THE RELATION OF INSTITUTIONALIZED RELIGION AND RACISM IN VIDEO GAME DRAGON AGE ORIGINS (2009)

HUBUNGAN ANTARA LEMBAGA AGAMA DAN RASISME DALAM VIDEO GAME DRAGON AGE ORIGINS (2009)

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Abstract
The exponential growth of video games in popular culture has been piquing scholars’ attention for years. Video games are unique compared to other media as they provide interactive experience for the users by giving them the power to choose. It has been argued that mythologies and belief systems play an important role in video games, wherein they act as referents to which video games are based on. This study aims to research how the major belief system in Dragon Age: Origins (2009) is interconnected with the in-game racial hierarchy. Using textual analysis as the method, the game narrative and mechanics are studied in order to pinpoint the connection between institutionalized religion and racism. The findings show that there are complex relations between racism and institutionalized religion. Through time, the study of religious racism and our understanding of religiosity evolved. Although there is no explicit positive correlation between the two, it is not entirely unrelated either. We must be careful not to oppose religion itself, but to criticize the other dynamics that come into play such as power and money.

Keywords: Institutionalized religion, racism in games, game narrative, game mechanics, Dragon Age: Origins.

1. INTRODUCTION
Religion plays a prominent role in popular culture, specifically video games (Campbell, et. al, 2015). As one of the many forms of popular culture, video games are a relatively new medium. They do not only display experience via visual aids and texts, but also provide a unique immersive
experience because players get to position themselves directly in the game-environment rather than just being passive spectators. According to Steffen at al. (2014), Games provide forums for discussions and creations of society, culture, and religion in particular as well as new means of representation and communication. Video game writers are increasingly drawing inspiration from mythology and belief systems in order to establish concrete linkages to the outer world, as quoted by Šisler (2008). Bogost stated: “[No] video game is produced in a cultural vacuum. All bear the biases of their creators. Video games can help shed light on these ideological biases” (2008, p. 128). It is important to note that these ideological biases are reflected from our real world, making video games a vehicle of such biases.

The academic research on video games varies depending on our view of them; as an art object, a communication tool, a storytelling mechanism, or a simulation. According to Malaby (2007), however, our view on games was often reduced to “play,” as we habitually associate games with “playing,” and we view games as separable from the everyday life (and especially against “work”), consequence-free, and pleasurable. This study does not deny that video games could be separable from real life, are consequence-free, and pleasurable to some degree; nevertheless, it is always problematic to put video games in a binary situation with real life because it considerably reduces video games as medium to a single scope of study. Even though games have existed in various forms for centuries, video games are relatively new. They are a complex and multifaceted form of media and entertainment that can be studied from various perspectives such as game design, psychology and human behavior, and computer science. In consequence, there is no single field of study that can completely encompass all aspects of video games. As a medium that provides ludic experiences, it is undeniable that video games are still changing rapidly, which puts them in a formative stage. Still, it has a role-playing element that is unique; as such, it provides a vast range of representations and, by consequence, a vast range of issues to be analyzed.

The video game that is discussed in this study is Dragon Age: Origins. The game (which will be later referred as DA:O) is a role-playing video game released in 2009 by BioWare and published by Electronic Arts. Set in the fictional world of Thedas, DA:O puts players into the role of a warrior, a mage, or a rogue, and as an elf, a human, or a dwarf, the combination of which creates six possible “origins.” Regardless of their background, the player character becomes the Grey Warden. The Grey Warden is an order whose sole purpose is to combat the Blight and end the Archdemon.

Many video games, specifically of the role-playing genre such as the Final Fantasy and Persona series, simulate a human society in order to criticize it. DA:O is no exception. Thedas is described as a world where race and class combine to determine social class and political dynamics, and Humans are the majority race, spreading far and wide across Thedas. Their major religious belief is the teaching of the Chantry, which will be discussed in depth. The focus of this study will be the Elves-Humans and Templars-Mages relation which comes with textual analyses as well as analysis of the game mechanic.

The ludic narrative, by its very definition, focuses on the fundamental mechanical and playful aspects of a game (ludus), while conveying a significant story without relying on additional, conventional narrative methods. The game mechanic in DA:O aims to set restrictions based on the origin that the players choose. For example, the Dwarves are not able to use magic, hence there are no Dwarven mages. The other restrictions are how the non-human characters will not be able to pursue the throne and be kings or queens. These mechanics create a ludic experience for gamers, wherein outside the narrative there is a structure which enhances the choice that the players make.

Other than racial benefits, the three races have distinct appearances. Below is the official art, in order from left to right: Elves, Humans, and Dwarves. As seen on the pictures, the Elves and the Humans have quite similar builds, except for the Elves having a slimmer build and pointed ears. The Dwarves, however, are significantly shorter and plumper. These differences support the structure of hierarchy in the game. The Humans, being the majority race in Thedas, dominate the political and religious scenes. Their appearance is tall and domineering. They tower over the Dwarves and outpower the Elves (in terms of physical build). Their physique becomes the ‘common’ figure in Thedas, sustaining a standard that other races cannot gain. Along with their physical imposition, the
Humans, as mentioned before, control the major belief system as well which will be discussed in this study.

Figure 1, 2, 3. Official art. (In order: Elves, Humans, Dwarves).

**Literature Review**

Organized religion, also known as institutionalized religion, is a structured and formalized system of beliefs, practices, and values shared by a community. It typically involves a hierarchical structure, with established leaders and institutions that oversee and regulate religious practices and doctrines. Organized religion often includes rituals, ceremonies, and traditions, and can be characterized by the presence of sacred texts, such as the Bible, the Quran, or the Torah. Examples of organized religions include Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and many others. When examining its relationship to racism, it becomes evident that racism is not solely centered on the belief that one race is superior to another. Rather, racism entails systematic discrimination against a particular individual or group based on their racial and ethnic identity.

Scholarly studies on the relationship between race and religion began with W.E.B. Du Bois, as quoted in Emerson et al. (2015):

> “Du Bois stated the idea that race in America is spiritualized; that is, that race resides so deeply in the American psyche that it exists, in Durkheimian terms, no longer in the mundane world but on another plane: the plane of the sacred, evoking deeply felt emotions, part of the national religion, blessed in many ways by institutionalized religion. (p. 2)”

This means that, as a system, slavery is so engraved within American society and operates through institutionalized religion. As a society, America depended on slavery, and to justify it, they warped the Bible’s teachings to fit their narrative: that Black people were inferior biologically and are destined to be slaves (CrashCourse, 2012). Many mainstream religions prohibit racial discrimination, which is opposed to their egalitarian and humanitarian principles (Duck & Hunsberger, 1999). This paradox of religious racism may be an expression of fundamental group dynamics, wherein membership in a religious in-group encourages the development of out-group prejudices, including racial prejudices that draw a line in the sand to demarcate religious practice (Burris & Jackson, 2000; Jackson & Hunsberger, 1999). Religious racism may also result from the values or guiding principles that people adhere to in their religious beliefs. In other words, certain social cognitive motivations for religion may also drive racism.

The relationship between organized religion and racism can be complex and multifaceted. On the one hand, many religious institutions and leaders have historically been involved in promoting and justifying racist ideologies and practices, such as the use of religion to justify slavery, colonialism, and segregation. At the same time, many religious organizations and individuals have been at the forefront of social justice movements and have worked to challenge and dismantle racist systems and attitudes. Some of the first researchers to empirically study this issue were Allport and Kramer (1946). They came to the conclusion that Protestants and Christians were more prejudiced
than those who did not practice religion (in this case not going to Church). This finding sparked extensive investigation, and it soon became clear that there was a considerable correlation between religion and intolerance, bigotry, etc. (particularly with reference to white middle-class Christians). 38 studies on the connection between religious affiliation and intolerance were compiled by Batson et al. (1993). They were able to extrapolate 47 conclusions from this, of which 37 showed a positive correlation while only two showed the contrary.

It is important to note that religion itself is not inherently racist, and that many religious teachings and beliefs promote values of equality, justice, and compassion for all people, regardless of their race or ethnicity. Ultimately, the relationship between organized religion and racism is shaped by a range of historical, cultural, and social factors, and can vary widely depending on the specific context and circumstances. According to Duriez and Hutsebaut (2000), the scholars in the Low Countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg), in contrast to the majority of researchers in America, share the opinion that one can only meaningfully analyze the relationship between religion and racism when one begins focusing on non-religious elements rather than on religion itself. When this relationship is divorced from its non-religious aspects, the only real influence religion appears to exert is to combat racism, contrary to the final conclusion of the American research, which seems to indicate that religion in general may stimulate racism.

The play-environment of DA:O has provided a wide variety of choices; the six “origins” are that of the Dalish the Elf, the City Elf, the Human Noble, the Dwarf Noble, the Dwarf Commoner, and the Mages, each with their own capabilities and weaknesses. This affects how the in-game characters perceive and act to the other players’ characters. For example, if you are a Dalish Elf, you will be perceived as a heathen and savage who lives at the lowest level of humanity. This research will focus on the relationship between the Elves and the Mages to the Chantry. By breaking down in-game texts and mechanics, I aim to answer these questions: how does the Chantry construct the racial division between the Elves and the Humans as well as the Mages and the Templars? Is the Chantry complicit present-time racism in DA:O?

2. METHODOLOGY

This study argues that the establishment of the Chantry represents how an organized religion follows racial prejudice. The Chantry operates like a religion in the human world in the sense that it has a god (the Maker), a prophet-like figure (Andraste), and a goal (Gospel). They aim to spread the Chant of Light and bring ‘salvation’ to non-humans, which consequently implies a segregated view of race. The majority of power dynamics at play in DA:O are controlled by the Chantry, which is followed by racism, because the Chantry views the Mages and those that are not of the Human race as second-class beings which need ‘salvation.’ This research, therefore, focuses on the intersection of race and organized religion in video games. By using textual analysis as means to interpret in-game mechanics and narrative and understand the social implications that follows, the research method that will be used is qualitative research.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Racial Structure in DA:O

As the minority race, the Elves are one of the marginalized groups in the game. They are once enslaved by the Humans and have all but lost their culture. They have continuously been oppressed. They either live separately in the woods (Free Marches) as free people called the Dalish, or they live in the city, in the slums. The Elves rarely, if ever, have fortune to spend. They live in poverty, but still they are not unhappy in the slums. I view this as their attempt to find a place to belong: Their culture has perished, and they have to live in the city, oppressed by humans, as a way to find a place to belong. The Dalish Elves hold dearly to the pieces of what is left of the Elven culture. Each mocks the other. One says, “What is the use of revering a dead God?” and the other responds, “What is the use of shedding your culture entirely, just to belong?” Below is the introduction script for the Dalish Elf’s origin taken from the game:

“We are the Dalish: keepers of the lost lore, walkers of the lonely path. We are the last of
“the Elvhenan, and never again shall we submit (my emphasis).”

This is the oath the Dalish elves hold close to their hearts. [...] Their wagons are welcome nowhere, and more than one tale is told of the Dalish clashing with remote villagers who attempt to drive them away by force.

Much has been lost, but the Dalish will find what has been lost and keep it safe. [...] Until that day comes, they will stand fast. As long as the landships are seen on the horizon there will be hope, hope that what was long ago shattered by the touch of mortal man may one day yet be restored (my emphasis).”

This part of the prologue highlights the condition that the Dalish face in the present-time DA:O. They live with pride and are rightfully resentful towards the Humans. Precisely, the narrator said “Their wagons are welcome nowhere, and more than one tale is told of the Dalish clashing with remote villagers who attempt to drive them away by force.” This shows that, even though slavery has been abolished, the Humans still view the Dalish as a threat. Thus, they are forced to live nomadic lives. The Dalish are fully aware that they walk on a lonely path, but they hold dearly to it. They stand by the belief that there is no shame in clinging to what has been lost and hope for a future that may never come.

The racial structure in DA:O thus creates the question: What, or where, is home? Below is the introductory script for the City Elf Origin taken from the game:

“Is it true? Have we fallen so far? We are not unhappy. As poor as we are, we have a home. The alienage is no prison—it protects us, just as the vhenadahl shelters us (my emphasis).”

We dance and sing and make merry, stealing what moments we can to enjoy what little we have… and I believe we appreciate it far more than the humans do. They have everything and appreciate nothing.

And perhaps the day will come when the humans come and try to take the alienage from us, too. If that day comes, I swear they shall regret it (my emphasis).”

This part of the introduction shows a longing for home, as is common amongst marginalized and colonized people. Living conditions aside, the City Elves still believe that they are to enjoy the present—if what they have in the moment—because, to them, the present is their only home. They, however, share the same resentment towards the Humans. They fear being colonized again. Contrary to the Dales’ belief, however, the City Elves do not submit to humans.

There are two “origins” the players can choose from that involve Elves: the Dalish Elf Origin, and the City Elf Origin. The two origins act as the prologue of the game. They explore how it is living a life as an Elf in their respective community. Duncan, a Grey Warden, is on his way to recruit new Wardens from various locations. Regardless of the origin chosen, the player character has to undergo a traumatic experience before they are taken to join the Grey Wardens.
The City Elf Origin goes a bit like this: on their wedding day, the player encounters a local lord named Vaughan abusing the women in the alienage. Shianni, the player’s cousin, knocks them out. Later in the day, during the wedding, Vaughan wreaks havoc and abducts the women. Shianni is raped and Vaughan attempts to bribe his way out, only to be killed. The City Elf then was going to be arrested, if not for the Grey Warden Duncan bailing them out.

As for the Dalish Elf Origin, the story goes like this: the Dalish clan discovers an ancient magical artifact called an Eluvian, a mirror-like portal, which they believe holds great significance to their heritage. However, before they can unlock its secrets, it is sabotaged, causing it to shatter and disperse its fragments. The player’s childhood friend Tamlen dies and the player is also tainted with the darkspawn. The only cure is joining the Grey Wardens, following Duncan’s instructions.

The two Elven Origin produces a narrative that the players, despite everything, are subjugated to a string of unfortunate events that revolve around their identity as an Elf. This narrative shows that the oppressive party here is systemic; it is ingrained in society and just like in the real world, we (the players) are powerless to it. As a result, more often than not, marginalized group had to comply with fate, as cruel as it can be. This leads to their frustration and even depression. While the public might not actively hunt marginalized groups, it is still complicit to their suffering. The general public, in DA:O’s case the Humans, do not carry the sins of their ancestors as slavemasters. Yet the Elves have built generations upon generations of trauma which led to their separation, loss of identity, home, and even connections to the world.

The Teaching of the Chantry in DA:O

Spreading the Chant of Light to all the four corners of the globe and to all races is the Chantry's mission. The Chantry's viewpoint on non-humans is that they must be saved since they have strayed even further from the Maker's favor than mankind has, which has led a large portion of humans to despise them. Once all people have accepted the Chant and practice its teachings, the Maker will return and restore the world to its former glory. As such, the Andrastian religion in Thedas can be described as deistic in that the Maker abandoned the world, and He will not heed any prayer or perform any other function until his favor is regained. As the dominant religion, the Chantry has spread the belief that the Mages are at fault for the Maker’s abandonment. In fact, the very Chant is imposed on the game’s opening sequence, which reads “And so is the Golden City blackened with each step you take in my Hall. Marvel at perfection, for it is fleeting. You have brought Sin to Heaven, And doom upon all the world” (Canticle of Threnodies 8:13). After the Chant, the opening sequence follows the narrator reading the transcript below:

“The Chantry teaches us that it is the hubris of men which brought the darkspawn into our world. The mages had sought to usurp Heaven, but instead they destroyed it. They were cast out, twisted by their own corruption. They returned as monsters, the first of the darkspawn. They became a Blight upon the lands, unstoppable and relentless.”

This sequence explains the beginning of the Mages’ downfall, the history which becomes the foundation of their oppression in the present-time DA:O. This sequence of events is what is referred to in the verse at the previous point: ‘And So is the Golden City blackened / With each step you take in my Hall / Marvel at perfection, for it is fleeting / You have brought Sin to Heaven.’ The Mages have a special connection to the Fade, the dream realm in which spirits dwell. However, this makes them vulnerable to demonic possession, which may turn them into abominations or darkspawn, where the monsters that the protagonists have to fight reside A Blight refers to a period when darkspawn found and corrupted one of the Old Gods, the ancient draconic creatures slumbering in the depths of the earth. The corrupted god was then transformed into an Archdemon and led a horde to attack the surface world.

According to the narrative, the Chantry teaches that the arrogance of humanity is the source of their sin. However, the narrative that the Mages sought to usurp heaven but then cast out and become a Blight implies that there is some kind of finger-pointing at the Mages. If the Chantry really believed that hubris is the main cause of the Mages’ downfall, they would not segregate the Mages
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as a separate group. This implies that the Mages are subhumans, non-humans even, and thus deserve their downfall (the Blight).

As a Mage, no matter what their race is, players will be put in the Circle of Magi. Below is the Magi’s Origin introduction script, taken from the game:

“On a cliff overlooking the dark waters of Lake Calenhad stands the tower fortress that is home to the Circle of Magi. [...] But the Circle Tower is as much a prison as a refuge; [...] This gilded cage is the only world you know. Found to be sensitive to magic at a young age, you were torn from your family and grafted here as an apprentice. Now, that apprenticeship is nearly over and all that remains is the final test: the Harrowing.”

This part of the prologue highlights the condition that the Mages face in the present-time DA:O: They have to live and spend their lives in the Circle, away from their families, torn from their origins. The term used in-game is ‘gilded cage’, a place that is superficially attractive, but nevertheless concerning. A place that is comfortable, but is also a confinement. The Templars exist to ‘protect’ them but also to ‘defend’ the outside world from the Mages; the Mages have food, a roof over their head, and habitable living conditions, but nevertheless they live in a prison. I would like to highlight that the game also deliberately uses second-person point of view, giving the players an immersive touch. By using the pronoun “you” to address the reader directly, it breaches the fourth wall and takes reading to a new level by involving the reader in the action.

Below is a dialogue transcript of the head Templar of the Circle: “Magic exists to serve man, and never to rule over him.” Portrays the nature of the Mages’ fate: To serve, to serve, and to serve, but never to rule; it is never about self-actualization, for the Mages were born to serve. There is a power relation issue here.

“Your magic is a gift, but it is also a curse.” Magic is a powerful force, but the doctrine that it is also a curse is not entirely baseless. Mages are prone to demonic possession because of their affinity to the Fade—the realm beyond. The prologue shows the protagonist facing the ritual of Harrowing. It is a ritual that every apprentice Mage has to go through. The ritual consists of the Mage consuming Lyrium, a mineral that will project them into the Fade, where the Mage only has the willpower to resist the temptation of demons. Again, there is power relation at question: the Templars have the authority to kill the Mages should they fail the Harrowing. This is why magic was also called a curse, hence explaining the reason that the Mages were kept in a tower in the first place. As I have stated before, the Chantry views Mages, no matter what race, as abnormal and as someone to fear. Thus, the discrimination Mages face are religiously-motivated. However, why would discrimination and religion both be rooted in the fundamental life values of traditionalism and social conformity? According to Roccas (2005) and Schwartz and Huismans (1995), religion is an assortment of beliefs and conduct that provide a rationale for and justification of societal norms. This promotes embracing the social order. In support, a meta-analytic examination across 15 countries and five religious’ denominations, including Christian, Muslim, and Jewish, revealed an association between more religiosity and greater respect for tradition, and greater adherence to others' expectations and norms (Saroglou et al., 2004).

Dialogue and Narrative

Through dialogue options and storylines, Dragon Age Origins allows players to engage in conversations about race, religion, and racism. These interactions provide opportunities for characters to discuss their beliefs, challenge prejudices, and foster understanding or conflict based on differing perspectives. The game does, in fact, have an ‘approval’ system wherein the choices the players made affect what the rest of his or her companions feel and even the ending of the game itself.

The extensive dialogue options allow players to engage in conversations with various characters, including those representing different races and religious beliefs. These conversations provide opportunities to delve deeper into the experiences, perspectives, and prejudices of the characters, fostering understanding and challenging players' own biases. They are given the power to choose and it does not exclude being complicit in discriminatory practices either. As the protagonist of the game, the players’ choices affect the progress of the game and eventually the ending. The game
is not above making the players kill their own comrades and/or exiling them.

![Figure 6. Highlighted is the approval level. Left indicates negative approval, right indicates positive.](image)

For example: the character above, Morrigan, is an apostate mage. As such, dialogue options that are hostile toward mages will gain her disproval. When it reaches -100, she will leave the party. However, there is another mage character named Wynne. She is affiliated with the Circle and thus shares the view that the Circle of Magi is to be upheld. The whole cast of party members include many different races with different backgrounds and as such, the player cannot seek to please everyone. These choices can have significant consequences, influencing relationships between characters, shaping the game’s narrative, and reflecting the broader themes of racism and religious conflict. The dialogue options allow players to explore different ethical viewpoints and grapple with the repercussions of their decisions. As a result, the players are encouraged to make choices that connect with them the most, as it is impossible to reach an ‘everyone is happy’ solution. I believe the end goal of this game mechanic is to give players empathize with everyone because given the different origins, they get to learn the motives and rationale behind everybody and every race. Below are the set of playable characters that act as the players’ companions throughout the game.

### Table 1. The companions in DA:O.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alistair</td>
<td>Warrior</td>
<td>Human</td>
<td>Grey Warden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Mabari Hound</td>
<td>Grey Warden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leliana</td>
<td>Rogue</td>
<td>Human</td>
<td>Chantry, Bard (former)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loghain</td>
<td>Warrior</td>
<td>Human</td>
<td>Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morrigan</td>
<td>Mage</td>
<td>Human</td>
<td>Apostate Mage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Table 2. Relationship chart between companions in DA:O

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Alistair</th>
<th>Leliana</th>
<th>Loghain</th>
<th>Morrigan</th>
<th>Oghren</th>
<th>Sten</th>
<th>Wynne</th>
<th>Zevran</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alistair</td>
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<td><img src="false" alt="Yellow" /></td>
<td><img src="false" alt="Red" /></td>
<td><img src="false" alt="Red" /></td>
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<td>Loghain</td>
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<tr>
<td>Morrigan</td>
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<td>Oghren</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Zevran</td>
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</table>

As seen on the table, the companions generally tolerate each other. What is notable is Wynne (Circle Mage) and Morrigan’s (apostate) relationship: due to their upbringing, the two have strikingly contrasting personality and views despite both being Mages. Wynne is altruistic whereas Morrigan is an egoist. Several companions are also wary of Sten. As the only Qunari in the DA:O, he is put at a position where even the player can question his values (Jong, 2012). The Elf, Zevran has his walls up behind a laid-back and sexually promiscuous persona; he does not trust easily and there is even an outcome where he can turn against the player. Wynne questions his dignity; Zevran is an assassin of the Antivan Crows. He does not hesitate to kill. One can argue that Zevran’s character depicts how marginalized groups are often sexualized, violent, or have to resort to a combination of both in order to survive.

The narrative of Dragon Age Origins delves into the personal histories of various characters, shedding light on the ways in which their race, religion, or interactions with other races have shaped their identities and experiences. Although religion might not be the ruling foundation, they are more or less affected by the influence of religion itself. These backstories provide insight into the complex social dynamics and systemic issues within the game’s world. Based on the choices the players make, the companions can turn hostile against the player, or just leave entirely.

Through dialogue and narrative, Dragon Age Origins establishes a rich lore that delves into the origins, beliefs, and conflicts of different races and religious groups. This worldbuilding adds depth and context to the exploration of race, religion, and racism, allowing players to immerse themselves in the intricacies of Thedas and its diverse cultures. The main quests and side quests in the game often involve themes of racial tensions, religious conflicts, or the consequences of discrimination. The narrative threads provide opportunities for players to actively engage with these
issues, make choices that reflect their beliefs, and witness the impacts of their decisions within the game world.

In the quest Nature of the Beast, the players are tasked with helping the Dalish Elves in order to gain their alliance to fight the Archdemon. The Dalish are being destroyed by a pandemic that turns them into werewolves. The clan’s keeper, Zathrian, requests the player to bring him Witherfang, the first werewolf’s heart. Throughout the quest, the Warden learns about the tragic history between Zathrian and Witherfang. It is revealed that Zathrian bound himself to the curse, ensuring the immortality of both himself and the werewolves. The story behind these dates back to hundreds of years ago where Zathrian lost his family to human settlers and as revenge, turned them into a pack of werewolves. However, the curse ran past its due and as a result, took the lives of many innocent humans as well. Any means of negotiation is ignored by Zathrian and the Werewolves resort to turning Dalish Elves into one of them in hopes of Zathrian finally relenting. However, Zathrian insists that Witherfang must die for the curse to be lifted.

There are three outcomes of this quest: siding with Zathrian, siding with Witherfang, and finding a compromise where the two coexist peacefully, at the cost of Zathrian sacrificing himself. The third outcome requires a specific set of dialogue and a certain level of coercion skill. The players’ choices also had varied outcomes on the companions’ feelings, reducing or increasing their approval rate.

Choosing to side with Zathrian will kill the Werewolves and in turn, the Dalish Elves are cured and will pledge loyalty to the player. Siding with Witherfang, however, does not cure the Elves. In turn, the Werewolves fight for the players in the final war instead. Siding with the Elves and the Werewolves lift the curse entirely and the Elves will join the final war. The companions’ feelings about the players’ choice vary. Alistair, Leliana, Morrigan and Shale gain positive approval. The rest gain approval from siding with Zathrian instead. Aside from the reaction the players wanted to get from their teammates, the question eventually boils down to how the players also feel about it. Is revenge justified even if it has collateral damage? Do anger and grief subside with time? And eventually, are the sins of the father passed down to their children? The human settlers did terrible things, but their children did not. The hatred between the two races is trapped in a vicious cycle. The players can break it, but they can also reinforce it.

In the “Broken Circle” quest of DA:O, the player's party arrives at the Circle Tower, where mages are trained and monitored. The tower is under attack by abominations, and the templars are
struggling to control the situation. The party navigates through the tower, fighting demons and searching for the First Enchanter, Irving. They discover that a Desire Demon is behind the chaos, possessing the mage Uldred, who seeks to lead a rebellion. The player must make choices that determine the fate of the tower—siding with the templars, supporting the mages, or seeking a compromise. Ultimately, the party confronts Uldred and the Desire Demon in a challenging battle. The resolution of the quest varies, with potential outcomes including saving the tower and finding a way for mages and templars to coexist or leaving the tower in ruins with one faction emerging victorious. The quest explores the power dynamics between mages and templars, ethical dilemmas, and the consequences of unchecked power in the world of Dragon Age Origins.

As explained in the previous sections, the Mages and Templars are not on amicable terms. They are both threatened by the other. While the Mages are imprisoned in the Circle Tower, the Templars watching over them often do not hesitate to abuse them. In this quest, however, the Mages do end up torturing the Templars as a means of revenge. Just like the quest “Nature of the Beast,” the players are tasked with a moral and ethical dilemma. If the player chooses to side with the Templars, Wynne will turn hostile and get killed whilst Leliana and Zevran will disapprove. Siding with the Mages will gain Wynne’s approval. However, for the final war, the two cannot both be recruited. The players must choose one faction over the other.

![Figure 19. The Templars are tortured](image)

Again, regardless of the outcome, the players are challenged to question their own beliefs and morals. The templars’ control over the Mages drove them to turn into abominations and rebel back, yet they turn to be the same monsters the templars ought to protect from, “proving” the point of the Templars being there in the first place. Maybe the question is not about who deserves what, but the Templars, as the extension of the Chantry, does perpetuate discriminatory practices in the name of peace and compassion. While we cannot rule out that the Chantry is the driving force behind the templars’ abusive practices, we should also consider that the existing power imbalance between the Templars and the Mages comes into play. It is not impossible that the Templars want to retain their position of power and that has nothing to do with religion; because power in the hands of a good man is a blessing, not a curse.

4. CONCLUSION

In summary, *Dragon Age Origins* offers a compelling exploration of the intricate relationship between race, religion, and racism. By immersing players in a fictional world filled with diverse cultures and belief systems, the game highlights the ways in which institutionalized religion can become intertwined with and perpetuate discriminatory practices based on race, which is highlighted by the Templars and the Mages’ relationship throughout the game. While the Chantry constructed the belief that it is hubris that brings downfall upon mankind; it is their believers who enacted that Mages were and are dangerous subhumans. The Templars stand to protect the Mages, but they too can fall into their own hubris. When money and power is added to the equation, humans are not immune to it. As such, what takes over is greed and hatred instead of love and compassion.

Through its engaging narrative, well-developed characters, and immersive gameplay, *Dragon Age Origins* encourages players to critically examine the impact of institutionalized religion on marginalized racial groups. The game prompts players to confront the consequences of religious
doctrines and their role in reinforcing stereotypes, prejudice, and systemic discrimination.

Moreover, *Dragon Age Origins* goes beyond a mere depiction of these issues, actively involving players in decision-making processes that shape the game's outcome. Players are presented with moral dilemmas and choices that challenge their own beliefs and biases, encouraging them to reflect on the complexities of race, religion, and their interplay. By using its fictional world as a mirror to real-world issues, *Dragon Age Origins* encourages players to engage in meaningful conversations and introspection about the interconnectedness of race and religion. It is a video game that involves moral choices and requires “tough choices” from its players at multiple points.

Ultimately, *Dragon Age Origins* serves as an influential medium for fostering empathy, critical thinking, and a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding race, religion, and the pervasiveness of racism in society. It exemplifies the potential for video games to tackle and shed light on important social issues, promoting dialogue and encouraging players to reflect on their own beliefs and actions in the real world. And although scholars suggest that the relation between institutionalized religion and racism remains at gray, it is important that we do not remain complicit in silence over discriminatory practices that may be religiously motivated by fundamentalists. We must be careful not to oppose religion itself, but to criticize the other dynamics that come into play such as power and money. For further research on religious racism I recommend reading Hall et. al’s *Why Don’t We Practice What We Preach? A Meta-Analytic Review of Religious Racism* (2009), whereas Heidbrink et. al’s *Theorizing Religion in Digital Games* (2014) makes a case on cultural and religious studies on video games. Jong’s *Ethical Advocates in Dragon Age: Origins* (2012) also provide a fantastic review revolving around DA:O’s ethical dilemmas.

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6. REFERENCES


