Digging Through Dragon Age
By Franki Webb

A hero or archaeologist?

There are many ways to enjoy playing Dragon Age. It has engaging narratives with complex characters, but it's the immersive landscapes, built with layers of imaginative gravity that make me replay Dragon Age: Inquisition (and then it's predecessor Dragon Age: Origins) over and over again. Exploring environments filled with ruins from a distant past and spaces so lived in you can't help but immerse yourself in the game.

The past is an important aspect of the Dragon Age series more so than its present. Even the name of the game Dragon Age is based on categorization of history into time periods (Ancient Age, Divine Age, Glory Age, Towers Age, Black Age, Exalted Age, Steel Age, Storm Age, Blessed Age and finally Dragon Age). The past is the foundation of the series, the bedrock of the events happening in the game. This importance of the past materializes in the environments we experience as players. Derelict buildings and degraded temples form many of Dragon Age's playscapes.

As Krzywinska (2006, p.389) explains the power of ruins in game, she states that "the ruins of once splendid temples and cities act within the game (as in real life) as in memoriam signifiers of passed glory, representing in romanticized terms a lost object of desire…The presence of ruined temples to lost gods is one of the ways that World of Warcraft makes use of myth to connect to the real world, in this case drawing on ‘magical revivalism’ through ‘new age’ culture’s promotion of knowledges and beliefs that fall outside rationalism and Christianity/monotheism, within which myth is often valued as a ‘lost’ way of seeing the world.

It's not just aesthetic, artifacts connected to these environments are informed by the game's in world history. There are number of archaeological elements within the game, not only in the visualizations of the ruins we explore and the artifacts we find onscreen, but the role of archaeologist we as players fulfil. Throughout the Dragon Age series, we emulate an archaeologist, who must locate, and piece together disconnected fragments to solve mysteries of the past in order to further the story.

As RPG players we can treat "archaeology as something that has an objective, and instead take a fresh look at those ruins and think about why they're there, who put them there, for what purpose" (Reinhard 2013).
Eleven ruins in *Dragon Age Inquisition: Trepasser DLC* (Image property of Bioware ©)

**Decoding archaeology**

Even the distant ruins you see on top of mountains and far beyond the reach of our character are a piece in a massive jigsaw. The statues come from a number of cultures and people across Thedas (*Dragon Age’s* world is made of different kingdoms and cultures). Many depict gods from the pantheon of the lost culture of ancient elves such as the continually present Fen’harel statues found across *Dragon Age’s* world known as Thedas. *Dragon Age’s* world is made up of complex societies all of which create very different types of material culture. The magnificent temple in Arbor Wilds is partly reclaimed by nature, but also reveals a still living culture relegated to the shadows. The ancient elves are somewhat fantastical within an already magical world, with nearly all characters believing they have simply died out.
What makes the ruins in *Dragon Age* so familiar to us as players is their context and setting within Thedas. We understand the purpose of these structures because they relate to how our own ancestors utilised the landscape. Like all archaeological sites and artifacts, *Dragon Age*'s ruins aren't randomly placed within the landscape they all have a function. An Iron Age hillfort in England is normally situated on the highest point within the landscape so it has an effective viewpoint for approaching enemies. This methodology can be applied to the ruins found anywhere in game. The Still Ruins in the isolated and uninhabitable Western Approach, were built by the Tevinter Imperium so they could perform a magical experiment in secret. Their objective was to tap into the powers and energy of the Fade (the realm where magic originates). The complexity of *Dragon Age*'s world building comes from its relation of people and the spaces they occupy as Livingstone notes "embedded narratives are told through the settings, surroundings and contents of the environment". (Livingstone et al 2016).

**Identity and Archaeology**

In *Dragon Age*, we can choose our identity from a number of races (the fictitious dwarf, elf and qunari or simply a human) within Thedas allowing us to unlock special skill sets and classes, but most importantly to decide how we are viewed within that world. Like many fantasy video games, think *Skyrim*, *Fable*, and *World of Warcraft*, much of your time is spent running around dusty old tombs and sand-encrusted physical remains created by Thedas's many cultures offering the player different landscapes to interact with. The shared history of people within Thedas creates constructed and lived-in environments that the player can recognize from their own character's perspective and identity.

Like most fantasy worlds, *Dragon Age* borrows many historical events and geographical locations of our real world. Anglo-Saxon themed Ferelden being conquered by the French-inspired Orlais can be considered partially based on William the Conqueror’s invasion of
England in 1066. Orlais's capital Val Royeaux is playable in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and looks hardly lived in, contrasting with Ferelden's Denerim, which offers a bleaker and more decimated cityscape. This makes the inhabitants of Thedas' feel like a real set of people who we can empathize with as we carve out our desired path. It also may even influence our decisions in game - as we essentially take on the role of one of our ancestors.

Further afield, racial and cultural dynamics get more complex with the elven people of Thedas being comparable to the Celtic people of Europe. One of the key aspects of their relationship with humans is the role of colonized versus colonizer. This is not only explicitly written about within the number of history books found within the game but is visible through the material remains within the landscape. The Exalted Plains, where the elven nation fell to the Chantry during the second Exalted March, shows through the materiality of the ruins that the elves lost the battle. As Benjamin Walter (1977) affirms, landscapes such as these "play a defining role in the histories of other races."

![The ruins of the Exalted Plains with a Fen’harel statue in the backdrop (Image property of Bioware ©)](image-url)

The treatment of the city elves within alienages is evidence of the political violence and segregation of racial discrimination. According to David Gaider the alienages were originally inspired by medieval Jewish ghettos. While, race plays an important part of *Dragon Age*'s political and historical narrative, it also is an integral part of the gameplay reflected by artifacts items of the various in-game cultures. Of course, obtaining a priceless artifact is a common trope across a myriad of archaeological media, but here we get to try to learn about lost cultures only through the remnants of their material culture. In *Dragon Age* you have quest to find Paragon Branka in a main quest entitled *A Paragon of Her Kind*, as you delve further into the Deep Roads close to the underground city of Orzammar, you discover the lost
dwarven relic called the Anvil of the Void. A powerful tool used to create golems reflecting the Dwarven identity of being builders.

Morrigan’s introduction in the ruined Warden structure in Dragon Age: Origins (Image property of Bioware ©)

Religion forms a central part of many characters’ identities within Thedas. There is an integral link between archaeology and belief, and in Dragon Age this is explored during the The Urn of Sacred Ashes quest. The Urn, an analog for the Holy Grail, has healing properties but also contains the ashes of the prophet Andraste. A human woman who was betrayed by her husband Maferath. In Thedas, humans tend to follow the Maker, a monotheism religion, which is juxtaposed by the polytheistic elven ideology. Through this quest we learn about the Andraste's betrayal and how it led to her eventual death, but we don't only uncover Andraste's tragic history, we also learn how people view her and how it moulds their decisions throughout the game. These include the pious Leliana who turns on you if you choose to defile Andraste's ashes reflecting the cultural beliefs of the local inhabitant characters. Leliana is only one of the many pious characters we meet throughout the series, there are others such as Cullen and Cassandra in Inquisition. There's Morrigan, a character so far removed from the Chantry and its ideal that she embodies the broken-down relationship of the mage and Chantry. As Zook (2012, p.228) states, "The Introduction of Morrigan within the ruin of the old warden structure is no coincidence, she is the embodiment of the 'ruin' of the mage/Templar/Chantry structure within Ferelden society."

But, not everyone falls within the two extremes of piety and atheism. Varric a dwarf from above ground believes in the Maker but does not actively worship him. Then there is Sera, a city elf conflicted with her own religious beliefs when she enters The Temple of Mythal both characters offering us complex viewpoints on cultural and religious institutions.

Accuracy is irrelevant
While, Dragon Age borrows heavily from real world events and people, it is still far removed from our own to worry about inconsistencies in social dynamics and material culture. Although inspiration of building aesthetics comes from medieval heritage superimposed upon a fictional world, close attention to Thedas's material culture can cause dozens of similar insights into different ways people used to interact with their world. A Reinhard (2013) states, "Indeed, it can be equally valuable to conduct archaeological modeling or to test hypotheses in fictional spaces." Accurate historical representation outside of the fantasy genre might be achievable. A project by University of Aberdeen hopes to utilize the Burgh Records, one of the best resources for exploring medieval life in Europe, hoping to look at ways in which the detail contained within the pages of the records can provide the vision for new games both for fun and historical learning. With the end goal being an accurate immersion into the past.

That's not to say that games such as Dragon Age are useless when it comes to interpreting our own historical past. The histories and lives you uncover are not transcendental they relate to real experiences not so unfamiliar to our ancestors. Potentially providing new insights of our own cultural heritage.

**Conclusion**

Fantasy RPG games like Dragon Age allow us to discover, interpret and analyse our surroundings more than any other genre. In Tomb Raider, the player doesn't take on the role of archaeologist, Lara Croft uses her knowledge and understanding to get past certain elements of the game; we don't solve the mystery on our own through the monuments and artifacts we encounter. Dragon Age with its complex characters and tenebrous history allows more for players to interact with, giving us more to unpack throughout the narrative as the player explores more of Thedas. Archaeological remains in Thedas are multifunctional reflecting the thematic elements of conflict, as metaphorical representations of characters and as a world that mirrors our past.