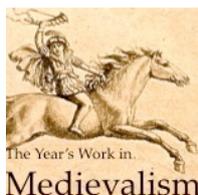


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“It’s the Middle Ages, Yo!”:
Race, Neo/medievalisms, and the World of Dragon Age
Helen Young, University of Sydney

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The fantasy genre, with its great popularity and transmedia reach, is one of the most common locations for medieval and pseudo-medieval elements in contemporary Western popular culture. Video games make varying attempts to represent the historical realities of medieval society and culture accurately.¹ For scholars fantasy role-playing games (RPGs) – and the entire fantasy genre in all media forms – are generally considered to be either not medievalism at all, because of its non-realist elements,² or neomedievalist. David Marshall has recently offered a useful summation of the many different manifestations of neomedievalism as: “a self-conscious, ahistorical, non-nostalgic imagining or reuse of the historical Middle Ages that selectively appropriates iconic images...to construct a presentist space that disrupts traditional depictions of the medieval.”³ The world of the Dragon Age video games and their spin-off franchise draws on the Middle Ages in precisely these kinds of ways. It is selective, draws inspiration from multiple temporal and geographic locations in medieval Europe, and is overtly presentist as it engages with contemporary social issues including gender, sexual orientation, and race.

The neomedievalism of fantasy RPGs provides game-makers with short-cuts in the process of creating an internally coherent world through references to both history and genre. The believability of the game-world is a critical issue for them because it is of paramount importance to players and, as a result, to the success of the game as a commercial product. Historical authenticity is a key factor in the believability of a neomedieval game-world like that found in Dragon Age and other fantasy RPGs such as World of Warcraft, as well as for the wider genre. Some authors, most notably George R. R. Martin, whose A Song of Ice and Fire series has become the wildly successful Game of Thrones franchise, claim their books represent the Middle Ages as they really were.⁴ Dragon Age has not achieved the success of Martin's works and their derivations, but players are also users of other games, are highly likely to be fantasy readers, and are inevitably consumers of other popular culture texts within and outside the genre. Thus,

¹ Oliver M. Traxel, “Medieval and Pseudo-Medieval Elements in Computer Role-Playing Games: Use and Interactivity,” *Studies in Medievalism: Medievalism in Technology Old and New* 16 (2008): 125–142.

² E.g. Michael Alexander, *Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

³ David W. Marshall, “Neomedievalism, Identification, and the Haze of Medievalism,” *Studies in Medievalism* 21 (2012): 21–34.

⁴ See, for example, James Poniewozik, “GRRM Interview Part 2: Fantasy and History,” *Time*, 2011, <http://entertainment.time.com/2011/04/18/grrm-interview-part-2-fantasy-and-history/>.

player attitudes to the world of Dragon Age are a useful case-study, offering insight into the neo/medievalisms not only of the fantasy genre, but of popular culture more broadly.

This article examines ways in which the idea of an authentic Middle Ages is deployed in fan debates over perceived racism in the role-playing video-game Dragon Age: Origins (DAO), its sequel Dragon Age II (DA2), and the forthcoming third game, which has the working title Dragon Age: Inquisition (DAI). It demonstrates that players who argue both for and against greater racial diversity in the Dragon Age games invoke the idea that the game-world is based on the European Middle Ages and should represent them in historically authentic ways. The article argues that their imagined constructions of medieval England are both mutually exclusive and united by nostalgic desire for a never-extant pre-race era which more closely resembles romantic medievalism than the neomedievalisms of the games themselves.

In online fan-forums, threads arguing over racism or lack of diversity in a video-game are so common that fans who make original posts are sometimes dismissed as mere trolls, courting controversy but lacking real interest in the supposed topic. Sufficient engagements last long enough, however, for meta-discussions – usually blogs – to be written; the quote in my title comes from one of these. The post, from The Border House blog, a site which “aims to break down cultural and stereotypical walls” in gaming, discusses the tendency to excuse prejudice of all kinds in games on the grounds of historical authenticity, and asserts that “when you create a fantasy world you are not bound to create a world with regressed social relations.”⁵ Despite the presentist concerns and multiple mythical elements of the Dragon Age world, the notion that it represents the Middle Ages authentically is of critical concern to many players, who may or may not consider the social relations of the game-world regressive.

Studies of the significance and representation of race in video-games of all kinds lag behind studies of gender.⁶ The majority of research which has been done focuses on games which do not have fantasy settings, but rather represent the real world in some way.⁷ The relatively few explorations of race in fantasy games do not consider the significant role of medievalism in how race is both constructed and received.⁸

⁵ Quinnae, “No More Excuses: ‘It’s the Middle Ages, Yo!’,” The Border House, 2011, <http://borderhouseblog.com/?p=4957>.

⁶ E.g., Anna Everett and Craig Watkins, “The Power of Play: The Portrayal and Performance of Race in Video Games,” in *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning*, ed. Katie Salen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 141.

⁷ Everett and Watkins, “The Power of Play: The Portrayal and Performance of Race in Video Games”; Anna Everett, “Serious Play: Playing with Race in Contemporary Gaming Culture,” in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, ed. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 311–326; David Leonard, “‘Live in Your World, Play in Ours’: Race, Video Games, and Consuming the Other,” *SIMILE: Studies In Media & Information Literacy Education* 3, no. 4 (2003), 1–9; David Leonard, “Not a Hater, Just Keepin’ It Real: The Importance of Race and Gender-Based Game Studies,” *Games and Culture* 1 (2006): 83–88.

⁸ E.g., Higgin, “Blackless Fantasy”; L. Schwartz, “Fantasy, Realism, and the Other in Recent Video Games,” *Space and Culture* 9, no. 3 (August 1, 2006): 313–325; N. Poor, “Digital Elves as a Racial Other in Video Games: Acknowledgment and Avoidance,” *Games and Culture* 7, no. 5 (August 17, 2012): 375–396; Jessica Langer, “The Familiar and the Foreign: Playing (Post) Colonialism in World of Warcraft,” in *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*, ed. Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jell Walker Rettberg (London: MIT Press, 2008), 87–108.

The Dragon Age games to date all take place on Thedas, a continent populated by humans and other fantasy species including elves, dwarves, the Qunari - and other humanoid species – and occasional dragons.⁹ The world draws very heavily on the conventions of high fantasy through its loosely medieval weaponry, social structures, and political systems; the last two apply particularly to human society, while other species have markedly different cultures. For all its connections with high fantasy, Dragon Age does not merely perpetuate in uncomplicated ways the stereotypes which see fantasy games commonly regarded as racist, not to mention sexist, and homophobic. In DAO players can make their characters either male or female, elven, human, or dwarven and can alter their skin tone and hair colour across natural and unnatural spectrums. Characters can be nobles or commoners for humans and dwarves and urban or rural dwellers for elves.

The game-world, moreover, is carefully and deliberately constructed to engage with issues around racism, prejudice, and histories of slavery. Human society is loosely feudal, and historically enslaved elves, who are still the targets of a great deal of negative prejudice. Dwarves, on the other hand, have a rigidly caste-based society. Bioware, the publisher of the Dragon Age franchise, was widely praised for creating six different opening game-play sequences for DAO which reflected varied the backgrounds of the characters players select.

The issue of race is complicated in the Dragon Age world, as it is in many fantasy worlds and works, by the tendency to refer to the different humanoid species as races, lending biological and essentialist overtones to difference. Tanner Higgin has argued that “blackness in MMPORGs [massive multiplayer online role-playing games] is not only scattered and diffused through a lens of fantasy.”¹⁰ Although Dragon Age is not strictly an MMPORG as the game play is largely console-based, the “lens of fantasy” is still applied to the races that inhabit Thedas. Such diffusion is evident when fans argue that an accusation of racism is irrelevant or misguided because: “USA = real world country, Ferelden = fictional fantasy elf, dwarf, and dragon-filled country.”¹¹ Others, however, engaged directly with the attempts to map histories of human race relations onto species-based difference in the fantasy world.

One thread on Bioware’s official fan-site, the Bioware Social Network, is, for example, titled “Elven alienage = Jewish ghetto.” Players were willing to recognise similarities between human oppression of elves and real world anti-semitism, but also acknowledged that it could be modelled on any number of historical and contemporary real world situations: “you could make the comparison between the Elves and the Jewish Ghetto, NA [North American] native reservations, the Palestinians in Israel, the indigenous South Africans under apartheid, the Helots in Sparta, [and] Anglo-Saxon serfs under the Normans.”¹² David Gaider, the lead writer for the Dragon Age universe, confirmed this reading on the same thread: “the medieval Jewish ghettos were the original inspiration behind the alienages, yes. It grew to encompass other

⁹ There are multiple spin-offs from the games, including novels, comics, a feature length film, and web-series.

¹⁰ Higgin, “Blackless Fantasy,” 12.

¹¹ Various, “Diversity in Thedas....,” Bioware Social Network, 2009, <http://social.bioware.com/forum/1/topic/9/index/1198792/5>.

¹² Various, “Elven Alienage = Jewish Ghetto?,” Bioware Social Network, 2009, <http://social.bioware.com/forum/1/topic/9/index/642539/6>.

things, of course, but all of Thedas started as a fictionalized version of European history, so that is indeed where it began.”¹³ Gaider makes an explicit connection between the fantasy world he helped create and the Middle Ages, underpinning the imaginary with a foundation of historical authenticity.

The majority of threads discussing how the Dragon Age games represent race focus on humanity rather than interspecies relations, although the two topics do cross-over at times. As noted above, in DAO players could change the skin and hair colour of their character, however, making such a change did not change the character’s immediate family. This was among the complaints of a player who began a thread titled “Diversity in Thedas”:

It never really struck me until now but why aren’t black people represented in Dragon Age? You have white people, latin...and various other ethnicities based on the accents of the people voicing them... It’s pretty ridiculous to make a male human and have a white mother and father as a black man... I would love for someone associated with the lore of Dragon Age to explain.¹⁴

Gaider also responded directly to this post, although he did not comment on the issue of the central character’s family not matching his/her race but remaining white, the games’ default. He wrote:

You’ll find dark-skinned people in the nation of Rivain, which is quite a ways off to the north... Ferelden [where DAO took place] is analogous to medieval England, which it is a fictionalized version of... our intent was to create an internally coherent setting, not to reflect ethnic diversity as it’s found in our world in modern times.¹⁵

The issue of mismatched familial skin and hair colour was addressed in DA2, although the great majority of peripheral or non-player characters still had noticeably European features and colouring which was also a source of dissatisfaction for some fans. Discussion on this thread continued after Gaider’s post for six pages with over 120 posts and more than fifty individuals contributing. Some contributors found the explanation offered by Gaider sufficient to explain the lack of diversity in the game, and others invoked his perceived authority as “the communities [sic] head” in attempts to stifle the debate. The explanation was, however, also dismissed as “an easy out.”¹⁶ While other topics were raised, including challenges to the original commenter’s definition of “diversity,” discussion of the racial make-up of England in the Middle Ages was a major theme throughout the entire thread.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Various, “Diversity in Thedas...”

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

The shape of the arguments demonstrate that there is a very strong desire amongst fantasy fans – and authors and game-makers as well – for imagined worlds to reflect historical realities of the Middle Ages. Author Chuck Wendig pointed out, in an article discussing DAO as well as World of Warcraft and other “pseudo-medieval fantasy” games: “England in the Middle Ages didn't really have werewolves, blood-forged swords, or ancient black spires that channel magic...If we can have werewolves, why can't we have black people?”¹⁷ The point that a fantasy world is, by definition, not historically accurate, however, does not derail the demand for historical authenticity. Having pointed out this logical fallacy, Wendig shows how powerful the argument is by accepting its basic premise. He asserts that there was, in fact, demonstrable racial diversity in medieval England, specifically arguing for the presence of people of African origin: Certainly the England of old was not home to any other races ... Except, we have evidence there of [Moors](#), who were clearly black-skinned. The influence of Romans, many of whom were dark-skinned or who brought slaves of different races, persevered as well. No, the country wasn't exactly a paragon of ethnic diversity, but it also wasn't nearly as white-washed as [this game suggests].¹⁸

The implication of this kind of statement is that historical authenticity is paramount to a neomedievalist world of the kind the Dragon Age franchise creates. It demonstrates that a monochromatic game-world would be not just acceptable, but desirable and even necessary, if medieval Europe had been populated only by whites.¹⁹

In the many claims and counter-claims about the racial composition of Europe in the Middle Ages, little, if any, evidence is offered or requested. In the above quote from Wendig – which appeared in an online gaming magazine – the word Moors was hyperlinked. At the time of writing the link no longer functions, but it took readers to a short online encyclopaedia entry about the Moors which indicated that they were an Islamic people who lived in North Africa and Spain, but made no mention of skin color or of any presence in England. Even this information, which is tangential at best to the immediate point of Wendig's article, is significant evidence compared to many claims.

One participant in the “Diversity in Thedas” thread wrote: “actually, there were dark-skinned people in medieval Europe, though many of them were slaves.” Another replied: There were not many black slaves (if any in most countries) during the medieval period, it is only at the very end of this period that Portuguese and Spanish nations began to explore the to [sic] any extent the African coastline. It is only in the early modern period (the renaissance) that European nations became seriously interacting [sic] with the slave trade.²⁰ Both comments were longer than I have given here, with significant factual claims, none of which were supported by links to evidence, any indication of the source of participant's

¹⁷ Chuck Wendig, “Industry of Inclusion: The Pasty White Person Is King,” *The Escapist Magazine*, 2010.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ In the interests of clarity, my use of the word ‘white’ here reflects the way it is generally used in this kind of online debate: uncritically and without acknowledgment of its conceptual problems and complexities.

²⁰ Various, “Diversity in Thedas...”

knowledge, or any claim to expertise on their parts. They follow the general pattern followed in these types of debate.

The “Diversity in Thedas” thread opens up the topic of racial representation by requesting information from the game-makers, but a significant number of other threads on Bioware’s forums are initiated as calls for change in later games. One, titled, “Bioware should break a barrier and put a African American character in DA2” went for some 18 pages with around 400 posts.²¹ Others call for greater diversity in the forthcoming DAI game, including: “more Asian people in DA,”²² and “DA3: Color-blind casting.”²³ In all of these threads, the supposed exclusive whiteness of medieval Europe is invoked on both sides of the at-times lengthy and bitter debates. For example: “there’s no reason for Thedas to be monoracial, it’d be unlikely for a medieval northern European to have met someone of a different skin colour, but for a mediterranean it’d be quite possible,” and “Thedas is obviously a land steeped in the culture, legends, and socio-historical realities of Northern Europe. Mixing in more non-white humans would ruin their careful reconstruction of the Dark Ages.”²⁴ For many players who engage in discussion on the Bioware Social Network, authentic representation of the racial composition of northern Europe in the Middle Ages – or at least what they believe to be authentic – is evidently of prime importance.

The nostalgic tendencies of modern medievalism have been discussed extensively in recent years (e.g. in the themed volume 2.2 of *post-medieval*). Fantasy as a genre is often dismissed or derided as nostalgic by Marxist thinkers such as Darko Suvin and China Miéville,²⁵ and medievalists alike.²⁶ In the light of these approaches the desire to construct medieval Europe as exclusively white is easily read as nostalgic longing for a never-extant time when the world was not just Eurocentric, but simple was white Europe. Such a reading is, however, complicated by the marked tendency of fans who are calling for greater diversity to accept the primacy of historically accurate renderings of race.

Participants on both sides of debates such as those outlined above, have a marked tendency to use the term politically correct in a negative way. The original post in a thread titled “Dark Fantasy and Political Correctness” discusses gender and race relations in the Dragon Age world and states: “now I do understand the reasoning behind this, Bioware wants to avoid offending people and loosing sales, and they want to allow you to play the character as you see fit. To be frank I agree with them... [but] I think Bioware went a bit too far.”²⁷ The statement

²¹ Various, “Bioware Should Break a Barrier and Put an African American Charcater in DA2,” Bioware SocialNetwork, 2010, <http://social.bioware.com/forum/1/topic/141/index/4439470/1>.

²² Various, “More Asian People in DA,” Bioware Social Network, 2011, <http://social.bioware.com/%25253Cbr/%25253Ehttp://social.bioware.com/forum/1/topic/141/index/7695163/4>.

²³ Various, “DA3: Color-Blind Casting,” Bioware Social Network, 2012, <http://social.bioware.com/forums..topic=716201/forum/1/topic/315/index/11928927>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ E.g., Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); China Mieville, “Tolkien – Middle Earth Meets Middle England,” *Socialist Review*, 2002, <http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=7813>.

²⁶ Renée R Trilling, “Medievalism and Its Discontents,” *Postmedieval* 2, no. 2 (2011): 216–224.

²⁷ Various, “Dark Fantasy and Political Correctness?,” Bioware Social Network, 2009, <http://social.bioware.com/for>

suggests that gestures towards, or attempts at, inclusiveness are motivated by the desire for profit and are imposed on players and game-makers by corporate interests. The thread titled “more Asian people in DA” includes examples from both sides of the diversity debate. One post reads:

I’m Black and I like to have diversity in my games, not for any ‘politically correct’ reasons but because it helps immerse [sic] me in the game.²⁸

The next post argues the opposite view but which likewise insists on the undesirability of political correctness:

Diversity is fine as long as answers are provided as to the ‘how’ and ‘why’ different cultures are all mingling in places where people likely wouldn’t wander twenty miles from where they were born... Though there is no need to be rude, overly [sic] political correctness will be the death of everything, especially stories that are worth a damn.²⁹

Posts such as this emphasise the need for an internally coherent world and suggest that such coherence can only be achieved if the game accurately represents the past. Political correctness is aligned not just with modernity, but also with corporatization and its supposed impositions on games and gamers.

Players on both sides of the diversity debate place a high level of value on the game-world representing the Middle Ages in ways they consider historically authentic. While they cannot agree on whether there was, in fact, any racial or cultural diversity in Europe – particularly England in the case of *Dragon Age* – during that era, they are united in their opposition to the constructed nature of modern culture. Their beliefs about the Middle Ages are mutually exclusive and, as they are generally expressed without recourse to evidence, demonstrate that in this context historical authenticity depends on feeling not fact. They engage in what Svetlana Boym terms “restorative nostalgia” which “does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition”³⁰ in selective ways which are contingent on perspective but united by their separation of the medieval from the modern.

The twenty-first century has been marked by claims that Western society and culture, particularly in the USA but also in Europe and Australia, is post-race. Precisely what post-race means varies, but the core of the argument is that race is no longer the most salient cause of inequality. For example, in the USA, the election of Barack Obama is taken by some as evidence that race no longer impedes opportunity by partisans on both sides of politics.³¹ The restorative nostalgia of *Dragon Age* players’ medievalism can be understood as a desire for post-race society

um/1/topic/47/index/47149/1.

²⁸ Various, “More Asian People in DA.”

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xi.

³¹ Alana Lentin, “Post-race, Post Politics: The Paradoxical Rise of Culture After Multiculturalism,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* no. November (March 22, 2012): 1–19.

redirected to the past so that the Middle Ages are imagined as a pre-race utopia. The tendency to view race as an invention of modernity – and thus absent from the Middle Ages – reflects the canons of race theory, although medieval studies scholars have argued for at least a decade that racialized thinking did occur in medieval Europe.³² Christian beliefs which aligned whiteness with purity and good, and darkness with sin and evil, are acknowledged to have influenced later thought,³³ but nonetheless authorise the idea that the Middle Ages were pre-race in the ways that contemporary society is at times considered post-race. The nostalgia of fans on both sides of debates about race is at the very least enabled by such modernist assumptions.

Marshall argues that the mode of identification between past and present is a key difference between neomedievalisms and romantic medievalisms; he suggests that the former “locates parallels to the medieval in our own practice, whereas more nostalgic medievalisms attempt to create those parallels.”³⁴ This distinction offers a useful way of reading the different neo/medievalisms at play in and around Dragon Age. When the game writers, for example, draw inspiration from “medieval Jewish ghettos,” and expand on that inspiration to encompass other historical situations in order to comment on the contemporary world, their practice is neomedievalist. In their debates about diversity in the game-world, however, players compete to re-create the Middle Ages in the mould of their own idealised imaginings. The practices inform each other as ideas about and approaches to the Middle Ages circulate in and around the Dragon Age world.

³² E.g., Thomas Hahn, “The Difference the Middle Ages Makes: Color and Race Before the Modern World,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31, no. 1 (2001): 1–38; Geraldine Heng, “The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages I: Race Studies, Modernity, and the Middle Ages,” *Literature Compass* 8, no. 5 (May 2, 2011): 258–274; Geraldine Heng, “The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages II: Locations of Medieval Race,” *Literature Compass* 8, no. 5 (May 2, 2011): 275–293.

³³ E.g., Nina G. Jablonski, *Living Colour: The Biological and Social Meaning of Skin Color* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

³⁴ Marshall, “Neomedievalism, Identification, and the Haze of Medievalism,” 30.