in that DAIII was likewise based on an open-world system.

The developers strove to create a hyper-medieval present, a dystopian dark time in a world called Theda that would remind the player of feudal times. The feeling of being in a medieval present was created by different layers that signal times gone missing. The fictitious nation Tevinter appears as a historical long-gone great civilization similar to what ancient Rome means to the Western world today. Signs of power and glorious culture are indicated by ruins in the landscapes, and antiquities from the Tevinter Empire. Medieval times are present in the DA series as a dystopian dark place with a long historical past, tales of years in named time periods. The title of the series, *Dragon Age*, indicates the present era. Lead writer David Gaider says that they chose different historical contexts foe each country within Theda. Ferelden was created with an aura of medievalism, while Orlais was more of the Renaissance, according to Gaider:

> [Ferelden] was our stand-in for England, which I think for many people is the most recognizable, the most comfortable, part of medieval fantasy, a sort of quasi-England … and in the third game we get into France basically, Orlais, where things actually start because France in this area was kind of a cultural center.

Gaider refers to a presumed common understanding of Britishness in order to make a safe starting-point in the first game. The developers assume familiarity with the British hyper-medievalism in the game, referring for instance to Peter Jackson's adaptation of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* storyworld. A strong tradition of British medievalism is felt. Stephen R. Donaldson observes that all English epics are fantasy, in the sense that they contain magic, all present supernatural perceptions of reality, from *Beowulf* to *The Lord of the Rings* (Donaldson 1986). When referring to medievalism in a British style, the developers are not only safe in the staging of a recognizable and authentic Ferelden, but can also draw parallels to the historical relationship between England and France by creating a counterpart of France within the story, called Orlais. We asked Gaider about the epochal in concept art of the French-like Renaissance in the country of Orlais. We wondered if the culture is supposed to imitate the Renaissance or even the baroque, but the team did not really work that close to historical authenticity, but would rather highlight the differences between the low technical level that characterizes the medieval "Britishness" of Ferelden, and the more sophisticated culture of "French" Orlais. The Versailles-inspired architecture and the costumes have visual inspiration from the Italian baroque as well as the French Empire to picture dissimilarities with respect to the agrarian culture of Ferelden. The use of parallel chronotopes sometimes clashed into anachronisms, as the following quotation shows:

> There is an event in *Dragon Age III* when they are attending a great ball in Orlais, and our art director said "You know, they didn't waltz in medieval times," and I said, "Well, I am well aware. But they also didn't have blood mages and dragons, so we can probably bend to a waltz if we really want to."

There are, however, certain limits to how far you can stretch contradictions. Laidlaw notes: "The joking way to get away with anachronisms is: 'A wizard did it with magic!' But that's sloppy storytelling!" To not strive for historical factual correctness is a way to avoid being trapped in anachronism. Gaider says: "If we were *actually* authentically medieval, a lot of people would look at it and say 'This is not true!'"

History as shorthand and "what if?"

The core of the storyworld lies in the work of the writers. The lead writer and the writers work intimately together in the same office to optimize the cooperation. Developing the world took the writing team five to six years. The team consists of a variety of people – writers, artists, level coordinators, cinematic, and game play constructors – who construct the storyworld using their separate skills. The creative process among the developers requires a varying expenditure of time, and was controlled by the construction of gates within the plot, to ensure that the development was maintained at a steady rate, and to avoid gaps between the groups. There were always risks that the writers could be too far ahead. When all the groups had reached the gate, they gathered in a meeting to discuss how to proceed. Gaider reveals that the progress is very much of a negotiation:

> We act like children, you know, we sit in a room and scream at each other…. We end up like, "No, we want the story to be like this!" and the artists go like, "No, we want a giant castle!" "That doesn't fit the plot!" and somebody has to mediate.

Gaider explains how the multifold team used references to the past as a shorthand to find common platforms to bring the crew together. For instance, "medieval green" was a starting point when creating the culture of British medieval Ferelden. When letting the culture and history come to life, they argued in a sort of counterfactual manner about what mages might have been like during the Middle Ages *if*

there actually were mages. The quotation shows how the use of history actually oscillates between different layers of memories, the past and canonic knowledge of Christianity during the Middle Ages, references from earlier mediations within the gaming culture, and the configuration by "what-if" as a driving motor in the process. The "what-if" strategy includes mindgaming cultural codes and mixing up established symbols as well; the usage is not a straight reproduction but a reconfiguration of memories:

> We wanted to make a make-believe world in a context that was sort of relative in reality. So we had this discussion … we have mages … real people that could read minds and summon demons … and know there were medieval witches and such stuff, but these were real … what would people do about that? We were talking about it and said that people would think that they were really dangerous. We are talking of Dungeons and Dragons – that's where BioWare kind of started – things of that world that really annoyed, and one of them was this kind of disregard what common people would think of this really dangerous monster and magic and how frightened people would be of anyone who had those abilities, right. What would happen … something like the church … and how it would develop in relation to that? And that's where the idea of the chantry, that sort of stands in for the Catholic Church. One of the questions we got to ask was about the Jesus character, but it was Joan of Arc that was our founding figure, how would the fact that this was a woman change what religion meant to people, right … how would that change what religion is to people? I mean … things have to be masculine or feminine … historically that was exclusive for men … and how magic might be built up in relation to … like if this was the chantry. "Magic exists but it exists to serve man, not rule over him." That the Roman Empire sort of rules by the mages and that this was a sort of reaction to that … sort of think of the reaction in a realistic world … what would happen….

The negotiating by references to a common past does not stop within the group of developers, but goes further to the communication with the gamers. The preferences among the gamers are important to the team, and *Dungeons & Dragons*, the fantasy tabletop role-playing game, seems to be one such common reference:

> Well, a good DM [Dungeon master], in my opinion, will always seed his world with some toss-off comics. The black river mercenary company came up a couple of times … maybe they'll never come up again … but if they come up again a year later, you seem like a genius: I reinvent this!

The gamers are important interlocutors and their reactions, both in direct communication with the developers and on fan-sites, are vital elements within the creative process. Reference to a common past is similarly a brick in the building of the storyworld. Gaider returns during the interview to incidents that somehow interfered with gamers' ideas of authenticity. Gaider noticed, not without resignation, that of all the comments made about the first game, the criticism of the avatars' underwear for not being medieval but ordinary modern was the most frequent.

Dealing with anachronisms and conflicts about authenticity was only one of many challenges when using the past. References to the emerging fictious past within the storyworld gradually became much more complicated than quarrels about interpretations of the common past outside the world of *Dragon Age*. Gaider recalls how the growing world was documented by scanning large quantities of post-it notes into a wiki page. The writer team had difficulties remembering details of folklore, fauna, flora, and history:

> You could never be 100% certain what the truth was. The further you go back in time, the less true things tend to be … not really the less true but the more colored by history. And then we have the part of the IP [intellectual property], we keep a separate section of our wiki and this is the objective truth; this is the truth of what happened to the ancient elves … this is the truth of what the old gods were and things like that…. And will we ever tell the actual truth to the players…. We don't know what's true of course…. But whether we do or not, we have to know…. Otherwise we spend our money on water. If you don't know what the truth is, it gets really awkward. It's funny, because we didn't know that we had to do that until we started DA II. We started to get some new writers who didn't know what the truth was…. I got like, "well we better start writing it down" or ten years from now I will have no idea of what we are doing!

"Weirdly enough it is the names we get most emotional about": Naming processes

Names were, according to Gaider, the hardest things to agree on, since names on one hand are subject to aesthetic preferences due to the function, but on the other hand evoke personal connections:

> I might think that some name sounds great; someone might say "Ah, that reminds me of this. Why can't we take account of that?" And we might argue over it. I remember Antiva. Ancient Antiva used to be called Calabria. Just by accident it is actually a region in Italy. And we said, "Well, it seems weird that we should name a place after a place in the real world." But some people have already got used to Calabria. When something has had a name for a while, it starts to be that name, and changes become really hard.

Gaider goes on to consider another difficult aspect of naming processes. It is problematic to change by renaming, once a person, a creature or a country is named. The name of the humanoid creatures called Qunari (people of the Qun) was questioned due to the similarity to canaries, an association that did not fit the huge, robust, horned creatures. But as the name was settled among the crew, it could not be changed. The final names are not infrequently the result of randomly picked personal choices, which afterwards make sense according to common heritage. Morrigan the witch is a central NPC (Non Playable Character) in DAO, a shapeshifter with a dark sense of humor and an ironic touch. Gaider told us that they wanted her to be cool, using "weird old-fashioned" British English (performed by Claudia Lee Black). When we suggested the resemblance of the name to the Morgana Pendragon of Arthurian mythology, and hinted some inspiration from the Celtic war goddess, Gaider reflected on unintentional usage of names. He told us that the name of Morrigan was finalized when they were working with a crucial sense of her, a dark ritual that inspired the creativity:

> It's funny how names will come about. Because sometimes we name characters and somebody afterwards points and says, "Hey, that name has a meaning, which is really appropriate." … At the time we were talking about the dark ritual in the end of DAO…. She didn't have that name at that point, but I thought it was a little of Morgan le Fey. I didn't want to name her Morgan because it was too on-the-nose, so I was going through versions of the name, and I liked the way Morgan sounded, so I wanted something similar. I came across Morrigan as an Irish name which fit into Ferelden which has such Irish and Old English names. Somebody later has pointed out "You know that name is from this Irish goddess of death?" It was completely unintentional, and they went "I don't believe you! You must have intended that!"

Gaider continues to add examples of how personal experiences go hand in hand with collective references, as when the protagonist and NPC called Alistair was invented:

> Sometimes it's intentional but not very often…. Alistair was named after a character I played in DD [Dungeons and Dragons] back when I was 16 years old…. There was a couple of characters that we searched for names … sometimes they were based on a meaning. There is a nice website called *Behind the Name* that you can do searches on the meaning of the names…. I think Win's [a female mage in DAO] name was based on them. Alistair got his name late. I think his first name was Victor. I have been watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and there is a character called Xander, and I thought that maybe it would be interesting to write someone like that, so I rewrote Victor so he sounded kind of different… He was really endearing and much more likeable. And all of a sudden everyone associated Victor with the character he used to be, and we thought he doesn't fit that name anymore. Well, why can't we have a nice likeable Victor? Because mentally Victor was this veteran guy, not this a little bit of a goof that Alistair ended up being. So I say, "Okay, I'll rename him," and we went through the process, trying to pick a name … and it's always painful… And then I saw this actor one afternoon when I was watching the television … on some kind of talk-show…. Well, I get the names in the weirdest ways…. Alistair Appleton…. We always fight over them [the names] … weirdly enough it is the names we get most emotional about.

Relation to society and commemoration:
the refashioning of the elves

BioWare's games have been discussed as potential influencers of contemporary societal issues by means of the role-playing games that are unique in drawing attention to supporting characters' personality cultures and societal backdrops (Jørgensen 2010), and are thereby platforms for mediating values. Christoffer B. Pattersson suggests that Mass Effect's "supporting characters can express meanings that value American multiculturalism as exceptional, thus permitting forms of patriarchal and imperial violence to continue unabated" (Pattersson 2014, 207). The impact of women gamers, gender roles and non-stereotypical diversity of representation in BioWare's games is furthermore highlighted and discussed (Nielsen 2015; James 2018). The social pathos within the series is for instance exposed in the NPC Flemeth, a witch and skin-changer, who represents an aging woman in a nuanced way, a category that is usually invisible in videogames (Toma 2015). BioWare's production of inclusive games as regards sexuality and gender is reflected in the romancing opportunities between the playable character and non-playable characters (Condis 2014), and is likewise questioned in terms of the problematic limiting representation of male homosexuality (Johansen Østby 2016).

Whether or not BioWare's games mediate liberal values at all, or only to a certain extent, is debatable, but ethical aspects are obviously present within the games. Morality is apparently explicitly addressed in the ethically colored gameplay of *Dragon Age*. The story-driven fixed narrative within the game offers ethnically challenging choices for the PC. Relations are steered by an approval rating game mechanics. The game's fixed narrative of interpersonal relationships is based on player's agency, and the choices affect the outcome of the game. The PC communicates with NPCs by means of user-selectable lines in a dialogue tree. Each line is emotionally loaded with affections and moods such as sarcasm, diplomacy, and care. The tactically correct phrase or action generates approval points from NPCs, while conflicts of interest may contribute to decreasing approval points. The approval points steer relations between the PC and NPCs, and the player can even get romantically involved with NPCs (Waern 2010; Jørgensen 2010).

According to Laidlaw, the immoral actions and the opportunities to act badly are created in order to put the good acts in perspective, as a kind of catharsis. The developers are "putting the player into an interesting quandary". Laidlaw refers to Milton's fortunate fall theory in the poem *Paradise Lost*, the "felix culpa", meaning that something good comes from bad things. The player is not supposed to pick the bad alternative, but to invoke the feeling of being even better when choosing the friendly options. It is actually hardly possible to play making only evil choices (Willander 2010). When we asked the developers about the intentions as commentators on the present world, Laidlaw said that the social aspects affect the player:

> I don't think that playing DAO will cause any social change. The game offers a range of choices that I as a player would not inherently do or never do, stuff that is not my own. The game lets people experience something that they wouldn't do in a – I wouldn't say consequence-free – because the game has internal consequences, but in a low-consequence or non-damaging kind of environment… Videogames, more than, say, a novel or a movie, can give alternate experiences and catharsis… Games offer you the ability to simulate, and tell you about the opportunity to apply rules to your own real life.

According to Gaider, DAII was about "freedom versus security," as reflected by the conflicts between the mages and the templars in the fixed narrative. The team discussed whether to draw parallels with the

contemporary political climate or not, and decided to use the references to war and conflicts in the present time to make the fantasy world recognizable and important. Gaider explains that the far from obvious potion is a tribute in making videogames into an art form that deserves to be taken seriously. The stories within the storyworld include armed conflict by war and civil war, and consequences of war such as refugees, apartheid and diaspora, and a dark past marked by continuing battles. The fantasy elements of the reoccurring blight and invasions of the orc-like blackspawn under the lead of the Archdemon, a tainted god in the form of a dragon, are combined with images of political and social conflicts and injustices.

The elves within the storyworld of DA are an example of how the cultural memory works with fantasy references interleaved with topical global conflicts. It has been noticed that elves represent otherness in a number of fantasy videogames, stand-inds for racial conflicts that cannot be made explicit, such as slavery and oppression. There are strong similarities between the history of Native Americans and the Jewish diaspora and the elf societies in DA (Poor 2012, 384).

The elves in DA not only represent otherness but are also separated from the place that fulfills their status. Elves, or fairies, in the fairy tales of folklore, are deeply connected to Faërie, the realm in which they have their being, only accessible for humans when they are enchanted. The connection between the fairies and the magic realm was used by Tolkien when creating Middle Earth (Hillman 2018). The elves in Tolkien's saga leave Middle Earth when magic and golden ages fade away. In DA the elves have been robbed in their home country. The City Elves live in a ghetto, elven alienage, in the capital city while the Dalish elves, who refuse to submit, are living like nomads in the woods. Like Tolkien's elves, the greatness of the elves belongs to the past. They possess supernatural wisdom and are in a covenant with nature. In contrast to the immortal elves who were leaving during the age of humans, the elves in DA have been robbed of their inheritance when their kingdom of Elvhenan was conquered by Tevinter and they were degraded to the second-tier inhabitants of Thedas. They fought alongside the prophet and war leader Andraste against the Tevinter Empire, and they received the land in the Dales as a gift for their loyalty, but lost it once again and are now without a home. In the game's present, the elves are despised, associated with crime and accused of being responsible for social problems and difficulties (Elf, Dragon Age wiki). The elves are used in *Dragon Age* to create a dynamic narrative that includes potential social conflicts and tools to characterize a race within the storyworld. In order to make them authentic, Gaider used memory both in terms of chronological courses of events, such as the Crusades, and narrative abbreviations such as the Jewish people and Native Americans, which reinforce the elves' exposure as a mimetic feature. The former understanding of elves, formed by nostalgia and distance to social issues in secondary worlds, is changed by the dark and dystopian context, in which the elves have lost their status and become second-rank citizens but, due to the gameplay, are incapable of changing society.

> "Realistic" is a funny word, though, because saying what is realistic when you are dealing with fantasy is sort of inherently contradictory. I think "possible" is a better word … if there were elves, I mean, we have had problems with racism in our own history. So what if we had people who were obviously not human? Not just the color of your skin but physically and looked different? What would that do? If these elements existed in our real history, our medieval history, how would that change the history? … With the elves … you can sort of point to the Jewish people or even Native Americans in terms of how they lost their homeland and try to wander the world until they can make claim on their homelands…. The Dale (Dalish) used to be an elven/elvish country and it was destroyed and I sort of based that on the exalted marches of the dales that was based on Albigensian crusades that were not against Muslims, but occurred within France. The chantry decides finally that the elves were heretics, and they couldn't be allowed to have

> their own nation even though Andraste, a sort of Joan of Arc character, according to the legend, has given them the land as a reward for helping to defeat the Imperium. And it is not clear in history that they did actually start that conflict. The elves say, "No, the humans got tired of us and said we were heretics". And the humans say, "Oh no, the elves had pulled away from humanity and become very hostile and have even gone to war with us." Which is true? We have players who ask us to tell us what is true. Why would we do that? That is what history is all about, it's all about viewpoint.

The last example of the configuration of memories is about the unfortunate and intentional naming of the NPC, the mage Anders, who appears in *Dragon Age II*. There were some concerns about his sexual orientation that evoked protests from male American gamers (Johansen Østby 2016, 358). Scandinavian gamers did not react to the character's sexuality, but to the everyday-sounding name. Gaider says that the name Anders was criticized by the Scandinavian foreign office who argued that naming a mage Anders, a very common name in Scandinavia, is like naming a mage Bob in Canada; Anders is very non-fantasy to Scandinavians. To the Canadian writer team the name Anders was an undeniably exotic touch, and considering the tricky business of naming, they decided to let Anders keep his name. The matter of the naming of Anders took a turn for the worse. This NPC, with a name that is anything but fantasy-sounding to Scandinavians, has a crucial part in the story. He might, according to the gameplay, become a terrorist if the player hardens him in that direction. Gaider recalls that a year after the release of *Dragon Age II* in 2011, the terror attack at Utøya in Norway happened, and the team realized with horror that the terrorist's name was Anders Breivik. Therefore, unfortunately, the choice of local name for the fantasy character, combined with the likeness to the terrorist, became a reference that was not only unintended but also mostly unwelcome due to the extratextual references, at least in Scandinavia, after July 2012.

BioWare and the intentional and unintentional use of memory

"Collective memory is a selective, unreliable narrator, focusing on popular eras of history such as medieval and Roman" (Lovell 2019, 452). The statement is in line with Harvey's metaphor of memory as an unruly beast, and leads us back to the core of the essay; the building of a fantastic storyworld does not occur in an empty space but in a realm of memories, in order to establish an authentic and compelling gameplay. The references to common knowledge, including heritage, gather the team during the creative process by being the starting point for the discussions. References might be open and general, like the typical medievalism in DA, or like twisted mindgaming by configuring the cultural memory in new ways, for example as DA transfers the classical elves to a dark social context. The use of memory can also be picked from intertextual references, such as the given knowledge of *Dungeons & Dragons* (cf. Fewster, this volume) or earlier personal experience from media, which was highlighted in the naming process of the protagonist Alistair. Memory takes all kinds of forms and stems from innumerable sources, but is mostly intentional although not obvious and easy to trace back to a single cultural memory. There are situations that actually are unintended and cannot be easily explained by intentional use of heritage or common knowledge of society. Naming processes are a concrete example of how references can play a trick, as for instance in the resemblance of names to Calabria or canaries, or in the more complex and definitely not humorous case of a name echoing actual contemporary terror.

Conclusions

A vital feature in creating imaginary mimesis is to mix spectacular fantasy with well-established narrative, symbols, and motifs, what is called cultural memory. This essay has explored how the configuration of memories serves gameplay in game design as an example of the building of storyworlds in contemporary time. In an interview with the lead designer Mike Laidlaw and lead writer David Gaider at the Canadian game developer BioWare, we had the opportunity to learn more about how medievalism and the use of cultural memories turn out in the concrete work on a storyworld. The meeting lasted for six hours and included discussions of fiction, fantasy, and history, gameplay and demonstrations of concept arts. The discussions concerned a wide range of aspects of the development process and gave a number of examples of how memories, in a nexus of references, drive the creative processes, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally, but always in dialogue in order to make sense, to thrill and to make the storyworld come alive.

NOTES

1. The interview was semi-structured and lasted six hours. The project was represented by Ulf Palmenfelt, Lars Wängdahl, and Cecilia Trenter. BioWare was represented by Mike Laidlaw, David Gaider, Mary Kirby, Lucas Christensen, and Ian Mitchell. The main part of the interview is published in Trenter 2017.
2. The essay is part of my research on the *Dragon Age* franchise, primarily in Trenter 2012.

REFERENCES

(See attached images).

[source: *The Enduring Fantastic – Essays on Imagination and Western Culture*, edited by Anna Höglund and Cecilia Trenter]