BA thesis
Folkloristics/Ethnology

“Be wary of elven sources”
A study of fictional folklore in the Dragon Age video games

Vitalina Ostimchuk

Kristinn Helgi Magnússon Schram
October 2019
“Be wary of elven sources”
A study of fictional folklore in the Dragon Age video games

Vitalina Ostimchuk

Final paper for a BA degree in Folkloristics/Ethnology
Supervisor: Kristinn Helgi Magnússon Schram
12 ECTS

Faculty of Sociology, Anthropology and Folkloristics
School of Social Sciences
University of Iceland
October, 2019
“Be wary of elven sources”

This thesis is a final project for a BA degree in Folkloristics/Ethnology. It is not permitted to publish this without the permission of the author
© Vitalina Ostimchuk, 2019

Printing: Háskólaprent
Reykjavík, Ísland, 2019
Abstract

This thesis explores how the creators of the fictional world of the *Dragon Age* games, a popular single-player fantasy video game franchise, use folkloric elements in “world-building”. It focuses on the invented folklore which constitutes an important part of this game world. The study uses the theoretical framework of the folkloresque to analyze how folkloric elements such as individual motifs and whole genres are integrated and portrayed in this work of fiction. I argue that the writers employ the folkloric elements directly by creatively reworking existing traditional elements as well as indirectly by using the strategies of interaction with the folklore material which are characteristic to the fantasy genre. My analysis of the invented folklore in *Dragon Age* shows that the writers have quite an accurate perception of how the genres, motifs and tale-types work in traditional folk narratives. They use this knowledge to make the fictional world a homely place for the player by alluding to familiar elements, to increase the depth and interconnectedness of the fictional world and to portray different cultural worldviews of the in-game peoples.
Foreword

First, I would like to thank my supervisor, Kristinn Schram, for his guidance, incredible patience and encouragement which made this thesis possible. I am also grateful to my dear friends Alice Bower, Alwin-Jon Hills and Eik Haraldsdóttir who helped greatly with proofreading and were willing to discuss my work at weird hours of day and night. Finally, I would like to thank María Anna Garðarsdóttir and Mads Holm for their constant support and kindness.
## Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................................. 4  
Foreword ................................................................................................................................................ 5  
Contents .................................................................................................................................................. 6  
List of illustrations ............................................................................................................................... 7  
Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 8  
1 Dragon Age series overview .................................................................................................................. 9  
2 Scholarship overview ............................................................................................................................ 13  
3 Research methods ................................................................................................................................. 19  
4 Thedas as a game world ......................................................................................................................... 23  
5 Research subject and theoretical framework ......................................................................................... 28  
6 Folk narratives in *Dragon Age* ........................................................................................................... 31  
   6.1 Locating folk narratives in the game world ....................................................................................... 31  
   6.2 In-game sources of folklore in Thedas ............................................................................................ 35  
   6.3 Elves and dwarves: *Dragon Age* as fantasy fiction ...................................................................... 36  
   6.4 Genres and functions ....................................................................................................................... 41  
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................... 44  
Bibliography ............................................................................................................................................ 46  
Interviews ............................................................................................................................................... 54
List of illustrations

Figure 1  Ballad of Ayesleigh, found on a bookshelf in Redcliffe Village (DA:O) ........... 31
Figure 2  Inscription on the statue of Ghilan’nain in Dalish camp (DA:O) ....................... 32
Figure 3  Leliana (NPC companion) is telling a story in reply to a dialogue option from the player (DA:O) .................................................................................................................. 32
Figure 4  The player character and his companions are listening to the elven storyteller in the Dalish camp (DA:O) .................................................................................................................. 33
Figure 5  The player character and her companions are listening to the minstrel (DA:I) ............................................................................................................................................. 33
Figure 6  The player interacted with a collection of colored inks and received information about Vallaslin, traditional elven tattoos (DA:O) ........................................... 34
Figure 7  Loading screen in DA:I containing the text of the song ....................................... 34
Introduction

This thesis examines how folkloric elements are used in “world-building” by the creators of the fictional world of the *Dragon Age* games. In order to answer this research question, I will analyze the invented folklore of this world and look closer at the fictional folk narratives in it. I will explore how the elements of real-world traditions are integrated into the fictional folklore, how existing genres of folk narrative are portrayed and what it can tell us about the game creators’ perception of folklore.

The study begins by providing an overview of the *Dragon Age* franchise in chapter one and then discusses existing scholarship on video games in folkloristics as well as previous research that has been made about the *Dragon Age* games in chapter two. In chapter three I describe my research methods. This is followed by an exploration of how the fictional world of *Dragon Age* as a game world affects the way folklore is integrated in chapter four. I will provide a definition of my research subject and invented folklore, and describe the theoretical framework with which I am going to approach my analysis of them in chapter five. In chapter six I will look in more detail at the fictional folk narratives, their structure and presentation in the fictional world of the *Dragon Age* games.
1 Dragon Age series overview

Dragon Age: Origins (DA:O), the first game in the Dragon Age series, was released in November 2009 after seven years of development. This single-player role-playing video game (RPG), produced by the Canadian game studio BioWare, is set in a fantasy world called Thedas. “Thedas” is an acronym of the words The Dragon Age Setting (“Thedas”, n.d.) and it became the name of this new fictional world developed by BioWare’s writers and of the continent in which the events of the game take place. According to the founders of BioWare, Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk, the genre of this game can be described as a “dark heroic fantasy”: “[i]t’s not the high fantasy of Tolkien or the low-fantasy of George R.R. Martin’s works that are brutal and gritty. We are in the middle of those things” (Takahashi, 2009). DA:O proved a big success and by February 2010 3.2 million copies of the game had been sold (Reilly, 2010). It earned favorable reviews from the critics and won several Game of the Year 2009 awards including Role-Playing/Massively Multiplayer Game of the Year 2009 by Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences, Best RPG, PC/X360, Best Story, PC and PC Game of the Year from IGN etc. (BioWare, n.d.).

The events of the game happen in Ferelden, a country in the south of Thedas. The player character (PC) becomes a member of an ancient order of Grey Wardens and is tasked with a mission to stop the Blight, the disastrous invasion of evil creatures called Darkspawn who are led by the Archdemon. In order to do this the protagonist has to not only fight these creatures but also gain support from different races inhabiting Ferelden, which means that they get entangled in complex political and social conflicts. The player can customize the gender and appearance of their character and choose their class (warrior, rogue or mage). Following their choices of race and class the player will go through one of the six origin stories: Human Noble, Mage, City Elf, Dalish Elf, Dwarf Noble and Dwarf Commoner. As in a classic RPG, there is a quest-based level-up system, i.e. how the player character develops and changes as the game progresses. The player can also interact with non-player characters (NPCs), recruit some of them as companions and

---

1 In this context the words “race” and “class” are used in the sense customary to fantasy role-playing games, both table-top and video games, where race refers to “intelligent humanoid species” of the particular fantasy world, such as elves, dwarves, humans etc., and class describes a character’s vocation (warrior, mage, cleric, rogue etc.) rather than social class (Mearls & Crawford, 2014, p.11).
complete quests as a party. What differentiated *DA:O* from many games of the genre is the depth and complexity of these companion characters. Rather than just being silent supporters, these companions have their own views and opinions which can be different to those of the protagonist. These differences can lead to conflicts, which can result in the companions turning against the player’s character or leaving the party. As in some of the previous BioWare games, the interaction with the companions includes the possibility for the player’s character to be in a romantic relationship with certain companions.

The success of *Dragon Age: Origins* led to the creation of a second game, called *Dragon Age II* (*DA2*), which was released in March 2011. As a result of the shorter time that the software development team had been allowed, the game could not have the same scope in terms of game locations and gameplay features as *DA:O*, and as a consequence received a lukewarm reception compared to its predecessor. Nevertheless, it got favorable reviews from some critics (BioWare, n.d.) and sold even faster than *DA:O*, with more than one million copies sold in less than two weeks (Reilly, 2011).

*DA2*’s setting is much more limited than that of *DA:O*. Instead of the whole country of Ferelden, the action mostly takes place in one city and its surroundings. The protagonist is named Hawke and, as in the previous game, the player can choose gender, class (mage, warrior or rogue), and customize the character’s appearance. There is no choice of race this time though: Hawke is a human. The events of *DA2* start when Hawke’s family is escaping from the Blight and must cross the sea to get to Kirkwall, the city-state in the Free Marches which will become Hawke’s home for the next decade. Starting as a poor refugee, Hawke manages to reclaim the family name and become wealthy but gets involved in the complicated politics of the city-state, first having to deal with the invasion by the Qunari, a foreign race, and later finding himself/herself in the center of the boiling conflict between mages and templars (warrior priests) in Kirkwall. Hawke’s story bears a much stronger resemblance to George R.R. Martin’s books than Tolkien’s epic. There are no cataclysmic events which endanger the whole world or unquestionably good and evil forces. Most of the decisions that Hawke must make will have both positive and negative consequences.

Just as in *DA:O*, Hawke can recruit and form relations with his or her companions. However, unlike in the previous game, all of Hawke’s potential love interests are bisexual.
so the possibility of romance with them is available for both genders, while in DA:O some of the romanceable companions were available only for heterosexual romance. This decision caused a backlash from some fans, which was addressed by the game’s lead writer, David Gaider, who reaffirmed the studio’s decision to stand by more diverse options for in-game romance (Pearce, 2011). This is just one example of BioWare’s tumultuous relationship with its fan base.

From the narrative point of view, DA2 is constructed differently than DA:O. Firstly, the whole game is framed as a story told by an unreliable narrator. Varric Tethras, Hawke’s party member and friend, is being interrogated about Hawke’s role in the mage-templar conflict which turned into an open mage uprising in Kirkwall and then spread to the whole continent. The events of the game are then presented as Varric’s story. Secondly, DA2 consists of three clearly defined acts, which is the traditional dramatic structure. In addition to the somewhat limited agency of players in terms of how their decisions influence the state of the game world, it makes the game resemble an ancient drama. However, other genre comparisons are also possible (see chapter 2).

After almost three years of development, the third installment of the Dragon Age franchise, called Dragon Age: Inquisition (DA:I), was released in November 2014. The resources allocated to the development allowed the studio to make this sequel larger, in terms of the number of locations, quests and story lines, and more detailed than both DA:O and DA2. The game had a successful launch (Savage, 2015) and gained many accolades from gaming publications and industry associations (Campbell, 2014; Gamereactor Staff, 2014; Makuch, 2014; “Game Critics Awards Best of E3 2014”, n.d.).

The events of DA:I take place shortly after the end of DA2. The mage uprising in Kirkwall led to civil unrest in the continent of Thedas. In an attempt to start negotiations, the head of the Chantry (an in-game religious organization that controls the templars) called a conclave which gathered representatives of the main parties of the conflict. During the conclave a mysterious tear in the sky appeared, killing everyone present except the protagonist. This tear, called “the Breach”, is a portal to the Fade, a realm of dreams which is also home to spirits. With the barrier between the worlds torn, demons and other evil creatures inhabiting the Fade can easily enter the material world. The Breach was opened by an ancient darkspawn called Corypheus, who plans to conquer the
world. However, the impending doom does not stop mage–templar fights or the conflicts between the nations and races of Thedas. Therefore, the protagonist’s mission is to restore order in different corners of the continent and defeat Corypheus before it is too late. In order to do this, they become the head of an organization called the Inquisition (hence, the game title), which unites people intent on fighting the chaos.

As in the earlier installments of the franchise, the player character can be female or male and belong to the three traditional RPG classes: mage, warrior or rogue. Their appearance is also customizable. The player can choose between all the fictional races available in DA:O (human, elf, or dwarf) and one additional race, Qunari. The setting now includes not only Kirkwall or Ferelden, but multiple locations across several nations of Thedas: Ferelden, its neighbor and rival Orlais, Nevarra and the Free Marches. The game is advertised as having an “open-world” setting (BioWare, n.d.). Even though this is technically not correct as the number of locations is limited, the game world is indeed expansive, and the player can easily spend hundreds of hours exploring its nooks and crannies. Having a bigger game world also creates more opportunities to introduce an interested player to the history and culture of the fictional world. And DA:I has this in abundance. It introduces stories, legends, songs and other cultural artifacts which were only briefly mentioned in previous games.

At the time of writing, the Dragon Age franchise consists of the three released video games (Dragon Age: Origins (2009), Dragon Age II (2011) and Dragon Age: Inquisition (2014)), with multiple DLC (downloadable game content) expansion packs, the fourth game in production, three spin-off games for browsers and mobile devices (some of which have been discontinued), three companion books, several novels and comics, anime and web series and a tabletop role-playing game. All these diverse products create a vast and elaborate cross-media fictional universe which attracts numerous fans and has become a part of modern popular culture.
2 Scholarship overview

Although video games have existed for several decades and have served as a research subject in several disciplines such as media studies and psychology, and even have a special discipline dedicated to them which is called game studies, the interest of folklorists in video games is still quite rare. Sharon Sherman published an article about *Super Mario* games as early as 1997. In this article she compares the narrative of the games with fairy tales and concentrates on the representation of gender in them. Ethnomusicologist Kiri Miller analyzed *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* in 2008 and discussed whether video games play the same role as folklore. In another article from the same year (Miller, 2008b) she uses a different approach and talks about the GTA players’ game world exploration and gameplay experience as a form of ethnographic fieldwork. A book was published in 2009 by Óli Gneist Sóleyjarson about *Eve Online*. His research of this online multiplayer role-playing game is based on interviews with the players and is focused on the online community of *Eve Online*. The 2011 book *Welsh Mythology and Folklore in Popular Culture: Essays on Adaptations in Literature, Film, Television and Digital Media* features an essay by Clay Kinchen Smith about representation of Welsh mythology in the Korean online game *Mabinogi*. In a more recent (2016) book, *The Folkloresque: reframing folklore in a popular culture world*, edited by Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey A. Tolbert, there is a chapter written by the latter which is dedicated to the analysis of the Japanese horror game *Fatal Frames* as part of the discussion of the folkloresque. However, his article’s main theme is the portrayal of folklore and folklorists. Although these sources discuss a wide range of themes in their analysis of video games belonging to different genres, none of them concentrate on single-player fantasy RPGs.

In contrast to the discussion of video games in folkloristics, there are quite a few sources from other disciplines which have studied *Dragon Age* games from different points of view, either concentrating on one or several of the games or taking them as case study examples alongside other game titles created by BioWare or other games companies. I have identified thirty-six such sources, which include articles in peer-reviewed journals, conference papers, articles or chapters in edited books, articles published on the web pages as well as one doctoral thesis and seven student theses (3 bachelor theses and 4 masters). These sources use approaches from a variety of disciplines, such as game studies, media studies, cultural and literary studies, art theory...
and criticism, gender studies, feminist and queer theories, religious studies, history, archeology, sociology, anthropology and Canadian studies.

As was mentioned before, BioWare has a tradition of creating interesting non-player characters and allowing the player to form emotional relationships with them through his/her character. It should not come as a surprise that the digital romance in all the three Dragon Age games has been a subject of research. Two chapters of the book Game love: Essays on play and affection (Enevold & MacCallum-Stewart, 2014) are devoted to Dragon Age. The first is an article by Annika Waern (2015) in which she discusses romance in DA:O using the concept of bleed which is “experienced by a player when their thoughts and feelings are influenced by those of their character, or vice versa” (p. 41). This concept can be instrumental in any analysis of interactions between a player and their character. The second article by Peter Kelly (2015) turns to DA2 and explores how the game constructs its romantic structures and representations. Romance in DA:I has become the topic for Veit Frick’s article (2016) in which the author notes the novel approach to romance and flirting that the developers used in this game: while players are given numerous romantic and sexual choices, their agency is also limited as NPCs can reject the PC’s advances.

The subject of digital romance is inevitably connected to the discussion of the representation of gender and sexuality in video games. A considerable number of sources provide analysis of various aspects related to this theme. The Dragon Age series serves as a good basis for such research as BioWare is well known for introducing diverse characters in its games and not shying away from the depiction of complex social issues and conflicts, which often causes intense reactions from its fan base.

Mohamed Hassan (2017) explores the different ways in which DA:I incorporates modern notions of representation in the sphere of gender and sexuality by analyzing romance options in the game, while Østby (2017) looks at BioWare’s Dragon Age and Mass Effect franchises and uses them as case studies to discuss representations of sexuality and gender in contemporary Western mainstream media and gaming culture. Several sources focus specifically on the LBGT representation in the Dragon Age series, what effect it has on the player’s experience of the game and how it affects the studio’s relationship with the games’ communities. For example, Holmes (2016) analyses how
BioWare’s representation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) themes developed, from the *Baldur’s Gate* franchise where LGBT themes, particularly transsexual themes, were treated primarily as comic relief, to the current standard in the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* franchises, where player characters can develop intimate homosexual relationships with NPCs. Greer (2013) examines the terms of inclusion of non-heterosexual identities within recent mass-market role-playing games, with the focus on Lionhead Studios’ *Fable* and BioWare’s *Dragon Age* series, while Honkanen (2018) analyzes LGBT representations in *DA:I* based on examples of Dorian Pavus (openly homosexual male character) and Cremisius “Krem” Aclassi (transgender male character). Krobová, Moravec, and Švelch (2015) discuss the strategies that queer players use while playing video games in the heteronormative gaming culture by studying LGBT players of BioWare’s *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* series. Schallegger (2016) and Pelurson (2018) both look at the representation of queerness in *DA:I* and how the studio’s fan community reacts to it. Diversity of representation is not only relevant to LGBT characters but also to characters of different age groups. In her article “Powerful elderly characters in video games: Flemeth of *Dragon Age*” Elisabeta Toma (2015) discusses the representation of elderly characters in video games by taking Flemeth (a mighty sorceress depicted as an elderly woman) from the *Dragon Age* series as an example.

A few authors analyze *Dragon Age* games from a feminist perspective. In her recent MA thesis Rowan Lucas (2019) examines narrative representation of female characters in video games and discusses how they contribute to socio-cultural discourse. She uses case studies of female characters in five recent game titles, including *Dragon Age*. Earlier, Gitelman (2014) explored the issues surrounding the portrayal of women in video games by examining several game titles, such as *World of Warcraft*, *Bayonetta*, *Dragon Age*, and *The Witcher*. In her discussion of *Dragon Age*, she used the character of Isabela from *DA:O* and *DA2*. She also addressed the issues of sexism in the gaming industry and within the player community. Lööf (2015) discusses the physical characterization of gender and the manifestation of the male gaze in *DA:I* and Beyer (2019) analyzes how rape and consent are represented in the *Dragon Age* series.

Several sources discuss how cultural identity and historical consciousness are constructed in the *Dragon Age* games. Schallegger (2016) uses the core concepts of
Canadian studies to show how the socio-cultural discourses and identity politics of DA:I relate to the context of its creation. Poor (2012) argues that fantasy-based video games, such as *World of Warcraft*, *EverQuest II*, *The Elder Scrolls* series and the *Dragon Age* series, portray elves in a similar way to a historically idealized Western minority, in other words as cultural “others”. Trenter (2012) discusses how *DA:O* and *DA2* create a spatial and temporal connection between past, present and future in a fictional history. A couple of sources explore ethics and religion in *Dragon Age* games. For example, Schallegger (2017) discusses ethics of knowledge and belief in BioWare’s *Dragon Age* series and how they apply to social and political processes, and Bezio (2014) analyzes how religion and ethics are introduced through the game mechanics and character and world building in *DA2*.

Another group of sources discusses the narrative strategies and the structure of the *DA* series. For example, Rudek (2012) explores decision-making in RPGs vs. decision-making in the real world using BioWare’s RPGs (including *DA:O*) as examples, while Bennis (2016) focuses on how the underlying structure and script of the game can make a player aware of and reflect upon real-life behavioral patterns. Hentoni (2012) discusses the creation of meaning in RPGs by looking at the relationship between RPG quest structures and the organization of narrative fragments. Zook (2012) shows how the narrative and visual representation of blood constitute a metaphorical theme that provides meaning and context for the activity of gameplay. Jørgensen (2010) focuses on using characters as narrative tools in *DA:O* and *Mass Effect 2*. Jong (2013) analyses games (more specifically, *DA:O*) in connection to social and political contexts and explores how in-game choices, coupled with levelling mechanics, narrative events, and the affective responses of the player, can reflect and potentially reinforce or disrupt dominant ideologies and political beliefs. In their conference paper *An Investigation of Vladimir Propp’s 31 Functions and 8 Broad Character Types and How They Apply to the Analysis of Video Games*, Brusentsev, Hitchens, and Richards (2012) explore how Propp’s model can be used to analyze video games from different genres; *DA:O* is used as one of the cases. What is interesting about this article is that despite discussing Propp’s function and character types, it does not use a folkloristic point of view but rather strives to determine the applicability of this model in game development. Their conclusion regarding *DA:O* is that Propp’s model fits well when applied to characters and the overall story arc but has limited validity on the level
of individual quests as they usually give the player influence over the narrative. One source (Švelch, J., Krobová, T., 2017) discusses fan–producer relations by providing a quantitative overview of official Facebook communication for four mainstream video games, including DA:I.

The last two groups of sources are of particular interest for my research. The first group looks at differences and similarities between video games and traditional genres. It is interesting to note that a comparison is made between video games and genres of oral folklore, such as fairy tales and legends. While Sherman (1997) compared Super Mario games to fairy tales by looking at games as narratives, Palmenfelt (2012) underlines the performance aspect and applies ritual theory to DA:O to reveal how these genres resemble each other and where they differ. He claims that both genres “offer playful arenas for testing the limits of the physical reality, of social and cultural norms, and of moral values” (Palmenfelt, 2012, p.3). However, video games allow the player greater agency on one hand and represent a different mode of communication on the other. Palmenfelt also notes similarities between video games and classical epics as well as their kinship to drama (Palmenfelt, 2012, p.7). Robertson (2012) argues that quest-based fantasy role-playing games such as DA2 are directly comparable to fairy tales in terms of narrative construction and cultural function. Bezio (2016) compares RPGs to epic stories. She looks at the series as a whole and argues that DA:O can be seen as traditional epic, while Dragon Age: Origins – Awakening (DA:O expansion pack, released in 2010) reverses the epic, DA2 is anti-epic, and DA:I redefines the traditional epic framework. Like Palmenfelt, Travis (2012) looks from the point of view of performance and compares the performance style allowed to the player of the BioWare RPGs with composition by theme, a practice used in traditional oral epic as described by Albert Lord.

The second group deals with the world building in Dragon Age games. In the article The Worldliness of the Dragon Age: Origins Game World, Lars Wängdahl (2012) discusses the concept of a game world and explores the relation of the game map in DA:O to its game world. Wängdahl’s understanding of the game world and possible applications of this concept will prove instrumental to my research. Hedda Gunneng (2012) uses a linguistic approach to analyze the texts that are offered to the player during the game in DA:O, such as place and character names, dialogue options and fictional literature. She
argues that allusions to our own world’s history are made by these means, which gives the game world additional depth and creates additional meaning for the game itself. Archeologist Franki Webb (2019) contemplates the role of ancient ruins that can be found in abundance in the fictional landscape of Thedas. She shows how the archeological remains create the effect of a lived-in world with its own history which at the same time resembles the history of our world in many ways. The ruins also perform other functions in the game world of *Dragon Age* series such as reflecting the thematic elements of conflict and serving as metaphorical representations of characters.

When existing academic discussion of the *Dragon Age* games is taken into account, it becomes clear that the role of folklore in the creation of this fictional world has yet to be examined. In the aforementioned studies where video games are discussed in relation to folkloristic concepts, such as fairy tales, epic storytelling or the potential applicability of Vladimir Propp’s functions, the focus is nonetheless on the narrative and performance aspect and not the game world itself. Therefore, I believe that my research of folkloric elements and fictional folklore in *Dragon Age* can contribute both to the discussion of video games in folkloristics and to the scholarship dedicated to research of this particular fictional universe.
3 Research methods

In order to perform my research I have made use of several qualitative methods. The first group includes documentary methods which are defined as “[t]he careful examination of documents and their content in order to draw conclusions about the social circumstances in which the documents are produced and read” (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 57). The texts that I studied include the official sources on the *Dragon Age* fictional universe, such as official games websites and works of fiction set in Thedas, two companion books by the writers of *Dragon Age*, *Dragon Age: The World of Thedas (Vol. 1)* and *Dragon Age: The World of Thedas (Vol. 2)*, as well as several published interviews with the game developers. I also explored a wide range of unofficial fan sources dedicated to the game. These included *Dragon Age Wiki*, an extensive database of the information about the franchise, online discussion boards (subreddits *Dragon Age* and *Thedas Lore*), and YouTube channels discussing the lore of Thedas (*Ghil Dirthalen*, *The Kingdom*, *Jackdaw Journalism*, *Watchman Gaming* and *Fusselkorn*) along with their comments sections.

When researching video games, just reading about them would not provide sufficient basis for analysis. It is important to also have first-hand experience of them. After all, as the game studies theorist Ian Bogost remarks when commenting on the difference between video games and other media, “[y]es, we “play” games like we do sports, and yes, games bear “meaning” as do the fine and plastic arts. But something else is at work in games. Games are devices we operate” (Bogost, 2015, p. 1). Classifying the practice of “playing” or “operating” the games when it is used as a research method may present a certain challenge. Although in the last twenty years the internet and virtual worlds have been recognized as a valid field for ethnographic studies (see for example Hine, 2000; Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce & Taylor, 2012; Markham & Stavrova, 2016, p.231), the virtual worlds in question are the game worlds of MMOGs (massively multiplayer online games) in which interaction between real people happens even though it is mediated by technology. Virtual worlds of single-player games like *Dragon Age* are different in that regard because there is no interaction with other players. That is why the framework proposed by Kiri Miller in her article *The Accidental Carjack: Ethnography, Gameworld Tourism, and Grand Theft Auto* (2008b) becomes instrumental for such research subject. While she discusses the *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA) games, her arguments can be easily applied to *Dragon Age*. She talks about similarities of the GTA game world to a fieldsite,
because “the field” is “a conceptual space as constructed as any digital game world—and certainly just as shaped by collegial collaboration, a history of design precedents, and attentiveness to current trends” (Miller, 2008b). She also remarks on how the gameplay reflects a traditional field experience. The next issue she addresses is the apparent absence of “informants” in a single-player game world. Miller suggests three possible solutions. The first of these is that even when a player plays alone he/she still belongs to the imagined community of other players. And just as “[n]o one is ever truly alone in Liberty City” in GTA, it is possible to say that no one is ever truly alone in Thedas either. The countless fan-created resources are a constant reminder of that. The interactions within these imagined communities are based on the presupposition that all of the participants “really were there”, which is proved by the “field reports” that the players bring from their playthroughs. The second approach suggested by Kiri Miller is to consider the development team as the true native citizens of the game world while in-game characters are vehicles for their voices. This stands true for the Dragon Age games. Sometimes this dialogue is even continued in other media, such as in the case when David Gaider responded to the forum post which criticized DA2 for bisexual player companions (see chapter 1). The third proposed solution to the challenges faced by ethnographic participants is “to suspend one’s disbelief and treat them like actual places with human inhabitants” (Miller, 2008b). Once again the Dragon Age games provide many opportunities to do so, from asking an elven lorekeeper to share a particular legend or collecting bard songs in the taverns to participating in the Joining ritual as a Grey Warden. To summarize, the ethnographic approach to a single-player game world suggested by Kiri Miller (2008b) proved to be a valuable method for my research of folkloric elements in the game world of the Dragon Age series. My previous familiarity with all three Dragon Age games facilitated the planning of this fieldwork. The timeframe of the project was from January to June 2018 in which period I played all three the games, consciously focusing on the in-game folklore while extensively documenting my experience in the form of note-taking and making screenshots. The information acquired by the participant-observation method adapted to the peculiarities of the single-player game world provided a basis for the research and also served as preparation for the interviews that I took at the next stage.
As shall be discussed later (chapter 4), each playthrough represents a unique performance of the game narrative and is greatly dependent on the player’s actions and style of playing. Therefore, I felt that the research would benefit from adding the discussion of the folklore in this franchise with other players. I came to the conclusion that doing in-depth interviews with several informants would be the most effective method to achieve my research objectives. My goal was to find five narrators. I wanted to find people with different player experiences. I looked for such informants both through my own circle of friends and acquaintances and online by asking several people who had blogged about *Dragon Age* whether they would consider being interviewed for my thesis. It is interesting to note that people who write full-length essays about their favorite video games on the internet were reluctant to talk about it with a researcher even on the condition of full anonymity.

I had about ten potential leads but eventually only four of the interviews came through. My narrators are two women (Tanya and Anna) and two men (Alex and Michael) from different countries, all of them in their late 20s or early 30s. All the interviews took place online although different means of communications were used: with two people we had a live conversation via Skype, with one person we had a text conversation in real time during one day over Telegram messenger and with another we had an exchange of messages on Facebook messenger over the period of two months. All the interviews took place from July 10th 2018 till September 13th 2018. In preparation for the interviews I devised a list of questions that I wanted to ask but I was also prepared to follow the flow of the conversation where circumstances allowed and see if other interesting topics would arise. Another important preparatory stage was to discuss consent forms with my informants. As it was not possible to obtain them in physical form, we agreed in each case to make it part of a recorded conversation. One informant, whom I will call Anna, asked that her nickname remain undisclosed and that I should quote our recorded conversation verbatim. Other informants were comfortable with the use of their real first names and did not have special requests regarding how the recorded material should be included in the thesis. With several narrators, video games other than the *Dragon Age* series were discussed, but as we stayed more or less on the topic of folklore there were interesting insights to be gleaned from these digressions from the original topic of our conversation. In the beginning of each interview I asked questions about the general experience of the
narrator with video games and their self-described style of playing. Then we discussed their impressions of playing the *Dragon Age* games and their opinion of the folkloric elements in these games. Although these interviews were not the primary focus of my research they proved to be a useful addition to documentary and participant-observation methods.
4 Thedas as a game world

The fictional universe of Thedas was developed first and foremost as a setting for video games, therefore it is necessary to discuss how Thedas’ being a game world influences the way it is built and experienced. The main distinctive characteristic of video games as a medium is that they are interactive. The player’s actions directly affect the state of the fictional world. Game studies researchers use the term *emergent narrative*, which they define as “the player’s experience of the game, or the stories that the players can tell about the game, or, perhaps, the stories that players can create using the game” (Juul, 2005, loc. 1441). In video games just as with other types of performances, even though the player uses the same repertoire of rehearsed actions, the resulting performance is different from every other performance due to the personal choices made by the player and the external circumstances of the performance (Schechner & Brady, 2013, pp. 36–37). Each of the *Dragon Age* games offers the player multiple outcomes depending on his/her choices during the game and an even greater number of the ways to get to those outcomes (for example, so called “good” or “evil” playthroughs). This high but still limited number of decision forks and outcomes allows the player to create innumerable possible narratives when the way the player interacts with them is considered. If we include events that are not predetermined by the developers, such as glitches, each playthrough can be considered a unique performance.

A good example of such narrative comes from a discussion of players’ favorite battles in the *Dragon Age* games, which took place in the Reddit thread *Dragon Age*:

I remember the first time I beat the game, during the Battle for Denerim (I consider that whole thing the final battle) there was a point when fighting a throng of darkspawn where all my healing was on cooldown and I was one hit from a full wipe. One of the Knights from Redcliffe ran in and killed the darkspawn who was mid-swing and prevented it from killing me (last of my party standing). So in this game, where the main questline is gathering allies for the final battle, one of the allies literally saved my life (and prevented me from dying and having to start the battle again). That was just so... satisfying and awesome. It will always stick with me and be a bar I compare many games to. The main quest felt so significant to me at that unscripted moment (diothar, 2018).

Although strictly speaking it is not possible to call this moment unscripted, as these NPC Knights were programmed to support the player’s character in the battle, the timing of this last-minute save is obviously coincidental but it worked splendidly to support the
main story of the game. It is worth noting that this example supports the suggestion that I made in the previous chapter (chapter 3) on research methods that Kiri Miller’s framework for ethnographic approach to researching GTA can be applied to the Dragon Age series. Firstly, it is obvious that during that battle the user suspended his/her disbelief and was truly immersed in the game (note the use of first-person pronouns in the account instead of “my character”) interacting with NPC characters as if they were real. Secondly, the user shares the account of the events that happened in the game world with the online community of fellow fans who in turn may comment and add their own stories.

Another interesting example of a player’s narrative can be found in the comments section of the YouTube video featuring the battle theme from one of the DA:I DLCs. The user “William Edward” recounts his experience:

Fun story: During my playthrough, Dorian glitched through the floor and and [sic] left me without a mage halfway through the fight. I managed to reach the part with the ogres, and got beaten to a pulp. Iron Bull and Sera both got taken out after about a minute, and my character (a Templar with the Sulevin Blade) spent another 2 minutes trying not to die. Ultimately, one of the ogres landed a killing blow at the exact same time Dorian glitched back in and immediately used Revival, bringing back the whole team. It happened at just the right time that my control didn't have time to switch to Dorian. My character just ran out of health, staggered for a half second, and then floated off the ground with glowing angel wings. The music at that moment? [Link to the specific moment of the music track]. Picture that in your head (Willian Edward, 2016).

For this player the combination of predetermined rules of the game, random unscripted events and the background music created a memorable experience and emotional connection with the game. The timely glitch did not destroy the “magic circle” (in Huizinga’s terms)² but only amplified the effect.

---

² One of characteristics of play according to Huizinga (1950) is its limitation in space: “[t]he arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart” (p.10). And later talking about a “spoil-sport” he writes: “[b]y withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others. He robs play of its illusion – a pregnant word which means literally “in-play” (from inlusio, illudere or inludere)” (p.11). His concepts of “temporary worlds within the ordinary world” and illusion resonate with Tolkien’s discussion on a Secondary World mentioned in the chapter 6.3.
This account also shows that in video games music can be used to build the world of the game. In addition to the background music and sounds there are a number of other ways to build the fictional game world. According to Jesper Juul (2005), graphics, text, cut-scenes, the game title, box, manual, haptics (creating an experience of touch), and rules are used towards that goal. On top of these instruments used by the developers, Juul maintains that player actions and time devoted to the game as well as rumors about the game can add to the world building (loc. 1265). This list, however, does not offer distinction between the story and the game world, as for Juul games consist only of “real rules and fictional worlds” (loc.50). His statement makes sense when discussing video games in general (there is no use looking for a story or a plot in a game of Tetris, for example), but in role-playing games like the Dragon Age series, which are heavily story-based, such distinction is necessary. Here is why it may be beneficial to consider a notion proposed by Lars Wängdahl (2012), that in the case of role-playing video games it is possible to define three main in-game experiential aspects: game world, story and play (p. 4). His understanding of the content of the game world is then the following: “I think that a useful criterion for what belongs to the game world could be whether an item can be used for another story as well” (p. 7). Another useful idea that comes forward in Wängdahl’s paper is that the game world of the Dragon Age games includes not only the content that can be experienced within the game itself, but also “all those pieces of side information that are provided by the creators of Dragon Age through other channels than the game” (p. 8). Just like Juul, he includes both diegetic and nondiegetic elements in the concept of the game world.³

Wängdahl’s and Juul’s opinions differ when it comes to discussing how the fictional world that is projected by the game is related to the fictional world imagined by the player. Wängdahl (2012) maintains that “in a game there is no way just to hint and leave the rest to the player” (p. 6) while Juul (2005) suggests that the fictional worlds of video games are incomplete just as any other fictional world, and that players imagine the

³ The terms diegetic and nondiegetic elements are borrowed from film studies. Diegesis is “[t]he entire world that a story describes or that the viewer infers, [including] the characters, places and events shown in the story or implied by it [as well as] viewers’ knowledge of other unseen figures and events” while “material used to tell the story that does not relate to the diegesis and its world, such as background music and credits” is defined as nondiegetic (Corrigan & White, 2012, p.231).
missing pieces based on their knowledge of how the real world works and their familiarity with genre conventions (loc.1203). Wängdahl’s argument seems problematic as he is writing about the game world of *DA:O* but there are multiple examples in *DA:O* when the creators do exactly that: just hint at something and leave the rest to the player’s imagination. For instance, this method is used when a player acquires some uncommon or unique weapon or piece of armor. These objects are accompanied by a note on their history or a legend explaining their provenance. These notes as well as other pieces of information are available to the player in the form of Codex entries, an archive of knowledge about different aspects of the game (like battle mechanics and strategies), characters, and the game world (items, places, history, culture etc.). To give just one example from *DA:O*, when a player loots the Bow of the Golden Sun from a defeated enemy, they may read the following entry on the history of the item:

There is no more famous ruler in history than Kordilius [...] Drakon, first emperor of Orlais. Few, however, know the story of his empress.

Empress Area was the third of Lord Montlaures of val Chevin’s famously unmarriageable six daughters. When she met young Prince Kordilius [...], she was the captain of her father’s archers and led the defense of Laures Castle. She was not the fairest of ladies, nor the most elegant or charming, but Area could shoot the wings off a bumblebee at one hundred paces. By all accounts, when the prince witnessed that particular feat, Drakon—who was not noted for his charm or elegance, and rather better known for his sword and shield—was instantly smitten.

On their wedding day, Drakon presented his bride with a golden bow crafted by the mages of Val Royeaux, so that they could ride into battle and spread the Light of the Maker side by side. (“Bow of the Golden Sun,” n.d.)

This text presents multiple hints at a much broader world that is presented in the game. The “famous” emperor is not a character of the game, and the gamer can learn about him only through such snippets of information in the games or in the books devoted to the game world. But in the world of Thedas he is well known, much like the “famously unmarriageable six daughters” of a lord.

This account also illustrates a distinctive characteristic of the *Dragon Age* game world: its facultative depth or multi-depth, as Hedda Gunneng (2012) calls it. She points out that many language-based elements, both oral and written, which are present in the game in the form of dialogues, codex entries etc. and construct the game world, are not in fact obligatory for successful completion of the game. It is quite possible to play
without reading any notes or talking with NPCs (p. 4). Mike Laidlaw, the creative director of *DA:I*, explains this by the necessity to make the game engaging for different kinds of players, not only those who are interested in the “lore”. But at the same time, he underlines the importance of having this elaborate background, because it is “the glue that silently holds together [...] the nucleus and the electrons, it’s the thing that keeps you all coherent and self-consistent because if you start breaking your own rules it starts to fall apart” (NYU Game Center, 2019). My informants’ accounts of their experience with the *Dragon Age* shows that they recognize this quality of facultative depth and its importance. Here is, for instance, Anna’s opinion:

Take *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, for example. It contains hundreds of pieces of game lore scattered about: chronicles, songs, poems, letters, diaries. You have absolutely no need for them plot-wise or gameplay-wise but if you want, you can read all about the world you’re currently in, learn its history and maybe get an additional glimpse into some events and characters. It’s great when a game allows you to do that. I love it (personal communication, July 23, 2018).

Her experience is similar to what Alex described: “now that I think of it the fact that I don’t read everything makes it even more real because we don’t go around and read every single book about every single religion, that sort of thing” (VO/2018_1). At the same time, only Anna said that she searches “every nook and cranny for pieces of lore” (personal communication, July 23, 2018) but the other three may alternate between reading every Codex entry at some point of the game or in one play-through and playing without that information the rest of the time.

In this thesis I will concentrate only on the folklore that constitutes a part of the game world as opposed to folkloric elements which are used to construct the story or the gameplay. This folklore can be found in different media belonging to the fictional universe of *Dragon Age* and is not limited to the games. It is a necessity for the creators in order to build a coherent fictional world yet is optional for the players, who have considerable freedom to choose how they wish to interact with this world. Each playthrough gives the player a chance to engage with the folkloric elements in a different way.

---

4 In popular culture the word lore usually signifies “the collective history and the sum of all knowledge available about a certain fantasy or sci-fi universe” (“Lore,” n.d.)
5 Research subject and theoretical framework

Before I proceed to further analysis it is important to define my research subject. When we look at the real world, there is a great range of what can be considered folklore (Sims & Stevens, 2005, pp. 8–12). Marta Sims and Martine Stephens (2005) offer the following working definition:

Folklore is informally learned, unofficial knowledge about the world, ourselves, our communities, our beliefs, our cultures and our traditions, that is expressed creatively through words, music, customs, actions, behaviors and materials. It is also the interactive, dynamic process of creating, communicating, and performing as we share that knowledge with other people (p. 12).

In a well-developed fictional world like Thedas it is possible to find fictional analogues to many of those forms of expression. One can research virtual objects such as clothes and armor, virtual architecture and art, fictional rituals and customs etc. I would like to narrow the focus of my research to the fictional folk narratives which are presented in written or spoken form and also set to music. They include myths, legends, fairy tales and folk songs. In many cases the fictional provenance of such texts is provided, making it is interesting to analyze how the folklore collectors and tradition bearers are portrayed in the fictional world of Thedas.

The issue of invented folklore has drawn the attention of several folklorists during the 20th century. In 1950 Richard Dorson wrote indignantly about “money-writers that had successfully peddled synthetic hero-books and saccharine folk tales as the stories of the people” (Dorson, 1950, p. 335). He called this type of commercial literary content that was presented as genuine tradition fakelore. His critique was mainly aimed at this misrepresentation which in his opinion confused people and drew their attention from the real folklore. In his article The Fabrication of Folklore Alan Dundes (1989) addressed Dorson’s criticism and pointed out that even such “canon” folklore works as the Brothers Grimms’ Kinder- und Hausmärchen or the Finnish Kalevala should then be considered fakelore in Dorson’s terms, because in order to create them the material taken from the oral tradition was reworked and embellished yet presented as if it was authentic. Therefore, the relationship between folklore and fakelore is more complicated than Dorson suggests, and fakelore should not be rejected but rather studied using the tools of folkloristics (Dundes, 1989). German folklore researchers used the term folklorism in
their discussion of the commercial use of revised “folklore”. According to Hermann Bausinger, folklorism is “[t]he use of material or stylistic elements of folklore in a context which is foreign to the original tradition” (as cited in Šmidchens, 1999, p. 52). Both fakelore and folklorism could be applied to the invented folklore of video games but such usage would not be without limitations. The difficulty with fakelore is first of all that this word has strong negative connotations. Secondly, it centers around presenting invented traditions as genuine, while it is clear that no one claims that the folklore of Thedas is the same as folklore of the real world. The problem with using folklorism consists in the definition of “foreign context” and “original tradition”. In the modern society it is difficult if not impossible to say which context is “foreign” and what can be considered “original” traditions (Foster, 2016, p. 9).

The theoretical framework that I will use to analyze this invented folklore is based on the concept of *folkloresque* proposed by Michael Dylan Foster. He defined it in the following way:

> Simply put, the folkloresque is popular culture’s own (emic) perception and performance of folklore. That is, it refers to creative, often commercial products or texts (e.g. films, graphic novels, video games) that give the impression to the consumer (viewer, reader, listener, player) that they derive directly from existing folkloric traditions. […] In addition, the folkloresque concept includes products that, while clearly born through commercial processes, explicitly or self-consciously showcase their relationship with folklore by alluding to folk knowledge or jargon or including characters labeled as folklorists. In short, the folkloresque signals popular culture’s recognition that folklore is a valuable brand (Foster, 2016, p. 5).

Foster coined this notion in order to allow “productive analysis of the ways motifs, folk ideas, and images operate within the production of commercial products” (Foster, 2016, p. 8). He also maintains that the folkloresque broadened and refined earlier discourses. He defines three major categories (modes) of the folkloresque: integration, portrayal and parody. The integration mode, as the name implies, explores how the creators of popular culture integrate the elements from different traditions in their work as well as the reasons for such borrowing and the effect it has on the consumer. Foster offers the following examples of integration: *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* movies, Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* book. The category of portrayal offers the ways to examine how popular culture depicts folkloristics as a discipline, its concepts, and folklorists as people. The entertainment TV program
*MythBusters* and the TV show *Supernatural* are offered as examples of this mode. The third category includes products that represent self-conscious and self-referential imitation of folklore. The products of the folkloresque parody often serve as “metacommentary” on the source material and/or contemporary culture. Some of the listed examples of this mode include *Princess Bride* (1987), the *Shrek* franchise (2001–2010) and *Maleficent* (2014). These modes can obviously intersect and appear in the same works of popular culture (Foster, 2016, pp. 14–19). Foster’s integration mode when applied to films seems to largely correspond to the concept of *filmic folklore* proposed by Juwen Zhang (2005). Zhang defined it as “an imagined folklore that exists only in films and is a folklore-like performance that is represented, created, or hybridized in fictional film” (p. 267). As the folkloresque can be applied to media other than films and offers more flexibility for exploring different modes of how the products of popular culture interact with the folklore, I will base my analysis on this notion, with integration and portrayal being prevalent categories.
6 Folk narratives in Dragon Age

6.1 Locating folk narratives in the game world

There are multiple ways in which fictional folk narratives are included in the game world of Dragon Age. First of all, the player can find them in the games while playing in the form of different written materials, such as scrolls, books (figure 1), diaries, inscriptions on the statues (figure 2), inscriptions in ancient ruins etc.

![Figure 1](image1.png) Ballad of Ayesleigh, found on a bookshelf in Redcliffe Village (DA:O)

Secondly, these narratives can be communicated orally as dialogue options when talking with NPCs (figure 3 and figure 4), as part of party banter (a dialogue between the player’s party companions which is linked to a certain place in the game world or triggered by a certain event or moment, but is not initiated by the player’s character) or which the player can hear if he/she approaches certain NPCs, such as overhearing gossip in the market or listening to songs by a minstrel in a tavern (figure 5).

---

These narratives can be experienced as written narratives if the player switches on subtitles, however only some of them are archived as the Codex Entries. Therefore, if the player wishes to hear/read them again then in case of narratives communicated through dialogues she or he has to load an earlier save and play through the whole scene again while some pieces of information are programmed to appear in the random order and thus are accessible only if other players have recorded and shared them on the internet.

---

5 These narratives can be experienced as written narratives if the player switches on subtitles, however only some of them are archived as the Codex Entries. Therefore, if the player wishes to hear/read them again then in case of narratives communicated through dialogues she or he has to load an earlier save and play through the whole scene again while some pieces of information are programmed to appear in the random order and thus are accessible only if other players have recorded and shared them on the internet.
Figure 2  Inscription on the statue of Ghilan’nain in Dalish camp (DA:O)

Figure 3  Leliana (NPC companion) is telling a story in reply to a dialogue option from the player (DA:O)
The player character and his companions are listening to the elven storyteller in the Dalish camp (DA:O)

The player character and her companions are listening to the minstrel (DA:I)

The third way the player can discover these narratives is through direct interaction with objects in the game world, for example, looting a sword from the chest or picking a plant. In these cases, an entry in the Codex which contains the information about this
object will appear, and often it would be a legend about its origin or the folk usage in Thedas (figure 6).

Figure 6  The player interacted with a collection of colored inks and received information about Vallaslin, traditional elven tattoos (DA:O)

Figure 7  Loading screen in DA:I containing the text of the song
Sometimes completing a quest is necessary for unlocking a Codex entry containing the narrative. For example, if the player in *DA:O* completes the quest fighting four revenants and their undead warriors and acquires the full Juggernaut armor set, he/she will also gain the Codex entry “Legend of the Juggernaut”. In *DA:I* another way to introduce folk narrative was added: through the use of loading screens which appear when the player travels between locations in Thedas or during the initial loading of the game (figure 7). Then finally the fictional folklore can be found in other media related to the fictional universe of *Dragon Age* such as companion books, novels, comics etc.

In my research I made use of the narratives accessible in the games as well as those included in the two companion books *The World of Thedas (Vol. 1)* and *The World of Thedas (Vol. 2)*. These books contain individual narratives (such as legends or proverbs) which sometimes represent full versions of narratives only partly included or mentioned in the games, and even full collections of the fictional folk narratives such as, for instance, *The New Cumberland Chant of Light* (the analogue of the Bible in Thedas) and *The Seer’s Yarn, A Treasury of Tales for Children All Over*. It is also worth mentioning that some narratives can be found only in one game or book, but others can be found in several sources. On one hand this repetition allows the creators of the games to introduce this piece of lore to players who did not play the previous games. On the other hand, for the players who have already encountered a particular narrative in another *Dragon Age* game, it creates the feeling that the story it tells is something that is widely known in the game world and also enhances the impression of its inner coherence.

6.2 In-game sources of folklore in Thedas
The fictional folk narratives that the player encounters in Thedas may have different in-game sources. While some of them are of unspecified origin, many others are attributed to different tradition bearers and/or collectors. There are different ways in which these sources are introduced. The first way is when no specific narrator is named but a collector is implied by the use of a remark such as “a popular, if historically unlikely, Fereldan tavern song” (“Andraste’s Mabari,” n.d.) or “from the Ballad of Ayesleigh, said to have been written after the Battle of Ayesleigh, which ended the Fourth Blight, 5:20 Exalted” (“Ballad of Ayesleigh,” n.d.). Here some unknown researchers expressed their doubts about the historicity of a popular song in the former case and the possible date of creation.
of the latter. Another way is where the narrator is named, such as the entries about elven lore that are attributed to Keeper Gisharel and are marked with the comment “as told by Keeper Gisharel to the children of the Ralaferin clan” (“Andruil’s Messenger,” n.d.). In this example an intended audience is also mentioned. Despite this clarity, the person who wrote it down stays behind the scenes, as it is not clear whether the story was written during the performance or as a later account by one of those children of the clan.⁶

Some narratives are framed by several levels of sources. For example, in The World of Thedas (Vol. 2) there is an excerpt from the book by the Chantry scholar Brother Genitivi in which he discusses the legends about the continents beyond the Amaranthine Ocean and provides his comments about the probability of historical truth in them (p. 132). The chapters from his books are in turn framed as part of a larger work about the “non-fiction” and “fiction” writers of Thedas which is called Andraste’s Bookshelf: Essential Tomes for the Painfully Devout. This book is compiled by the Chantry Sister Lilian Hatch and in the beginning of each chapter dedicated to a specific author she provides her comments about this author. These multiple levels allow the creators of the games to convey different in-world points of view on the same narrative and portray different cultural values. It also increases the interconnectedness of different parts of the fictional world as one and the same folk narrative can be told through several sources. It is worth noting that this intertextuality and metacommentary built into an imagined system of folklore dissemination are characteristic of a postmodern outlook.

6.3 Elves and dwarves: Dragon Age as fantasy fiction

One of the methods that might be used to understand how a popular cultural product integrates the folkloric elements is the folkloric study of motifs (Foster, 2016, p. 20). Mikel Koven (2003) coined the term for this study of folklore types and motifs that occur in popular media: “motif-spotting” (p. 181). When trying to spot real-world folklore motifs in the fictional folklore of Dragon Age it is tempting to start with discerning the motifs that concern elves and dwarves which often act as main characters in these narratives. They are readily associated with folklore in people’s minds as most people in the Western

---

⁶ In this chapter by “performance” or “collector” I mean parts of the fictional world which the player does not witness but instead has to imagine by drawing from the real-world experience. In cases where real-world folklore, performers or collectors are mentioned they will be clearly identified as such.
culture are familiar at the very least with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (for example, two of my informants immediately assumed that we would talk about elves and dwarves when I said that the subject of my research is folklore in *Dragon Age*). However, upon closer examination, there are very few characteristics of the elves and dwarves in *Dragon Age* that can be referenced to the motif-index (Thompson, 1975–1976). Both these races are not supernatural in the world of Thedas. Yes, dwarves in this world mostly live under the mountains (cf. motif F451.4. *Dwarfs live under the ground*), they are of a smaller height than humans (F451.2.1.1. *Dwarfs are small*) and are portrayed as exceptional craftsmen (F451.3.4.1. *Dwarfs as artificers* and 451.3.4.2. *Dwarfs as smiths*). But other than that, there is not much about them that can be traced to certain motifs and traditions. The dwarves of *Dragon Age* cannot perform magic like elves, humans and Qunari because they do not have connection to the dream realm of the Fade which is the source of magic in Thedas. At the same time, they have higher tolerance for lyrium, a magical mineral-like substance that acts as a sort of conductor for magic and is found both in the Fade and in the waking world, connecting them. As dwarves can handle lyrium better than other races, they can craft runes and enchantments using this material. Dwarven society has a strict caste system and is obsessed with writing down its history. Some dwarves live on the surface in human cities and are considered outcasts by the dwarves who live under the ground.

Elves in Thedas have preserved even fewer characteristics associated with folkloric fairies (when compared with motifs F200–F399). They had a highly developed civilization before humans came to the continent and conquered them (can perhaps be compared to F211.0.2.1. *Tuatha Dé Danann, conquerors of Ireland, are overcome by invaders*). Before humans came, the elves were almost immortal as their bodies and minds did not age, and instead of dying, when they were tired of living, they succumbed to a long slumber which could be eternal ("Uthenera," n.d.). As the elf named Lanaya explains, “according to the legends, association with humans caused us to quicken, our blood sped, and we began to age” (BioWare, 2009); other sources provide a less metaphorical explanation: that elves were susceptible to diseases that the new human arrivals brought with them ("Arlathan: Part One," n.d.). The first human state, the Tevinter Imperium, destroyed the elven ancestral land of Arlathan and enslaved its inhabitants. After millennia of slavery, the elves joined the human prophet Andraste (Thedas’ version of a
religious savior figure mixed with Joan of Arc) in her uprising against the Imperium and in
reward they were given new lands in Dales. Their exodus from Tevinter was called the
Long Walk. The elves who stayed in the Imperium continued to be slaves. But the elves
in Dales enjoyed their freedom for only three hundred years as they continued to worship
their own gods and not Andraste and the Maker, the god she believed in. After the
growing hostility between humans and elves lead to skirmishes, the Chantry (the religious
organization created to worship the Maker and Andraste) called a holy war against the
Dales and defeated them. Surviving elves had two options: accept the Maker and live in
human settlements or leave their second homeland and become nomads. Those who
took the first option became the city elves. They live in ghettos which are called
“alienages” and are generally social outcasts. The nomadic elves are called the Dalish and
they strive to preserve their culture and traditions but suffer hostility from humans and
cannot dwell long in one place. The elven history and culture resemble those of several
oppressed nations of our world. David Gaider commented in his blog on this resemblance:

The initial inspiration for the elves actually came from Jewish people—consider the
lost homeland, the existence of Jewish ghettos in many medieval cities, etc. After
years of development, however, the connections to those initial inspirations are
tenuous at best, and I can definitely see comparisons to Native Americans as well as
a number of other peoples who have experienced oppression in our history. These
cultural elements evidently have many real-world analogues, which is interesting but
also a bit sad (Gaider, n.d.).

By analyzing the images of elves in Dragon Age and a few other games, Nathaniel Poor
(2012) made a compelling argument that the elves in them are portrayed “similarly to a
historically idealized real-world Western minority” and therefore represent a cultural
“other” (p. 376) which allows the creators of the games to reflect on real-world racial
problems in a safe manner (p. 391).

The fate of the Dragon Age elves can be connected not only to events of the real
world, but also to a literary source: Lanaya’s remark about “quickening” quoted earlier
resembles Galadriel’s words in The Lord of the Rings:

Yet if you succeed, then our power is diminished, and Lothlórien will fade, and the
tides of Time will sweep it away. We must depart into the West, or dwindle to a rustic
folk of dell and cave, slowly to forget and to be forgotten (Tolkien, 2007, p. 365).
While it is not certain that the creators of the world of Thedas allude to the works of J.R.R. Tolkien directly, they were undoubtedly influenced by them in an indirect way as the *Dragon Age* games are fantasy role-playing games. This genre developed from the earlier *Dungeons and Dragons* role-playing games, which in turn were heavily influenced by the writings of Tolkien as well as sword and sorcery literature (Stableford, 2005, pp. 164–165). As David Gaider, the lead writer in BioWare at the time of creation of the first three games, writes in the introduction to *The World of Thedas (Vol. 1)*, “I remember the parameters I was given: a traditional fantasy world, complete with wizards and dwarves and elves and all the things one expects out of fantasy” (Gelinas, Gaider & Thornborrow, 2013, p. 6). By belonging to the fantasy genre, the *Dragon Age* games inherited its relationship with folklore, the strategies of the world-building and common tropes and clichés.

The idea of an elaborate fictional world (he called it the Secondary World) with its own history, laws and rules comes from Tolkien. In his famous essay on the subject, *On Fairy-Stories*, he writes:

> What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful “sub-creator.” He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is “true”: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed (Tolkien, 1984, p. 132).

As C.W. Sullivan III (2001) argues, in order to create a cohesive Secondary World, the author must include enough elements familiar to the reader so that he or she will be able to understand the nature of the unfamiliar, the fantastic. He suggests that folklore is used to invoke this sense of familiarity. Sullivan defines three ways in which fantasy authors can employ folklore for their world-building. The simplest use is on the level of specific motifs and individual elements such as proverbs. More complex strategies include working with the whole stories, such as myths, legends and ballads, and using them to create the new plot but also to structure their fiction. According to him, the best authors, like Tolkien, do not just borrow from a specific body of lore but synthesize elements from many sources (p. 287). The third way in which fantastic literature draws on folklore is on the level of cultural worldview. He points out that fantasy genre has generally supported western cultural values and worldview (pp. 287–288).
While some fantasy authors like Tolkien engaged with the folkloric material first-hand, many others tried to imitate their creations in the hopes of achieving commercial success. This has led to commodification of the fantasy genre when a large stock of knowledge which constituted the formulaic core of the genre accumulated and solidified in the 1970s (Stableford, 2005, p. lix). However, as Brian Stableford notes, as the experience of the readers with the fantasy genre grew, the scope of genre variation and ambition increased dramatically (ibid). The core fantasy tropes, to which elves and dwarves belong, stay the same but now they need to be creatively reworked in order to keep the audience’s interest. As David Gaider (2013) recounts:

I wanted to subvert some of the common fantasy tropes while still keeping the conventions recognizable – elves who had been brought low rather than remaining aloof and immortal; dwarves who were conniving political schemers rather than stouthearted Scotsmen; mages who were feared for good reason (p. 6).

This subversion of the fantasy tropes was noticed by all my narrators. For example, Michael said: “In general DA takes these classic fantasy creatures and twists our expectations of them, which I love. Thought you would have mystical Tolkien elves? You get a socially marginalized race facing oppression from all angles” (personal communication, July 24, 2018–September 13, 2018). It is interesting that while all of the interviewees recognize Tolkien as the origin of the fantasy tropes (elves and dwarves in particular), their impression of these characters is based more on the general fantasy stereotypes than Tolkien’s writing in particular (except for Anna).

The case of the elves and dwarves in the *Dragon Age* games illustrates a curious phenomenon. Certain elements of folkloric tradition were appropriated by the fantasy genre and became its tropes. In the process they lost most of their traditional characteristics and now signify the images which exist in popular culture. At the same time, they continue to allude to folkloric tradition, but only in name.

---

7 The term “commodified fantasy” was introduced by Ursula Le Guin who used it in pejorative sense to describe “stereotypical and imitative genre fantasy devoid of intellectual and moral complexity” (Stableford, 2005, p. 84).
6.4 Genres and functions  
While some of the seemingly folkloric elements in the fictional world of the Dragon Age games can be attributed to the fantasy genre conventions, it would be wrong to say that their creators do not engage with the folklore directly. The invented folklore of Thedas is full of magical swords (Dragon Age. Magic sword) and magical sets of armor (Dragon Age. Magic Armor), there are fictional legends about plants and stars (which correspond, for example, to A2620. Plants originate from experience of holy person and A761. Ascent to stars) and many other identifiable motifs. Yet the writers of Dragon Age do not integrate only individual motifs but also varying styles of different folk narratives. The content of these fictional narratives may allude not only to folkloric sources, but also to literary works or comment on the phenomena of real-world popular culture. For instance, the legend of the “Windline Marcher” (“In the Mists: The Windline Marcher,” n.d.) is a retelling of the legend of the Flying Dutchman. An example of allusion to a literary source can be found in the poem The Doggle-Boon Behemoth (Gelinas & Thornborrow, 2015) which contains clear references to Lewis Carroll’s poem Jabberwocky (Carroll, 1998, p. 132), especially in the following stanza:

A bander snatched and hander matched,  
No jabber whilst you’re walking.  
Do not be swayed to drop your blade,  
When danger comes a-stalking.  
When Mother comes a-stalking (p. 208)

Whether the player recognizes exact references or not depends on his or her familiarity with the sources of allusion, but the form of the fictional folk narrative would still work to create “the odor of folklore” (Foster, 2016, pp. 10–11).

The borrowing of form and style from traditional folk narratives does not only establish a connection with folklore in general but can be used to portray cultural differences between different races of the world of Thedas. For example, as elven folk tradition is maintained by the nomadic Dalish elves, their folk narratives tend to belong to the oral tradition (songs, rhymes, lullabies etc.) and some of them are performed by NPCs in the games so that the gamer can see how they are meant to be transmitted. The game also show that humans treat elven sources with certain contempt. Even Brother Genitivi, the scholar who is well aware of his bias (Gelinas, Gaider & Thornborrow, 2013, p. 17), warns against trusting elven sources:
The elves like to talk. Be they Dalish or of the city in origin, the elves have an oral tradition in which much of their knowledge and traditions is passed along but never actually written down. Is it any wonder then that what they have written down is to be taken with a grain of salt? The elves like to disseminate teachings from keepers like Gisharel and hahrens like Sarethia. But really, none should be consulted in any serious search for knowledge; they should at best be regarded with a kind of novel curiosity. At worst, these elven sources are apocryphal (Gelinas & Thornborrow, 2015, p. 128).

The genres and styles of the elven, dwarven and human narratives are familiar to a person belonging to the western culture. These in-game folklore genres include legends and fairy tales, rhymes and lullabies, fables and travelling songs. In contrast, when the creators portray the Qunari culture which is distinctly exotic in the game world, they show it through appropriate stylistic and genre choices. For example, The Chain of the Saarebas alludes to Buddhist parables in its last sentence: “[t]hus the arvaarad was enlightened” (Gelinas & Thornborrow, 2015, p. 213). Another Qunari tale The Straight Path is called “a lesson” and starts with “[t]his is truth in a fiction” (Gelinas & Thornborrow, 2015, p. 214). Both narratives are presented as stories in a collection of tales for children compiled by Seer Agata, a human witch. The former tale is framed by her as “a fable” while the latter is “a lesson” even though both are cautionary tales by nature. Perhaps, this can be interpreted as an attempt to distinguish between in-world “etic” and “emic” genres, where fables are “etic”, characteristic to the human culture, to which Seer Agata belongs, and lessons are “emic”, i.e. a genre defined within the Qunari culture.

The writers of the Dragon Age games also use different genres to emulate how tale types work in different cultures. The aforementioned Qunari tale, The Straight Path, is a cautionary tale about an unexperienced child who is lured into the forest by a malevolent spirit. The moral of the story is clearly stated in the end: “[h]ere’s the truth: That those who are unfinished follow whims and superstitions and are lost” (Gelinas & Thornborrow, 2015, p. 214). The same collection of stories contains the tale titled The Witchwood, which is presented as a tale “that has been told to Fereldan [i.e. mainly human and probably city elf] children for generations” (Gelinas & Thornborrow, 2015, p. 212). This story is also a cautionary tale about a child who was lured into the forest by “the voice in the dark” but his behavior was caused not only by a lack of experience but also by arrogance. The end of the tale contains the moral: “[a]nd so I say to you now: Do not go past the edge of the wood. You are too young and too foolish to face the dangers within.
You once had an older brother who would’ve agreed” (ibid). This very last sentence about an older brother is an allusion (or intended parody) to contemporary urban legends or even their digital-born close relative creepypasta (Duncan, 2018, p. 85). Both discussed narratives have the same core story: a child is lured into the wood by a malevolent spirit, but it is presented slightly differently and through different genres.

Still, these tales illustrate that pedagogical function is performed by the folk narratives in different cultures across Thedas. In fact, the entertainment and educational functions of folklore are directly mentioned in the foreword of A Treasury of Tales from Children All Over: “these stories may teach lessons or simply make you laugh” (Gelinas & Thornborrow, 2015, p. 205). The other two functions may not be named but they are still implied. For example, the Dalish myths and legends play an important role in validating the elven culture and justifying its rituals. The function of maintaining conformity to the accepted patterns of behavior is present in multiple legends that show desired and undesired behavior in different cultures. Whether the use of these functions is intentional or not, it is safe to assume that the creators of the invented folklore in the Dragon Age games have a certain perception of the functions that folklore plays in society in the real world and successfully use this understanding to create a more believable portrayal of cultures in the game world. This use of invented folklore, and legends in particular, to create a social map of the fictional world can be paralleled to Terry Gunnell’s argument that folk legends in the real world “served as a map of behavior, underlining moral and social values and offering examples to follow or avoid” (Gunnell, 2005, p. 70). In the same way it is possible to say that just as real-world legends give meaning to a particular space and thus turn “spaces” into “places” (Gunnell, 2008, pp. 14–15), legends in a fictional world give historical depth and meaning to fictional landscapes.

---

8 The educational function is one of the four functions of folklore according to William Bascom (Bascom, 1954). The other three are amusement, validating culture and exercising social control.
Conclusion

In this thesis I aimed to answer how folkloric elements are used in the building of the fictional world of the popular single-player fantasy RPGs called *Dragon Age*. The fictional universe of these games is not limited to the three main video games but includes various types of media such as books, comics, novels, anime and web series. Taken together, these products of popular culture create a deep and immersive fictional world called Thedas.

Although folklorists have been interested in the analysis of popular culture for several decades, video games rarely become a subject for their research. At the same time, the *Dragon Age* games have attracted considerable scholarship over the years from the number of disciplines, but not folkloristics. Therefore, a folkloristic approach to the fictional world of the *Dragon Age* games can contribute to both discussions.

By using several qualitative research methods, including documentary methods, in-depth interviews and an ethnographic approach to gameplay I came to a conclusion that two main factors influence the use of folkloric elements in world-building. The first factor is that Thedas is a game world. On the one hand, it gives the creators an opportunity to use diegetic and nondiegetic elements in world-building which allows them to increase intertextuality and interconnectedness of the fictional world. On the other hand, the main feature of a game world, its interactivity, gives more agency to the player, who can choose to engage or not to engage with the content belonging to a particular game world and which is therefore not strictly necessary for gameplay. The depth of this world becomes facultative for the players. But the elaborate background is necessary for the developers themselves if they want to create a consistent fictional world. In addition, as the interviews with my informants suggest, this optionality of interacting with the elements of the game world, including invented folklore, resembles to a certain degree their experiences in the real world and therefore supports the player’s immersion in the game world.

The second important factor is that the *Dragon Age* fictional universe belongs to the fantasy genre and inherits the strategies by which it uses folkloric material as well as the genre’s tropes and clichés. By using the traditional folkloristic method of identifying folkloric motifs, or motif-spotting, as Mikel Koven calls it, I show that certain elements of
folkloric tradition such as, for example, images of elves and dwarves, were stripped of their folkloric characteristics and allude to the tradition only symbolically while in people’s minds they are now associated with the fantasy tropes. That being said, the writers of the Dragon Age fictional folklore nevertheless continue to use many traditional folkloric motifs and tale types in their narratives by creatively reworking them.

This strategy of integration of folkloric elements into the product of popular culture is one of the modes of the folkloresque, the concept that refers to “popular culture’s emic perception and performance of folklore” (Foster, 2016, p. 5). The other two modes of folkloresque are portrayal and parody. I used integration and portrayal modes of the folkloresque as the theoretical frame of my research and analyzed not only how individual motifs are used but also how the traditional genres of folk narratives are integrated and portrayed in the creation of the invented folklore of Thedas. I contend that the writers consciously use stylistic and genre elements associated with various folklore traditions of real-world cultures to create the cultural map of the fictional world as well as to give depth and meaning to the fictional landscapes.
Bibliography


BioWare. (2011). Dragon Age II [PC, PS3, Xbox 360, Mac OS X]. Canada: EA.


NYU Game Center. (2019, March 1). NYU Game Center Lecture Series Presents Dragon Age Inquisition [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tzGa0AagMoo


Reilly, J. (2010, February 8). Left 4 Dead 2, Dragon Age Sales Hit 3 Million Each. IGN. Retrieved August 20, 2019, from https://www.ign.com/articles/2010/02/09/left-4-dead-2-dragon-age-sales-hit-3-million-each


Interviews

VO/2018_1. (2018). Interview with Alex. Interviewer Vitalina Ostimchuk. Recorded interview is in the author’s custody.


Anna (pseudonym). (July 23, 2018). Personal interview [Telegram messenger]. Written recording is in the author’s custody.

Michael. (July 24–September 13, 2018). Personal interview [Facebook messenger]. Written recording is in the author’s custody.