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## **A Patchwork World: Medieval History and World-Building in *Dragon Age: Inquisition***

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Open-world role-playing games (RPGs) pose a particular challenge to game designers. If a player is allowed to explore the gameworld freely and interact at will with non-player characters (NPCs), that world and its people must feel authentic to them in order to facilitate what Mark J. P. Wolf calls “conceptual immersion.”<sup>1</sup> Wolf believes that achieving this requires *absorption*, which he defines as the preoccupation of the user’s imagination with the details of the secondary world to such an extent that details of the primary world are temporarily displaced. Only then can the user achieve *saturation*, “the pleasurable goal of conceptual immersion; the occupying of the audience’s full attention and imagination, often with more detail than can be held in mind all at once.”<sup>2</sup> A neomedieval gameworld that hopes to successfully engage its players for fifty to a hundred hours of gameplay can best achieve these goals through the creation of a world that is both detailed and expansive. To do so, designers often choose to draw deeply on elements of medieval history and culture. Typically, this is done in a fragmented, piecemeal way, mediated through other medievalist tropes and reassembled in a new form that, like most neomedievalist texts, bears little overt resemblance to the historical Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the gameworld’s relationship to its sources of historical inspiration can seem to be a very distant one. In truth, however, these elements play a critical role in lore, narrative, and gameplay.

In an article discussing the similarly problematic relationship between *Game of Thrones* and the various elements of medieval history and culture that inspired its story world, Philippa Byrne argues that *Game of Thrones* is “a chaotic amalgam of periods and places. . . . If it’s not set in any one period, we’re limited in how far we can discuss it in relation to ‘history’. We can only talk about vague ideas of ‘influence’ and ‘inspiration’, terms which

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<sup>1</sup> Mark J.P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 48. Wolf describes conceptual immersion as the provision of “sufficient detail and description for the reader to vicariously enter the virtual world.”

<sup>2</sup> Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, 48-9.

<sup>3</sup> Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl, *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 3. Pugh and Weisl consider the ongoing debate on the nature of neomedievalism, but stress that although many forms of medievalism can be seen as “fantasies of the period” or “fantasies built upon fantasies,” this does not preclude them from being “authentically medieval.” See also Carol Robinson and Pamela Clements, “Living with Neomedievalism,” *Studies in Medievalism* 19 (2010): 62, where they cite neomedievalism’s “lack of concern for historical accuracy” but also its “self-awareness and self-reflexivity” as setting it apart from other fantasy works. The common element in such definitions would seem to be that neomedievalism’s historical elements are decontextualized, but that its relationship to medieval history and culture is not entirely severed.

can mean anything.”<sup>4</sup> Byrne is quite correct that any relationship between a neomedieval world and medieval history tends to be ambiguous and indirect. But especially in the case of a neomedieval gameworld, designed to maximize player immersion, it must be remembered that this kind of ‘chaotic amalgam’ is constructed through a set of deliberate choices, each intended to create meaning for the audience. The so-called chaos is actually a complex layering of multiple medievalisms. Game designers may blur (or often, obliterate) geographical, temporal, and cultural boundaries, but they do so in order to immerse the player in an environment that persistently evokes the medieval on multiple levels. Accuracy is not necessary, only a sense of perceived authenticity. Fidelity to history is less important than the player’s sense that they are operating in a fully fleshed-out world that *feels* medieval to them, wherever their path through the gameworld may take them.<sup>5</sup>

In this essay, I will explore this blurring of boundaries in the open-world RPG *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.<sup>6</sup> Like other games of its type, *Inquisition* features what I would call a neomedieval patchwork world, where medieval influences appear without consideration for their original geographical, temporal, or cultural separation. It also blurs another boundary: specifically, the one between popular and academic perceptions of the medieval period. *Inquisition*’s game world reflects the growing sophistication of popular ideas about what a “medieval” world should look like—which, in turn, satisfies the audience’s somewhat ambiguous yearning for a sense of historical authenticity in their neomedieval fantasy.<sup>7</sup> This article will consider how *Inquisition*’s pseudo-medieval world presents nuanced representations of political and institutional leadership, diplomacy and intercultural contact, religious and theological diversity, and the motives and methods of religious institutions. It will also illustrate how many of these aspects of worldbuilding are not passive parts of the setting, but directly connect to gameplay choices. The player is hence not a passive observer, but an active participant in shaping events that bring about political, social, and cultural change, which in turn reflects modern perceptions of the medieval world as dynamic and complex.

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<sup>4</sup> Philippa Byrne, “Why Medievalists Should Stop Talking about *Game of Thrones*,” *The Conversation*, June 15, 2016, accessed December 27, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/why-medievalists-should-stop-talking-about-game-of-thrones-61044>.

<sup>5</sup> Brent Moberly and Kevin Moberly, “Neomedievalism, Hyperrealism, and Simulation,” *Studies in Medievalism* 19 (2010): 15. They discuss “hyperreal medievalism,” arguing that neomedieval worlds “simulate the medieval,” producing “a version of the medieval that is more medieval than the medieval, a version of the medieval that can be seen and touched, bought and sold, and therefore owned.” Divorced from their original historical context, these elements still maintain their meaning to the audience.

<sup>6</sup> *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, video game (2014), Playstation 4, Bioware / Electronic Arts, Canada.

<sup>7</sup> Amy Kaufman, “Medieval Unmoored,” *Studies in Medievalism* 19 (2010): 3. Kaufman argues that “what initially appears to be neomedievalism’s denial of history may, instead, be a desire for history alongside the uncomfortable suspicion that there is no such thing.”

Originally released in 2014, *Inquisition* is the third game of a franchise set in the neomedieval world of Thedas.<sup>8</sup> The story begins in the immediate aftermath of a magical explosion that destroys the Conclave, a peace conference called to negotiate an end to the Mage-Templar War.<sup>9</sup> The customizable player character is the sole survivor of the explosion, which damages the Veil that separates the material world from the Fade, a sort of astral plane inhabited by spirits and demons, and leaves the people of Thedas vulnerable to attacks from the other side. The explosion leaves your character with partial amnesia and the ability to seal tears in the Veil thanks to a magic-infused scar on your hand. Rumors quickly begin to spread among the people that your survival was the work of Andraste, the holy martyr and prophet at the heart of spiritual life in southern Thedas. The player character is acclaimed as the “Herald of Andraste” and quickly enlisted by the Inquisition, newly re-established by surviving associates of the Divine.<sup>10</sup> Eventually accepting the position of Inquisitor, the Herald leads a long campaign against those responsible for the destruction of the Conclave, while simultaneously trying to restore order in Thedas.

The preceding paragraph gives some sense of the social, political, and cultural complexity of the game world. Thedas makes no claim to historical accuracy; it is purely neomedieval, containing many common tropes of high fantasy and intertextual connections to other medievalist texts. Yet in a manner that demonstrates Adam Chapman’s point that a fantastical setting can “still be used metaphorically to argue about the past . . . [by] exploring key ideas or concerns by mixing fantastical elements with those that are more conventionally historical,” the gameworld operates on a set of fundamental assumptions that resonate in key ways with our modern historical understanding of the medieval period.<sup>11</sup> That is, however fantastical, *Inquisition* still presents a metaphorical argument about the nature of the medieval past, one which can be read as demonstrating how popular concepts of the period have evolved. The game *shows*, rather than *tells* us that Thedas is a culturally rich and diverse “medieval” world with an intricately detailed history, where violence is not always the answer and where complex institutions both shape and

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<sup>8</sup> *Inquisition* follows *Dragon Age: Origins*, video game (2009), Playstation, Bioware / Electronic Arts, Canada; and its sequel, *Dragon Age II*, video game (2011), Playstation, Bioware / Electronic Arts, Canada.

<sup>9</sup> The war begins following the events of *Dragon Age II*, pitting rebel mages who voted to dissolve the Circle of Magi against the Templar Order, their former guardians/jailors. At the beginning of *Inquisition*, the war has been ongoing for three years, causing widespread suffering and hardship. The Conclave is called by the Divine (head of the Chantry), who is killed in the explosion.

<sup>10</sup> The original Inquisition was founded eight hundred years earlier by Andrastian believers seeking to combat the misuse of magic and to restore order during a chaotic period of Thedas’s history. After they ceased independent operations as part of the Nevarran Accord with the Chantry, they became the Chantry’s original Templars. See David Gaider, *Dragon Age: Asunder* (Tor Books, 2011), 412. The Divine intended the “new” Inquisition to end the Mage-Templar War if the Conclave was unsuccessful.

<sup>11</sup> See Adam Chapman, *Digital Games As History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 10.

are shaped by social change. Thedas may be a fantastical world, but it is one that is grounded in its audience's perceptions of medieval authenticity. As such, it is broadly consistent with the wider historical trend of secondary worlds, which since the late nineteenth century have tended to be presented in what Michael Saler calls a "realist mode,"<sup>12</sup> using authentic-seeming details and methods to lend the invented world a greater sense of verisimilitude.

This level of authenticity or realism can be seen in the game's complex political world, where the player deals not only with the relationship between nations, but also between nations and transnational institutions like the game's titular Inquisition. Thedas's politics do not simply inhabit the background lore of the game as set dressing but are at the forefront of gameplay, giving the player a direct role in shaping the ongoing history of the gameworld, an important aid to immersion.<sup>13</sup> The franchise's original setting, the kingdom of Ferelden—whose physical landscape and political and social structure evoke strong parallels to pre-Conquest England—remains a key location in *Inquisition*, but many of the game's major story quests take part in the neighbouring Empire of Orlais. Orlais is a more overtly sophisticated society, where everyone speaks with a French accent and the visual aesthetic is a fantastical blend of late medieval France and Italy. In *Dragon Age* lore, Ferelden and Orlais have a history of conflict, but in order to succeed, the new Inquisition needs the support of both nations. The Inquisition's first operations in Ferelden focus on aiding refugees from the war and those affected by the damage to the Veil. Eventually, Inquisition agents are recruited to protect the monarch of Denerim from assassination in the war table mission "Shadows over Denerim."<sup>14</sup> This establishes a closer relationship,

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 25. For Saler's discussion of how fantastic imaginary worlds have historically combined realism and fantasy as a method of engaging readers, see pages 25-32. He also points out that literary secondary worlds are "often accompanied by scholarly apparatus such as footnotes, glossaries, appendices, maps, and tables" (25). An argument can be made that digital worlds such as Thedas provide this apparatus in a far more integrated way, with maps serving as a gameplay mechanic and in-game books and scrolls creating a hands-on experience of what would otherwise be seen as supplemental material. See also Dimitra Fimi, "The Past as an Imaginary World: The Case of Medievalism" in *Revisiting Imaginary Worlds: A Subcreation Studies Anthology*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (Routledge, 2017), 46-66, who discusses the different approaches of Chatterton, Tolkien, and Eco to world-building and emphasizes that all three of them employed methods to stress the perceived reality of their invented worlds.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Tanya Krzywinska, "World Creation and Lore: World of Warcraft as Rich Text" in *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader* ed. Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), Kindle Edition, who stresses the importance of providing the gameworld with a history in order to create a sense of "worldness" (Loc. 1557 of 3708) and to give the player a sense of agency as an actor in that world by providing a sufficiently detailed rationale for the player character's identity and personal history.

<sup>14</sup> The war table missions are text-based quests the Inquisitor can delegate to their advisors. As a game mechanic, they earn Influence (which unlocks new capabilities for the Inquisition) and unlock additional missions and storylines. The game uses the Influence mechanic to give players an incentive to complete these missions, which have the function of fleshing out not only the gameworld but the broader impact of

and the Inquisition is soon asked to mediate treaty talks between Ferelden and Orlais in “Delicate Negotiations,” another war table mission. Given that the Inquisition’s home base, Skyhold, is technically on Ferelden soil (if in a very remote corner), the Influence gained in these successful operations represents greater security for the fledgling organization.

Meanwhile, in Orlais, the Inquisition becomes directly involved in the civil war between the Empress Celene and her cousin, Grand Duke Gaspard, with the goal of preventing Celene’s assassination by those responsible for the explosion at the Conclave. In one of the game’s longest and most complex story quests, “Wicked Eyes and Wicked Hearts,” the Inquisitor and their party attend a masked ball held to celebrate peace talks between Celene and Gaspard at the Orlesian Winter Palace. The Inquisitor and their companions must navigate the intricate social rules of the Orlesian “Grand Game” as they investigate the assassination plot. There are serious consequences for failing to observe these rules; the quest is governed by a “Court Approval” meter that falls if you make blunt or impolitic decisions in conversation with Orlesian nobles (or if you are away from the ballroom for too long while investigating). If the meter falls to 0, the Inquisitor will be ejected from the ball, thus failing to prevent the Empress’s assassination and causing the end of the game.

If the Inquisitor successfully uncovers the plot, however, they also uncover the various machinations of the parties involved in the civil war (Celene, Gaspard, and the elven spymistress Briala, Celene’s former lover). This gives the Inquisition sufficient leverage to determine who should actually sit on the Orlesian throne. Which candidate would be most valuable to the Inquisition is only one consideration among many. Gaspard would be an effective military ally for the Inquisitor, but he also dreams of military expansionism and a second invasion of Ferelden, making his potential as a post-war leader rather dubious. Meanwhile, the pacifist Celene is a talented politician who fosters trade and culture and who has been slowly improving conditions in Orlais for disenfranchised minorities such as the elves.<sup>15</sup> An ethical Inquisitor committed to the Inquisition’s mission to restore social peace cannot simply consider the immediate crisis; they must also work on the diplomatic level and determine which ruler or combination of rulers would be best for the people of Orlais in the long-term.

*Inquisition* complicates the political situation further with an expanded role for the Tevinter Imperium. The original superpower of Thedas, Tevinter is a much-diminished state on the

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the Inquisition’s actions. In one of the game’s few major weaknesses, however, the consequences of war table decisions are rarely reflected in dialogue between characters.

<sup>15</sup> Briala cannot take the throne (the people of Orlais would not accept an elven Empress), but she can play a role in governing Orlais if the Inquisitor reunites her with Celene, provides her with blackmail material against Gaspard, or uses blackmail material against her to force her to participate in a three-way truce.

other side of a religious schism with the southern kingdoms. It is also the homeland of the villains of the game, a cult known as the Venatori. But rather than depicting Tevinter itself as entirely corrupt, the game gives the player an alternate perspective in the character of Dorian Pavus, a Tevinter mage who joins the Inquisition in hopes of redeeming his homeland. Like all the Inquisitor's companions, Dorian can be engaged in conversation at the Inquisition's base of operations. In an early conversation with the player character, Dorian introduces himself as the scion of House Pavus and expresses his hatred of Tevinter's aristocratic culture: "Naturally, I despised it all: the lies, the scheming, the illusions of supremacy. That's Tevinter in a nutshell, isn't it?" But when pressed on his apparent distaste for his homeland, Dorian claims that he cares about Tevinter and sees its potential: "For all our faults, my people have many virtues. We are laden with history and culture—Tevinter is where Thedas truly began, remember. We treasure our past and preserve it . . . If I truly believed my homeland was beyond all hope, I wouldn't miss it so much."<sup>16</sup> Dorian's ambiguous feelings towards his homeland and his hopes that it can be successfully reformed are a frequent subject of conversation with the Inquisitor throughout the game. This encourages the player to take a more thoughtful approach to the Inquisition's dealings with Tevinter. Two war table missions ("A Friend in Qarinus" and "The Tevinter Resistance") allow you to support Tevinter reformers led by Maevaris Tilani, Dorian's friend. Completing these missions increases Dorian's approval of the Inquisitor (another game mechanic) and opens up new story options and quests related to his background and Tevinter. *Inquisition's* epilogue reveals that Dorian and Maevaris eventually join forces to form the Lucerni, a reform party within Tevinter's Magisterium.

As Inquisitor, the player must understand the varying agendas at play in these three key societies and choose the right tool to employ (diplomacy, military force, or subterfuge). The best result is usually achieved when the player practices intercultural understanding. This is often complicated by the fact that your Inquisitor, whatever their origin story, is always an outsider in Ferelden and Orlais. Even the human Inquisitor, who comes from a noble family, is from the Free Marches, a group of independent city-states very different from Ferelden and Orlais. Thedas is a cosmopolitan, diverse world, and to be successful in their mission, the Inquisitor must be as well.

The game's focus on the importance of intercultural contact is also made explicit in the personal histories of the Inquisitor's companions and advisors. Cassandra Pentaghast, the Right Hand of the Divine and the woman who actually calls the Inquisition after the destruction of the Conclave, is from Nevarra, a warlike society with a reverence for the dead reminiscent of ancient Egypt. Though she has spent most of her adult life in Orlais serving the Chantry and is actually revered by Orlesians as a national hero, she still rebels

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<sup>16</sup> Background conversation with Dorian at Haven or Skyhold, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014).

against the elaborate formalities of her adopted culture.<sup>17</sup> At the Winter Palace, she is decidedly uninterested in the festivities, proclaiming that “[t]his ball is a waste of time, like all Orlesian foolishness” and condemning the Grand Game: “Orlesians pretend their petty squabbles are a ‘game’. Yes, let us treat murder, corruption, and deceit as delightful amusements. How wonderful.”<sup>18</sup> Cassandra may understand Orlais, but that does not mean she approves of the behaviour of its aristocracy. A wise Inquisitor is well-advised to consider her moral argument carefully. In contrast to Cassandra, the Inquisition's ambassador, Josephine Montilyet, who is originally from the trading nation of Antiva, was educated in Orlais and even participated in the Grand Game as a bard (an elite spy) until a tragedy convinced her to dedicate her life to diplomacy instead. Josephine adores Orlesian culture; in the game's final piece of narrative downloadable content (DLC), *Trespasser*, she even invites the Inquisitor to the performance of an Orlesian masked drama as a gesture of friendship. While Cassandra reminds the Inquisitor to hold the Orlesian aristocracy to account, Josephine reminds the Inquisitor that cultural differences can be bridged by goodwill (and an appreciation for theatre).

Like Josephine, Cassandra, and Dorian, many of the Inquisitor's companions and advisors have been shaped by their experiences moving between nations, cultures, or classes. Varric Tethras, a dwarven merchant and author from the Free Marches (and one of the returning characters from *Dragon Age II*) has personal and commercial ties spanning most of Thedas, which frequently work to the benefit of the Inquisition. He provides a non-aristocratic viewpoint to the Inquisitor, and, in his role as the Inquisition's unofficial chronicler, serves as a constant reminder to the Inquisitor to consider how history will judge their decisions. In sharp contrast, Vivienne, a powerful mage of Rivaini and Free Marcher background who spent years rising through the ranks of the Circle of Magi in Orlais to become court enchanter to Empress Celene (and the mistress of a powerful Orlesian duke), provides a very different perspective. A pragmatic and ruthless loyalist mage who enlists with the Inquisition immediately after the Conclave, she frequently gives the Inquisitor advice on both secular and Chantry politics. Her cynical outlook and sometimes manipulative actions can seem distasteful, but they also drive home the political realities of the role the Inquisitor has chosen to fill. In Thedas, faith and politics are inextricably connected, and the Inquisitor cannot afford to be naïve.

By interacting with Varric, Vivienne, and the Inquisitor's other companions over the course of the game, the player learns about Thedas, its peoples, and its institutions from a wide range of perspectives. If the Inquisitor is consistently thoughtful, sympathetic, and respectful of their companions' opinions in conversation, the game's approval mechanic

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<sup>17</sup> For the story of Cassandra's youth and her role in thwarting a plot against the Chantry, see Jeffrey Scott, *Dawn of the Seeker*, film, T.O. Entertainment, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> “Wicked Eyes and Wicked Hearts,” main story quest, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014).



will eventually unlock access to each companion's personal questline, where the player can explore their personal histories and home cultures in more depth. The game rewards the player for practicing intercultural understanding and emphasizes the core message that this is a necessary practice for any successful leader in this neomedieval world.

*Inquisition* also emphasizes the role of peaceful intercultural contact in its treatment of religion,<sup>19</sup> where it emphasizes both the unifying possibilities of a shared faith and the diversity of thought and practice that develops when a faith spreads across many different cultures. As Kevin Schut points out in his essay, "They Kill Mystery: The Mechanistic Bias of Video Game Representations of Religion and Spirituality," the *Dragon Age* series is unusual in its treatment of religion: rather than being a manifestation of the game's systems (which is often reflected in RPGs by a role for religion as a supernatural power generator), religion in Thedas functions primarily on a narrative or roleplaying level and provides important context and motivation for in-game choices.<sup>20</sup>

Interestingly, *Inquisition* is not the only neomedieval RPG of the 2010s whose developers saw the value of exploring religion's narrative potential. In *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt*, the player pursues numerous quests involving local religion as they participate in the player character Geralt's travels across the Continent.<sup>21</sup> *Wild Hunt*'s depiction of religion is rather black-and-white, however, with the matriarchal, nature-based faith of Freya on the Skellige Isles occupying one end of the spectrum and the witch-burning zealots of the Church of the Eternal Fire occupying the other.<sup>22</sup> The player character also espouses no faith of his own, and the gameworld's various faiths tend to be either an obstacle to his quest or simply peripheral. The portrayal of the Church of the Eternal Fire revels in medieval stereotypes about the cruel, oppressive, and corrupt nature of the Church; its priests and witch hunters terrorize those outside the mainstream of society but are also easily corrupted by wealth. The player is encouraged to share Geralt's opinion of them (which is, as might be imagined, profoundly negative).

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<sup>19</sup> Wolf discusses the role of mythology as part of the infrastructure of the secondary world, arguing that it gives "historical depth and transcendental power...to a text." See *Building Imaginary Worlds*, 190. He also discusses the importance of mythical-religious elements like the savior-figure and their impact on narrative but, strangely, does not consider the cultural or political role of religion in an invented world.

<sup>20</sup> Kevin Schut, "They Kill Mystery: The Mechanistic Bias of Video Game Representations of Religion and Spirituality" in *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell and Gregory Price Grieve (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014), 265-7. RPGs that treat religion as simply a source of magical power tend to be those that follow in the broader *Dungeons and Dragons* tradition, where specific character classes such as clerics and paladins draw on divine power to cast spells.

<sup>21</sup> *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt*, video game (2015), Playstation 4, CD Projekt Red, Poland.

<sup>22</sup> "Eternal Fire," *Witcher Wiki*, accessed August 29, 2019, [witcher.fandom.com/wiki/Eternal\\_Fire](http://witcher.fandom.com/wiki/Eternal_Fire); and "Skellige: Religion," *Witcher Wiki*, accessed August 29, 2019, [witcher.fandom.com/wiki/Skellige#Religion](http://witcher.fandom.com/wiki/Skellige#Religion).

*Inquisition's* morally and politically nuanced depiction of religion is more similar to what we see in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*,<sup>23</sup> which borrows from late antique history to create its Talos controversy. By drawing inspiration from the Arian controversy and, specifically, its cultural implications for the Germanic peoples and their relationship to the Roman Empire, *Skyrim* gives players who choose to join the Stormcloak Rebellion,<sup>24</sup> particularly those who choose to do so as a Nord (one of the Viking-esque natives of the province of Skyrim), additional role-playing material. A rebel Nord can fight not only for Skyrim's political independence, but also for the right of the Nord people to pursue their own ancestral worship. The similarities between *Inquisition* and *Skyrim* in this regard are perhaps best explained by the fact that the player characters in both games are fully customizable (in contrast, *Wild Hunt's* Geralt is a pre-set character). In a game where the player is doing most of the work of character-building, adding the ability to incorporate a personal faith allows the character to be more fully integrated into the social and cultural life of the gameworld.

As in *Skyrim*, in *Inquisition* the Inquisitor/Herald is not the only character deeply concerned with religion. Many of the companion characters, though expressing frequent exasperation with the current state of the Chantry, still treasure their faith's ability to unite the different peoples of southern Thedas (and unlike *Skyrim*, whose NPCs are rarely compelling, there is real emotion in these conversations). In an early conversation with the Herald at Skyhold, Josephine discusses the Chant of Light, the Chantry's holy scripture, and how it brings together the cultures of southern Thedas: "Little but the Chantry ties Orlais, Nevarra, Ferelden, Antiva, and even Rivain to a common cause . . . Andraste's chant is familiar across kingdoms, a source of many shared customs. That is the crucial point. Common ground is the start of all negotiations."<sup>25</sup> This conversation strongly evokes the use of Christianity as a unifying and even pacifying force in the political world of post-Roman Europe. As the Inquisition's power grows, Josephine leverages its religious status to expand her diplomatic mission even further, offering the Inquisition's support in mediating disputes between nations, aristocratic families, and

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<sup>23</sup> *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, Special Edition*, video games (2016), Playstation 4, Bethesda Game Studios / Bethesda Softworks, USA.

<sup>24</sup> The historical parallel here is perhaps an obscure one for the general audience, but it is very strongly evocative of late antique culture. The Talos controversy focuses on the debate over the nature of the Ninth Divine, Talos, who is the deified form of the Emperor Tiber Septim. The Nords of Tamriel treasure Talos as one of their own and consider their worship of him a core part of their culture. See "Talos," *Elder Scrolls Wiki*, accessed August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019, [elderscrolls.fandom.com/wiki/Talos](http://elderscrolls.fandom.com/wiki/Talos). Similarly, the Germanic peoples of late antiquity held to their particular variation of Arianism and its interpretation of the human and divine natures of Jesus Christ in part because it served as a cultural marker to differentiate them from their Roman neighbors. See, for example, Marilyn Dunn, *Belief and Religion in Barbarian Europe c.350-700* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Herwig Wolfram, *The Roman Empire and Its Germanic Peoples*, trans. Richard Dunlap (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> Conversation with Josephine after the confrontation with Marquis DuRellion at Haven, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014).

other interest groups.<sup>26</sup> The Inquisition's spiritual authority becomes a tool in its mission to preserve social peace.

It is important to note that the Andrastian faith itself is far from monolithic or unchallenged; *Inquisition*, and, in fact, the *Dragon Age* franchise as a whole, takes a historically realistic view of how diverse cultures would modify a charismatic faith to suit their own local context and cultural preferences; the new faith is not always accepted fully or quickly. Tevinter's schismatic Imperial Chantry has its own leader, the Black Divine, as well as a very different interpretation of Andrastian theology on the subject of magic (one dictated by the profound differences in culture between the Imperium and southern Thedas).<sup>27</sup> The player can also discover by reading in-game history books that, in some nations, the Chantry has made little headway against a general social preference for pre-Andrastian beliefs.<sup>28</sup> The story of the Andrastian faith is explicitly not a triumphalist one.

The complexity of Andrastian history is further explored in one of the DLCs, *Jaws of Hakkon*, which deals with an archaeological mission to the remote Frostback Basin to uncover the truth behind the disappearance of the last Inquisitor, Ameridan, eight hundred years before. While searching for evidence of Ameridan's travels in the Basin, the current Inquisitor discovers twin shrines—one to Andraste, one to an Elven goddess—raised by the lost Inquisitor in the early days of the Chantry, when the two faiths still coexisted peacefully in Orlais. A side quest allows the player to magically capture the memory of Inquisitor Ameridan's final prayer at the shrines before facing the monstrous dragon Hakkon: "I prepare now for my final battle . . . All is in place. I offer thanks to Ghilan'nain, Halla-Mother, and to Andraste, Maker-Bride. As you were raised up from mortal men to stand with our Creators, our Makers, so raise me up now to defend this world."<sup>29</sup> The Inquisitor and their companions marvel over the implications, and, if in the party, Dorian immediately draws a parallel to similar practices in ancient Tevinter, where the Old Religion's holidays were appropriated and renamed by the Andrastian faith. This all strongly evokes Bede's story of Raedwald and his two altars,<sup>30</sup> as well as Gregory the

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<sup>26</sup> If the Inquisitor is a human noble, for example, Josephine can mediate between their family (the Trevelyans) and other noble families in the Free Cities in a series of war table missions.

<sup>27</sup> "The Imperial Chantry," *Dragon Age Wiki*, accessed December 29, 2018, [http://dragonage.wikia.com/wiki/Imperial\\_Chantry](http://dragonage.wikia.com/wiki/Imperial_Chantry).

<sup>28</sup> The codex entry "In Pursuit of Knowledge: The Travels of a Chantry Scholar, by Brother Gentivi" discusses the nation of Rivain, where only the Rivani royalty are Andrastian and both the Qun and pre-Andrastian religion coexist peacefully in the countryside.

<sup>29</sup> "Where Once We Walked," *Jaws of Hakkon* DLC (2015), Playstation 4, Bioware/Electronic Arts, Canada.

<sup>30</sup> In II.15, Bede states that Raedwald "seemed to be serving both Christ and the gods whom he had previously served; in the same temple he had one altar for the Christian sacrifice and another small altar upon which to offer victims to devils. Eadwulf, who was ruler of the kingdom up to our time, used to declare that the temple lasted until his time and that he saw it when he was a boy." See Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Judith McClure and Roger Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 98.

Great's advice to his missionary Mellitus about making use of the holy places and customs of the people to whom he was ministering.<sup>31</sup> The world-building here thus neatly sidesteps the medievalist stereotype of the all-powerful Church and enhances the player's sense of the course of Thedasian history.

Perhaps the most provocative choice made by the game designers in constructing their neomedieval religion was to make use of the word "Inquisition," which has certain negative connotations for a general audience. The game both acknowledges these connotations and offers the player the option to either embrace or subvert them. Mother Giselle, a Chantry cleric who allies with the Inquisition, will share the history of the original Inquisition with the Inquisitor if asked. She calls the original Inquisitors "hunters, zealots, who tracked and killed cultists and dangerous mages," and suggests that the murdered Divine's intent to revive the Inquisition under that name was meant as a warning.<sup>32</sup> She even makes a point of saying that she hopes the new Inquisition will prove less brutal than its namesake. This is a chance for the player to reflect on what they want their Inquisition to be before they are presented with the in-game choices that will shape its progress.

If the player chooses, their Inquisitor can be savage to their enemies and ruthless in pursuit of their goals. Nowhere is this more evident than in the side quest "Sit in Judgement," where the Inquisitor determines the fate of various enemies or criminals captured during story quests. Execution is always an option, although prior to the first judgement, Josephine does counsel the Inquisitor that less violent and more creatively appropriate sentences would be more beneficial to the Inquisition's reputation in southern Thedas (another explicit warning that the violent path is not the best choice). A "darker" Inquisitor also runs the risk of alienating their companions. If Cassandra's approval falls too low, for example, the game eventually triggers a scene where she drunkenly rebukes you for your decisions and mourns having raised you to your position. Other companions may depart the Inquisition entirely. But wise, diplomatic, or compassionate choices can transform the Inquisition into a beacon of hope and earn it widespread respect.

In a final, ironic twist, the same Chantry that initially denounces the Inquisition as a heretical movement—supposedly because the player character is being called the Herald of Andraste, but more likely, as your companions point out, because the Inquisition is emerging as an alternate source of religious authority—eventually elects one of the

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<sup>31</sup> In I.30, Bede preserves Gregory's letter to Mellitus urging the missionary to use existing shrines for Christian purposes and to convert sacrifices into Christian feasts, stating that "it is doubtless impossible to cut out everything at once from their stubborn minds: just as the man who is attempting to climb to the highest place, rises by steps and degrees and not by leaps." See *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 57.

<sup>32</sup> Conversation with Mother Giselle at Haven, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014).

Inquisitor's followers as the new Divine. The new Divine's identity depends on the Inquisitor's choices and political/theological preferences as expressed throughout the game. If the new Divine is Leliana, your devout spymaster, she brings radical reform to the Chantry, freeing the mages and opening the Chantry to elves and dwarves who had been nominally Andrastian. If the clerics choose Cassandra, she takes a more cautious (but well-received) approach, cleaning up key institutions and instituting measured reforms.<sup>33</sup> By the time of the *Trespasser* DLC, set two years after the main game, the Inquisitor has to choose between disbanding the Inquisition or transitioning it to a diminished role as the Divine's honor guard to ease political tensions. But even in its short lifespan, the Inquisition has profoundly changed the Chantry. Just as in the historical Middle Ages, there is a fine line between a "heretical" movement and a church reform movement, and *Inquisition's* epilogue invites the player to look back and consider how their organization's history will eventually be perceived by later generations in Thedas and to understand the longer-term historical consequences of the changes in which their Inquisitor has been a central figure. The epilogue challenges the myth of progress by pointing out that not all of these consequences are going to be positive; *Inquisition* leaves the audience with the message that the road to hell can be paved with the best of intentions and that not all victories are permanently won, a message with real resonance for a twenty-first century audience.

*Inquisition*, just like other games of its type, shows us that a neomedieval open world that wants to look believable to a modern audience needs to be more than just a caricature of Romanticism or a grotesque landscape trapped in a dark age. Its characters navigate between cultures and classes, while its institutions evolve in response to social and political change. Such neomedieval amalgams, despite or perhaps *because* of their blurring of boundaries, have the potential to encourage more sophisticated forms of historical thinking in both their creators and their players and a better understanding of the differences between the historical Middle Ages and our modern perceptions of the period. A visit to the *r/dragonage* subreddit, for instance, reveals a high level of interest in how the franchise uses history. Players clearly recognize the use of medieval history in worldbuilding, with such threads as "Historical parallels between Thedas and Our World" discussing not only these parallels but also how the developers avoided "1:1 analogue[s] of a particular country or culture."<sup>34</sup> The debate over these historical parallels crops up in multiple threads, with most posters recognizing the patchwork nature of the gameworld; some even caution fellow posters not to take these connections at face value and, instead, to recognize the creativity of the developers in blending different historical

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<sup>33</sup> Vivienne is a third option for Divine, but perhaps the least likely, as her election requires a very specific set of choices that favor her attitudes towards the role of mages in the Chantry.

<sup>34</sup> Elf Enthusiast, "Historical Parallels between Thedas and Our World," *Reddit*, Feb. 25, 2015, [www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/2x4g2i/historical\\_parallels\\_between\\_thedas\\_and\\_our\\_world/](http://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/2x4g2i/historical_parallels_between_thedas_and_our_world/).

inspirations.<sup>35</sup> The game seems to encourage its fans to consider the difference between medieval fantasy and medieval history, an invaluable outcome in and of itself.

But this sort of historical discussion is not limited to exploration of these state-level parallels. Elsewhere in the subreddit, two posters engage in a debate about the economy of the gameworld and, specifically, how the Chantry funds its operations. They raise possible parallels to the medieval church but also conclude that the gameworld's depiction of a realistic economy is lacking, leading one poster to conclude that "Thedas needs more sociopolitics."<sup>36</sup> Other posters recognize the unique nature of *Inquisition's* treatment of religion, with comments such as "I like that there are several different aspects of belief presented—from the ideal of abstract faith, to the internal politics of religion, to schisms and divides within a religion, to the interaction between religions both familiar and foreign."<sup>37</sup> These reactions from hardcore fans make it clear that player engagement with the gameworld is enhanced by the level of depth and complexity built into the society, culture, and politics of Thedas. *Inquisition's* greatest strength as an open-world RPG is that it places the player's gameplay choices at the heart of its world-building and invites them to consider, at length and in depth, what kind of "medieval" hero Thedas truly requires.

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<sup>35</sup> In another thread on historical parallels, the poster Shalania suggests that "None of the countries is an expy, and most of them incorporate ideas from various Earth societies while making sense for the Thedas setting...Don't try too hard to draw parallels, especially when those parallels don't make it easier to understand the setting. Take *Dragon Age* and Thedas on their own merits." See "Real world inspirations for nations of Thedas," *Reddit*, Apr. 21, 2019, [www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/bfln2a/no\\_spoilers\\_real\\_world\\_inspirations\\_for\\_nations/](http://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/bfln2a/no_spoilers_real_world_inspirations_for_nations/).

<sup>36</sup> Strangelyliteral and Rocklobsterking, comments on "What's your unpopular opinion about the series?" *Reddit*, Jan. 15, 2017,

[www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/5nvn9/spoilers\\_all\\_whats\\_your\\_unpopular\\_opinion\\_about/](http://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/5nvn9/spoilers_all_whats_your_unpopular_opinion_about/).

<sup>37</sup> AvianIsTheTerm, comment on "Professor of Medieval Studies discusses *Dragon Age*, medievalism, and video gaming," *Reddit*, Aug. 25, 2015, [www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/3ih1u6/spoilers\\_all\\_professor\\_of\\_medieval\\_studies/](http://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/3ih1u6/spoilers_all_professor_of_medieval_studies/).