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Maker's Breath

Religion, Magic, and the 'Godless' World of BioWare's Dragon Age II (2011)

Kristin M.S. Bezio

Abstract

The core conflict of BioWare's 2011 digital role-playing game *Dragon Age II* places the Christianesque Chantry in opposition to both the hierarchical Qunari and the Circle of Magi. In *Dragon Age II* religious beliefs, particularly those of the Chantry, prove destructive; by demonstrating the chaos of religious conflict, the game guides the player to recognize the danger inherent in extremist devotion to religion, and argues that interpersonal relationships should form the basis of our ethics. In *Dragon Age II*, the player-character, Hawke, is evaluated by each of his (or her) non-player companions; the mechanic forms the basis for a fundamentally humanist ideological framework in the game's world, despite the prevalence of a variety of religious beliefs. I suggest that the game retreats from systems of belief as ideal sources of ethical mores, instead turning to human interaction as a preferable means of determining social and personal ethics.

Keywords

Dragon Age II, videogame, ethics, extremism, religion, oppression, humanism

BioWare's 2011 digital role-playing game (DRPG) *Dragon Age II* stands as an example of the complex ethical self-reflection possible for players of DRPGs.¹ Zachary McDowell (2012) explains that such games

require a massive time investment, often requiring from forty to over eighty hours (or more) of game-time to complete the basic story (and much more to complete all of the other content). This provides a unique situation where RPGs become more than just a simple story. This story takes up an incredible amount of the player's time and therefore a large

1 The official *Dragon Age II* website contains a link to the official game trailer: <http://dragonage.bioware.com/da2/>.

percentage of the narratives that the player participates in. The game becomes an adventure that the player inhabits – lives through, not just digitally, but corporeally as well. (p. 183)

The player's level of investment in a DRPG contributes to his or her dedication to succeeding at the game and also his or her engagement with the thematic concerns which the game presents.

Within the digital space of any videogame, especially DRPGs, players confront a variety of obstacles to which they react based on their individual experience and ideology. In *The Ethics of Computer Games* (2009), Miguel Sicart explains that, as in the 'real' world, in virtual gameworlds "Players interpret the game experience from their game cultural background, making ethical choices that affect the way the game is experienced" (p. 102). In constructing gameplay decisions, then, the player must evaluate both the narrative (story) and the ludic (strategic gameplay) significance of each choice (Henton 2012). Because "Players act in a game as ethical beings as well as goal-oriented, rational players" (Sicart 2009, p. 112), it is important to consider not only the in-game narrative and mechanical frameworks of the game, but also the game's ideological objective in presenting both narrative and ludonarrative (the gameplay-event sequence).

In the case of *Dragon Age II*, the narrative, ludics, and context create a synthesis which focuses primarily on the problems of religious and cultural intolerance, oppression, and extremism. In the gameworld, the player "encounters a recognizably hierarchical social structure, including class distinctions and organized cultural, religious, and military institutions," explains Karen Zook (2012), which have "expanded to include familiar fantasy elements such as elves, dwarves, and magic" (p. 222). Within this fantasy context, the game challenges the player to grapple with familiar 'real' concerns of oppression and intolerance produced by religious fanaticism and cultural prejudice. These themes resonate with the game's players as relevant to contemporary global struggles with terrorism, insurgency, rebellion, and cultural oppression, as well as more generalized Western cultural intolerance and religiously motivated bigotry.

Through its narrative and setting, *Dragon Age II* explores a diversity of religious beliefs and practices, and the struggle amongst them for supremacy and survival. The player – as the game's central player-character, Hawke (whom the player can choose to make either male or female, but to whom I will refer as male for the sake of simplicity) – must choose sides in each conflict, and those player-driven decisions help to shape the game's narrative and the player's in-game interactions with non-player companion characters (NPCCs) and other non-player characters (NPCs) in the gameworld of Thedas. The player may choose to make Hawke a warrior specializing in hand-to-hand combat, a rogue with skills in archery and lock-picking, or a mage capable of healing and attack spells. As Katie Whitlock (2012) explains, the ability to customize the player-character is a hallmark of the DRPG genre, and of BioWare DRPGs in particular. This allows the player to become "imaginatively connected to the character...which engages the player in building a

reflection of some facet of self” (Whitlock 2012, p. 137), and encourages the player to explore and experiment with systems of belief.

The game’s overall narrative structure is dramatic, with a frame story narrated by Varric Tethras (one of Hawke’s NPCCs, a dwarf rogue); a three-act central framework with choric interludes from Varric; and an epilogue. During the first act, the game narratively establishes the socio-religious tensions between the Chantry and the Qunari and the Chantry and the Circle of Magi within the city of Kirkwall. The player’s goal, as Hawke, is to build reputation and influence in the city, and to develop individual relationships with the game’s NPCCs. During act two it becomes clear that the Chantry’s treatment of the Qunari is one of the main causes of stress between the Qunari and the population of Kirkwall. At the end of the second act, these tensions come to a head, and the Qunari attack the city, a circumstance the player must resolve before moving on to act three, which concentrates exclusively on the struggle between the Chantry and the Circle. The game concludes with open war in which both sides bear equal and significant fault. In the game, the player has the opportunity to choose from required primary (“Main”) quests; optional “Companion” quests, given to Hawke by the NPCCs; optional “Side” quests, which involve hunting down thugs, thieves, assassins, smugglers, or slavers, or finding objects and returning them to their owners; or optional non-specific “Secondary” quests which typically concern mounting a rescue, finding multiple objects, making an area safe, or solving a mystery. Of these, only “Main” quests must be completed in order to progress through the game. Some quests may not ever become available, depending on the choices a player makes during gameplay (and even in the earlier games *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Dragon Age: Awakening*). But while the narrative focuses on religion, the game’s friendship-rivalry evaluative mechanic prioritizes relationships.

This mechanic, separate from the influence of a universal scale of ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ evaluates Hawke’s actions relative to each NPCC. *Dragon Age II* thus stands in contrast to other DRPG games like the *Mass Effect* series (2007, 2010, 2012), the *Fable* series (2004, 2008, 2010), *Knights of the Old Republic* (2003), the *Fallout* series (1997, 1998, 2008, 2010), and *Black & White* (2001), which employ a single universal code concerning good and evil, light and dark, helpful and selfish.² *Dragon Age II*’s friendship-rivalry mechanic works by measuring the ‘response’ of each NPCC to Hawke’s speech and actions in terms of “approval” or “disapproval” (BioWare 2011). The more ‘approval’ Hawke earns from interacting with an NPCC, the closer the slider moves toward the blue “Friend” end of the spectrum, while ‘disapproval’ moves toward the red “Rival” (BioWare 2011). The friendship-rivalry status of NPCCs not in the party is unaffected by Hawke’s choice, so that if a

2 Other games – *Bioshock* (2007), *Dishonored* (2013), *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) – use a similar system to evaluate a player’s “reputation” or empathy, but have no visible representation thereof. Instead, they alter gameplay and narrative elements (NPC remarks, number of enemies, available powers, and alternate endings) to reflect the player’s style.

character is not an active party member (the active party consists of Hawke and up to three NPCCs), their status will not change. The limit on active party size allows the player to better manage the friendship and rivalry levels of the party by choosing which NPCCs will accompany Hawke on ideologically sensitive quests.

As the sliders advance (in either direction), additional secondary “Companion” quests and conversations become available to the player, allowing him or her to advance the slider even further by completing them. It is also possible to reverse the slider’s direction through Hawke’s choices, at least until the slider reaches one endpoint or the other, at which point the NPCC’s friendship or rivalry becomes ‘locked in’ and cannot be changed. As well as ‘unlocking’ additional gameplay, Travis (2012) notes that

sliders of approval/disapproval differentiate the player-performances with respect not only to any idea the player might have about liking, disliking, loving, or hating this or that NPC[C], but also with respect to the much more embracing question of what the PC [Hawke] should do. (p. 249)

What is important about this system for the player is not simply that the game records the NPCC’s ‘opinion’ of Hawke, but that the narrative and gameplay reflect those choices as significant. The purpose of such a mechanic, Travis (2012) explains, is to enable the player to associate the game with

an overdetermined version of the player’s world that productively mystifies him or her about the meaning of his or her choices, both in the game and in ‘real’ culture. (Travis 2012, p. 246)

The friendship-rivalry mechanic, also used in *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009) and *Dragon Age: Awakening* (2010), thus ‘guides’ the player to decisions based on Hawke’s relationships with the NPCCs, but it also situates the player’s gameplay decisions within a complicated evaluative system that relies on multiple and often conflicting points of view.

In order to understand the metrics by which Hawke’s companions evaluate him, it is necessary to know the beliefs of each NPCC. The game is careful to clearly introduce the NPCCs’ opinions early in the game, and each encounter Hawke has with them presents opportunities for them to further explain their stance on major ideological and social concerns. Hawke himself comes with no preset conceptions, and is controlled by the player’s choices. Varric approves of humor, diplomacy, and decisions that make for good stories. Hawke’s sister Bethany, a mage, is sympathetic to mages, to family, and to inclusion. Hawke’s brother Carver approves of independence, aggression, and honor. Aveline Valen, a human guardswoman, approves of lawful actions and fairness, generally sympathizing with the Chantry. Anders, a human mage, approves of freedom for mages. Merrill, an elf mage, approves of anything that helps the elves, freedom for

magic, and friendly actions in general. Fenris, an elf and former slave, despises magic and approves of Chantry restrictions, but is also sympathetic to the Qunari. Isabela, a human pirate-rogue, approves of freedom for everyone and mercenary actions. Sebastian Vael, a human Chantry brother, is an optional downloadable character (included in early-release copies of the game) who approves of Chantry beliefs. Within gameplay, the player must account for the responses of NPCCs to his or her ludic and narrative decisions, forcing the player to examine both the NPCCs' ethics and his or her own in the process.

As Sicart (2009) suggests, gameplay “can be understood as an act of interpreting the game system and choosing the appropriate strategies, which need not be the optimal strategies,” because “Ethics play a role in that interpretation process” (p. 118), and the player should be free to choose based on an ethos (whether his or her personal ethos or one ‘constructed’ by the player for Hawke) rather than optimization. However, *Dragon Age II*'s friendship-rivalry mechanic encourages the player to consider him- or herself relative to others, rather than relative to an ostensibly ‘universal’ ethos or moral code. In a game saturated with religious images and language, the game's use of humanistic (character-based) evaluative processes introduces an agnostic element into the narrative. This is not to say that the game is exhorting the player to adopt an agnostic or atheistic ideology; rather, the only way for *Dragon Age II* to make its point about religious (or social, or political) extremism is to ensure that it does not ‘take sides’ in the narrative's religious conflict, because to do so would lend some measure of legitimacy to one faction over the others.

1. Martyrs, Magic, and the Way of the Qun: Belief Systems in *Dragon Age II*

In their official guide, *Dragon Age: The World of Thedas*, the team of BioWare writers explains that Thedas, the world of the *Dragon Age* series, “would not be what it is without religion” (Gaider et al 2013, vol. 1, p. 111). Yet despite the importance of religion, the beliefs that (fictionally) underpin these religions do not manifest as ‘real’ within the gameworld, as *Bitgamer* writer Joe Martin (2010) notes:

magic definitely exists and is used regularly. The Chantry god, though, is not. The Maker never comes down himself to give you a +2 Sword of Archdemon Slaying, he acts in mysterious ways instead. There are lots of references and legends about miracles and holy powers, but who is to say that these aren't either natural or magical phenomenon? (para. 5)

Martin's observation illustrates how the creators of the *Dragon Age* series deliberately allow for an atheist or agnostic viewpoint, as well as a religious one. Blogger Adam Ryen Daniels (2011) remarks that the *Dragon Age* games “allow [] you to embrace the religion if you choose” (para. 5).

Another gaming and popular culture blogger known as Salo (2011a) explains that “When dealing with religious responses, BioWare typically includes a response from the perspective of 1) devout believer, 2) lax believer, 3) apologist/agnostic, 4) atheist” (para. 2). What is noteworthy about the ‘option’ of religion in the game is that it by necessity requires the world of *Dragon Age* to fall into an agnostic framework: in order for a player-character (or an NPC) to be able to believably adopt either a religious or an atheistic viewpoint, the world itself cannot foreclose either possibility, making it by default an agnostic gamespace.

However, despite the agnosticism of the world, the characters within it – both NPC and NPCC – exist in a richly religious culture. The complex systems of belief in the game include the Christianesque Chantry, the polytheistic nature-religion of the Dalish elves, the use of magic and worship of the demonic Old Gods by the ancient Tevinter Magisters, the ancestor-worship of the dwarves, and the ascetic and hierarchical belief structure of the Qunari. *Dragon Age II* focuses specifically on the conflict between the Chantry – the dominant religion in Thedas – the Qunari, and the mages. Although sidelined, the beliefs of the dwarves and elves appear in minor plots and individual quest missions, present but not vital to the core gameplay or main narrative.³ These systems of belief are important to individual NPCs and NPCCs (like Merrill) associated with them, but neither presents a significant opposition to the Chantry as Kirkwall’s primary religion and source of both spiritual guidance and institutional oppression.

Within Kirkwall – a city whose name (“Church-wall”) indicates the centrality of religion to its infrastructure and culture – the oppressive dominance of the Chantry ostracizes non-believers both socially and geographically; elves and Qunari are marginalized into the eleven alienage and Qunari compound respectively, kept in the poorer slums and working-class districts, while the Chantry building dominates the noble district of Hightown. Mages are even more geographically shunned, literally enclosed within the confines of the Gallows, a former slave prison on an island in the harbor. By pressing these minority beliefs to the ghettoized spaces of the city, the game’s developers create a cartographical representation of social and ideological oppression. By focusing our attention as players on the spaces of marginalized belief as well as on the treatment of the individuals within those spaces at the hands of the city’s religious and political authorities, the creators of *Dragon Age II* present the sociopolitical dangers of institutionalized extremism tacitly authorized by those in power in the name of the very security their actions eventually destroy.

At the center of both the main conflicts in *Dragon Age II*, the Chantry is the most important institution both for our purposes and in the game’s narrative framework. The Chantry’s core belief system and structure appears to have been modeled roughly on the late medieval Catholic church,

³ The religious beliefs of both the Dalish and the dwarves play a much larger role in the narrative of *Dragon Age: Origins*, released by BioWare in 2009.

with a monotheistic creator god, a divine martyred prophet, and a foundational tenet which states that

Humankind has sinned and must seek penance to earn the Maker’s forgiveness. When all peoples unite to praise the Maker, he will return to the world and make it a paradise.
(Gaider et al 2013, vol. 1, p. 111)

Yet although it ascribes to a Christianesque framework, the Chantry doctrine – referred to as the Chant of Light – is not meant to parallel Christian dogma. Most obvious, perhaps, is the distinction between Christ and Andraste, the Chantry’s martyr. The third tenet of the Chant states that “Andraste was the bride of the Maker, a prophet and martyr whose ultimate sacrifice must be remembered and honored” (Gaider et al 2013, vol. 1, p. 111). Within *Dragon Age II*, the details of the Chant remain largely unspoken, although they appear more prominently in specific portions of *Dragon Age: Origins*. In the earlier game, the player learns that Andraste’s husband, jealous of her relationship to the Maker and the powers granted to her, betrayed her to the Tevinter Imperium, and burned her at the stake (BioWare 2009; Gaider et al 2013). Following her death, the religion elevated her to the status of divine bride and prophet, and – like Christ – she serves as the liminal intercessor between mortal believers and the Maker.

Most significant to *Dragon Age II* is the Chantry’s doctrinal condemnation of magic. According to the Chantry, “Magic is a corrupting influence in the world” (Gaider et al 2013, vol. 1, p. 111), and the mantra “Magic exists to serve man, and never to rule over him” (BioWare 2011) is repeatedly quoted throughout the *Dragon Age* series. The Chantry’s active opposition to magic and to mages forms the central conflict of *Dragon Age II* between the Chantry Templars and the Circle of Magi. In an interview with BioWare lead writer David Gaider, Kimberly Wallace (2013) asks about this opposition:

According to Gaider, *Dragon Age: Origins* was about setting up this dilemma. As the team moved on to *Dragon Age II*, the focus shifted: “Then it was, ‘What would it take for that to come crashing down?’” Gaider recalls. (para. 6)

In the *Dragon Age* series, mages are gathered into Circles, compounds in which mages are restricted by Chantry proscription, but in which they are also trained in magic. The mages themselves are not necessarily opposed to Chantry doctrine so much as they object, especially in Kirkwall, to their (mis)treatment at the hands of the Templars.

Although not made explicit in *Dragon Age II*, the source of the conflict between the Chantry and the Circle is based in ‘historical’ religious opposition between the Chantry and the Tevinter Imperium. Mages, as practitioners of magic, enter into and draw upon the Fade, a spiritual dimension that is home to spirits and demons:

The Fade is an otherworldly realm of great power and mystery, a wellspring of magic, and, to some, the source of creation. They say you enter this kingdom of spirits when you sleep, as well as when you die, and that a corruption at its heart set in motion the Blight. (Gaider et al 2013, vol. 1, p. 131).

The power of the Fade is also linked both to the darkspawn and to Archdemons, corrupted Old Gods in the form of dragons (Gaider et al 2013). In Thedas, the Old Gods were worshipped in the Tevinter Imperium, where political and religious authority are concentrated in the hands powerful mages whose power acts in open defiance of the idea that “Magic was meant to serve” (BioWare 2011). Mages in Kirkwall are not specifically devotees of the Old Gods, but their use of magic has the potential to turn to ‘blood magic,’ which is often linked in *Dragon Age II* with the Tevinter Magisters and worship of the Old Gods (Zook 2012). For the developers of *Dragon Age II*, the creation of a ‘history’ of religious opposition produces a parallel to the player’s ‘real’ world, in which religious intolerance is often also the product of historical conflicts, such as the centuries-old conflict between Islam and Christianity, alluded to in the game through the choice to call the Chantry’s military branch “Templars.”

Although the game’s final major source of theological conflict – the Qunari – agrees with the Chantry practice of restricting magic, the Qun is defined by the Chantry as “heresy” (BioWare 2011) because the doctrine of the Qun is “godless” (Gaider et al 2013, vol. 1, p. 127). Gaider et al (2013) explain that “Any worship of a god or gods, such as the Maker, is forbidden and stopped with violence if necessary” (vol. 1, p. 127). In the Qun, roles define the individuals completely; a “sten” warrior, for instance, is referred to as “Sten” by name because his identity is bound up with his place in society (Gaider et al 2013, vol. 1, p. 128). In *Dragon Age II*, the Qunari leader, the Arishok, explains to Hawke that within the Qun individuals are “Free to accept and succeed, or leave and die” (BioWare 2011).

In the game, it becomes the player’s goal – through Hawke – to mediate between and negotiate with these different religions and the various factions they produce. Even within the followers of a particular faith there is little solidarity, as some within the Chantry favor the extermination of mages or Qunari, while others encourage tolerance or cooperation. Similarly, some mages willingly submit to the Templars, others turn to blood magic, and still others remain apostate outside the Circle but reject blood magic. Even the Qunari are not universally intolerant: Tallis, an elven follower of the Qun, befriends Hawke and his companions in the downloadable mission “Mark of the Assassin” (BioWare 2011). It is important to note that the creators of *Dragon Age II* neither show preference for nor discriminate against any specific religion, but against the unwillingness to compromise demonstrated by the extremist devotees of all of them.

2. The Law & The Qun: Government, Religious Intolerance, and the Qunari

The clash between the people of Kirkwall and the Qunari provides the source of both narrative and ludonarrative action throughout acts one and two. One of the first interactions Hawke has with the Qunari takes place during the act one “Secondary” quest “The Unbidden Rescue.” The player triggers the quest when Hawke first learns of the disappearance of the Viscount’s son, Seamus, who has supposedly been abducted by the Qunari. As the player explores further, it appears that Seamus joined the Qunari willingly. When Hawke finds Seamus, he has been captured by mercenaries and his Qunari companions killed. After being rescued, Seamus explains that despite popular opinion to the contrary, the Qunari are not “brutes,” and are worthy of friendship (BioWare 2011), complicating the initial impression created for Hawke by other NPCs.⁴

At the quest’s conclusion, the player has the ability to consider not only what opinion he or she wants Hawke to express to the Viscount, but how the NPCCs accompanying Hawke will react. If Hawke chooses “Yes, your son went too far,” confirming the Viscount’s policy of social segregation from the Qunari, Hawke earns rivalry from both Aveline and Carver (BioWare 2011; *Dragon Age Wiki* 2013). The option “Seamus is right to question,” sympathetic to the Qunari, earns disapproval from Aveline, but approval from Carver (BioWare 2011; *Dragon Age Wiki* 2013). “You’re both stubborn fools,” suggesting derision of both sides, but with a desire for compromise, reverses the previous option, with rivalry from Carver and friendship from Aveline (BioWare 2011; *Dragon Age Wiki* 2013). Remaining neutral and uninvolved by responding with “This is clearly not my affair,” however, earns only friendship, from Aveline and Isabela (BioWare 2011; *Dragon Age Wiki* 2013). The mechanical feedback in this instance suggests that neutrality is the choice most favored by the game’s creators, since the player can earn +10 approval by remaining non-confrontational (as opposed to +10 disapproval for agreeing with the Viscount’s restrictionist policies, or +5 to each for the other options). Furthermore, if Hawke is respectful toward the Arishok throughout the game, he will earn the Qunari leader’s respect in return, giving the player the “Worthy Rival” achievement or trophy.⁵ Earning respect from the Arishok can also alter the eventual outcome of the final quest in act two (“Demands of the Qun”) by allowing Hawke to fight the Arishok in single combat, suggesting that the player’s willingness to respect the Qunari is ultimately the ‘right’ decision (in order to minimize bloodshed).

4 For a playthrough of “The Unbidden Rescue,” see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKYG_ZcuRwA (RedLightGamers 2011). This playthrough contains a male warrior Hawke accompanied by Aveline, Anders, and Isabela. The player chooses an aggressive early conversation option, then later chooses “You’re both stubborn fools” when speaking to the Viscount and Seamus (RedLightGamers 2011; BioWare 2011).

5 The game has built-in achievements or trophies (on the Xbox 360 console, the rewards are called “achievements,” on the Play Station 3, they are “trophies”) that players can earn by competing quests, demonstrating combat skills, etc. Players earn points for their gamerscore, a tally external to the mechanics of any individual game but which is linked to the player’s online public profile.

However, regardless of Hawke's actions, tensions between the city and the Qunari is exacerbated by the intervention of an extremist faction within the Chantry, introduced in the act one "Main" quest "Shepherding Wolves." During this quest, Hawke is asked by Chantry cleric Sister Patrice to escort a Qunari mage outside the city. When the party arrives, a group of Qunari are waiting to ambush them, which Hawke immediately recognizes as having been planned by Patrice to escalate the antagonism between the city and the Qunari, a precursor to the Chantry's treatment of the Qunari in act two. In the second act, the 'problem' of the Qunari accelerates as the Arishok grows impatient with the citizens and the citizens, in turn, become increasingly hostile to the "heretics" in their midst at the urging of extremists like Patrice (BioWare 2011).⁶

When the Viscount tells Hawke that an emissary from the Qunari has gone missing "almost from my doorstep. What do you imagine will be the Arishok's reaction?" (BioWare 2011), the inevitability of open violence begins to become apparent. The Viscount says, "I feel as if I have been trying to turn a stampede for some time now. Someone has been pushing, and very hard" (BioWare 2011) to escalate rather than defuse the latent violence between the Qunari and Kirkwall. The Viscount's comment is a clue to the player that the conflict has been constructed in an effort to eliminate the Qunari from the city and starts a new quest, "Offered and Lost," which sends Hawke on a city-wide search for the lost emissaries. Upon tracking down the guards who failed to protect the emissaries, one of them informs Hawke's party that a Templar with the seal of the Grand Cleric paid him to "look the other way" (BioWare 2011) with the Maker's approval, locating the source of the "stampede" within the Chantry. When Hawke arrives at the Chantry, Patrice intercepts him and Hawke has the option of saying, "Funny how you and issues with the Qunari seem to go together" (BioWare 2011). Patrice replies that "The Grand Cleric trusts her servants to enact the wishes of the Maker" (BioWare 2011), excusing her actions under the guise of religious piety.

The player finds the Qunari delegation held captive by a group of radical extremists led by Templar Ser Varnell. Patrice appears soon after, chastising Varnell, but the deliberately wooden tone adopted by the voice-actor suggests that this is meant to be understood as an act, since Varnell asks for her blessing (BioWare 2011). Hawke must choose between expressing disinterest in the lives of the Qunari or fighting Varnell, but both decisions result in the murder of the delegation. Interestingly, a player who has been choosing 'aggressive' actions and conversation options for Hawke throughout the game has an additional selection: to join Varnell's cause and help to kill the Qunari himself (BioWare 2011; *Dragon Age Wiki* 2013).⁷ The design choice to allow an aggressive

6 For a playthrough of "Shepherding Wolves," see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smbfwzAHaDk> (VideoGameSophistry 2012b). This playthrough contains a male mage Hawke accompanied by Carver, Isabela, and Anders. Hawke makes pro-mage choices, freeing Ketojan from the Qunari.

7 'Aggressive' choices are marked on the player's choice wheel (the mechanic that allows the player to choose Hawke's dialogue and actions within a cut-scene) with crossed red swords, a red fist, or a red gavel. Other options include 'mercenary,' indicated by gold coins; 'diplomatic,' with a pale blue olive branch; 'idealistic,' with a bright

Hawke to participate in the oppression of the Qunari allows the player to explore the consequences of that aggressive intolerance: the deaths of the Qunari and responsibility for escalating the conflict.⁸

After Hawke defeats Varnell, the Viscount confirms the devastating effects of extremism on the overall social harmony of Kirkwall: “Madness! Madness! And with Chantry support! Even if they are fringe elements...this couldn’t be worse” (BioWare 2011). Hawke is able to counsel the Viscount to either burn the Qunari or return them to the Arishok so that the Qunari leader can see the torture inflicted on his delegates. If Hawke exposes the truth about Chantry involvement, the Viscount makes “inquiries” (BioWare 2011), but cannot do much more. Revealing the truth to the Arishok earns Hawke additional respect, but cannot repair the damage done by the extremists, confirmed by the Viscount’s line, “I’m losing my sense of how to balance this nightmare” (BioWare 2011).⁹

Interestingly, at this point *Dragon Age II* temporarily abandons the Qunari quests, requiring the player to complete several other “Main” quests that do not involve the Qunari before triggering “Following the Qun.” This constructed waiting period allows the player to grow complacent, even possibly forgetting the Qunari in the midst of the escalating tensions between the mages and Templars and Hawke’s family concerns. The intentionality of dismissing the Qunari for a portion of act two makes their reemergence both jarring and poignant, reminding the player that social issues like oppression and intolerance simply do not vanish when they are not central to the player’s attention.

“Following the Qun” begins with a summons from the Viscount, who reveals to Hawke that Seamus has converted to the Qun, a circumstance which the Viscount cannot condone because his office has been accused of being “in Qunari hands” (BioWare 2011), ranking political expediency

blue wings-and-halo icon; ‘charming,’ with a pink gem; ‘deceptive’ as a pair of crossed fingers (uncolored); ‘flirtatious,’ with a pink heart; or ‘neutral’ with uncolored arrows or question marks (BioWare 2011; *Dragon Age Wiki* 2013). Some conversations also include a green profile, which defers to one of Hawke’s NPCCs, and usually gains approval from that NPCC. In special circumstances, a yellow star option will appear, which is only available if a player has fulfilled certain criteria during gameplay (BioWare 2011; *Dragon Age Wiki* 2013). Not all of these choices appear in every conversation; generally, the player is given between two and four options at any given juncture. Interestingly, the words which appear on the screen are not the same words that Hawke actually speaks, which leads, in some circumstances, to ‘poor’ choices being made by a player who misinterprets the conversation hint. In fact, there is an entire forum thread on BioWare’s *Dragon Age* fan page dedicated to accidental conversation choices based on misleading hints (“Dialogue Wheel Mishaps” 2011).

8 For a video of the cutscenes featuring an aggressive Hawke in “Offered and Lost,” see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Kr_YB4CK8k (WebFoo 2011c). This playthrough contains an aggressive female mage Hawke accompanied by Fenris, Anders, and Aveline. The player chooses to support Varnell and kill the Qunari.

9 For a non-aggressive playthrough of “Offered and Lost,” see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s83L73IK3eI> (gamingarcadia 2011). This playthrough features a female warrior Hawke accompanied by Anders, Varric, and Isabela. The player condemns Varnell and reveals the circumstances of the emissaries’ deaths to the Arishok.

over his son's personal beliefs.¹⁰ When Hawke confronts the Arishok about Seamus, the Qunari expresses frustration:

In four years I have made no threat, and fanatics have lined up to hate us simply because we exist. But despite lies and fear, Baah [non-Qunari] still beg me to let them come to the Qun. They hunger for purpose. The son has made a choice. You will not deny him that.
(BioWare 2011)

In Kirkwall, the “lies and fear” of “fanatics” produce the Viscount's political imperative much in the same way that irrational fears of Islamic terrorists have produced in Western culture an almost automatic rejection of all Muslims. Like the Viscount, American and other Western politicians distance themselves from one religion or espouse another for the sake of political popularity, and belief itself becomes secondary to open religious practice. The game's inclusion of references to “torture” (in “Blackpowder Courtesy”) and Anders's act of terrorism at the game's conclusion reinforce the smaller parallels between Western marginalization of Islam and the treatment of the Qunari in *Dragon Age II*. While the Qun does not ideologically parallel Islam, even the name “Qun” echoes that of the “Quran,” deliberately turning the player's attention to this parallel. However, it is important to note that in *Dragon Age II*, it is the dominant ideology – the Chantry – and not the suppressed ideology that first instigates violence, although the Qunari rapidly escalate it in response.

It is important to the game's argument that Hawke is no longer able to control the outbreak of violence, and when the party arrives at the Chantry, Seamus is already dead. Patrice reveals her plan to blame Seamus's death on Hawke and “your Qunari masters” (BioWare 2011), justifying murder because Seamus “deliberately denied the Maker” (BioWare 2011). She argues that “People need the opportunity to defend faith, starting with you,” upon which she exhorts her followers to “Earn your reward in this life and the next. The heretics must die!” (BioWare 2011). Patrice's rhetoric is, as the Arishok's earlier description suggests, fanatical, and her embrace of violence is meant to destroy any sympathy the player might have for her defense of her faith. Even Elthina, as Grand Cleric, rejects Patrice's fanaticism, proclaiming that “The Chantry respects the law, and so must she” (BioWare 2011), neither turning nor slowing her climb up the Chantry steps when a Qunari executes Patrice with an arrow to the forehead. Yet the game makes clear that both the Chantry-Qunari and Chantry-Circle conflicts are ultimately outside of either Elthina or Hawke's ability to stop or even control.

The final quest in act two, “Demands of the Qun,” instigates open warfare between the Qunari and the population of Kirkwall when the Arishok discovers that the city has been harboring

¹⁰ For a playthrough of “Following the Qun,” see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_knF5Lko46c (Revan657 2011). This playthrough contains a female rogue Hawke accompanied by Varric, Merrill, and Isabela, whom the player replaces with Aveline.

the thief (Isabela) of a sacred Qunari relic. Violence rapidly spreads throughout Kirkwall as the player guides Hawke through the combat-riddled Docks and Lowtown, and toward the Viscount's Keep in Hightown. Mechanically, the player's path is restricted by the destruction of open battle, mimicking Hawke's inability to choose any path but the one on which he and his party have been set by the escalating oppression and violence.¹¹ Inside the Keep, the player discovers that the Viscount has been killed by the Arishok, whose rant at the court of Kirkwall addresses the citizens' complacency:

You feed and feed and only complain when your meal is interrupted. You do not look up.
You do not see that the grass is bare. You are blind. But I will make you see. (BioWare 2011)

Complacency – like that possibly experienced by the player in the interim between “Blackpowder Courtesy” and “Following the Qun” – enables oppression, *Dragon Age II* suggests, by encouraging blindness; without a personal connection to oppression or intolerance, we – as Westerners – are content to “feed and feed” until our own lives are “interrupted,” unconcerned with the suffering of others. The Arishok's diatribe reveals an attempt on the part of *Dragon Age II*'s creators to encourage engagement on the part of the players through the friendship-rivalry mechanic; Hawke must interact with his companions, must pay attention to their grievances and beliefs, in order to secure their friendship.

At this point in the game, friendship and respect born of tolerance become important to the resolution of the Qunari attack. First, if Hawke has secured the Arishok's respect, he will not attack the party (*Dragon Age Wiki* 2013). Second, if Hawke has cultivated a high enough “friendship” quotient with Isabela (more than half the distance between neutral and full friendship), she will return the relic she stole to the Arishok. The Arishok accepts it, but is unwilling to let Isabela go unpunished, and Hawke will have to make the decision to turn her over (earning disapproval from Isabela, Aveline, and Merrill) or fight for her life (earning approval from Isabela, Aveline, and Merrill). If Hawke surrenders Isabela, the player does not need to fight the Qunari, and the act ends with their departure. If he fights for her, the player has another choice: whether to fight all the Qunari with the full party, or to engage the Arishok in single combat. Without Isabela's friendship, Hawke will be forced to fight, although single combat remains an option with the Arishok's respect.

The variety of options that appear at the end of “Demands of the Qun” demonstrate the power of tolerance and cultural respect; it is possible for Hawke to minimize bloodshed by accepting Qunari culture and condemning the Chantry's extremism. It is in fact possible to avoid bloodshed (in the Keep) altogether if Hawke is willing to sacrifice friendship for ideology, although the

11 For a playthrough of the end of “Demands of the Qun,” see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fU_MytxPagk (Welcome to Bonertown! 2011). This playthrough features a female warrior Hawke accompanied by Varric, Aveline, and Merrill. Hawke has not earned the Arishok's full respect, but has earned Isabela's friendship.

friendship-rivalry mechanics of the game punish the player for making this choice (through the disapproval of three NPCCs). Instead, the game mechanically rewards a player unwilling to betray a friend (Isabela) in the name of religious belief, emphasizing the importance of human connections over abstract ideology. In the end, irrespective of the player's choices, the Arishok must be defeated, and Hawke is proclaimed "Champion" by a resentful Meredith (BioWare 2011).

3. "Belief is No Excuse": Templar Oppression & The Rise of Blood Magic

During the interlude between acts two and three, Varric says of Meredith, "the more she squeezed the mages, the more they resisted. The more they resisted, the tighter she squeezed" until "it all came crashing down" (BioWare 2011), encapsulating the essence of the Chantry-Circle conflict throughout the game. This cycle of oppression and rebellion appears repeatedly in *Dragon Age II* through both quests and interactions with Hawke's NPCCs, almost all of whom express opinions concerning the mage-Templar dispute. Unsurprisingly, Merrill, Anders, and Bethany support the mages, while Fenris, Carver, Aveline, and Sebastian support the Chantry. Isabela supports freedom for everyone, but Varric is neutral, disliking both sides and in fact saying at one point, "I think I'm sick of mages and Templars" (BioWare 2011). As Hawke, the player is caught in the midst of the debate and must ultimately choose one ideology or the other by the end of the game.

Even as early as the prologue, the player confronts the hostility inherent between apostate mages and Templars when Aveline's Templar husband, Ser Wesley, threatens Bethany (and Hawke, if Hawke is a mage). Although Aveline convinces her husband that "the Maker understands" (BioWare 2011), the game's immediate introduction of this animosity establishes it as foundational to the game. It reappears in act one almost immediately, when Hawke must help Anders to free a friend, Karl, from the Circle, because he has been threatened with being made "Tranquil." When a mage is made Tranquil by the Templars, he or she is cut off from the Fade, robbing mages of their magic and destroying their emotions and personality.¹² In the game's narrative, Tranquility appears as the proverbial 'fate worse than death,' and mages, including Karl, often choose suicide or execution instead. This episode introduces the player to the inhumane treatment of mages at the hands of the Chantry, and narratively encourages the player to be sympathetic to mages. However, the game also presents the Chantry's objection to magic as legitimate through both quests and the opinions of Hawke's other companions.

12 The physical marker of Tranquility – a Chantry sun (a red circular sun with wavy rays) in the center of the Tranquil's forehead – visually depicts the act as a kind of magical and emotional lobotomization.

In the act one “Main” quest “Enemies Among Us,” for example, Hawke goes in search of a missing Templar recruit who has been abducted by a group of rogue blood mages seeking to undermine the authority of the Chantry and restore the old Tevinter Imperium (and the worship of the Old Gods) to Kirkwall. An insane blood mage also murders Hawke’s mother during act two, indelibly tainting its practice from the player’s perspective (presuming the player sympathizes with Hawke). The harmful potential of blood magic thus lends legitimacy to the suppression and even incarceration of mages, as Jonathan Moeller (2009) notes on his blog: “it turns out the Chantry’s hostility to mages is not irrational prejudice but completely justifiable self-defense” (para. 6). Moeller’s response echoes the espoused Chantry viewpoint throughout the *Dragon Age* series, but in *Dragon Age II* this position is hardly presented as “completely justifiable.”

In fact, the point of the conflict is that both sides – and neither side – can justify their position. Wallace (2013) notes that “even within BioWare’s own staff, team members disagree about who’s in the right” (para. 7). Gaider explains to Wallace (2013) that

the idea is that if we can successfully argue either side of an issue and not feel like a sociopath doing so, then that is a good avenue for us to explore. (para. 9)

In the game, when Hawke returns the recruit to the Gallows, Templar Captain Cullen asserts that mages are universally dangerous, and Hawke has the opportunity to agree with him, contradict him, or state that “there must be another way” (BioWare 2011) to handle the situation than Tranquility or extermination. If the player chooses the last, most moderate option, Cullen will agree, suggesting that there might be a way to mitigate both danger and oppression through Templar-mage cooperation.

The Templar Thrask – like Cullen – also represents a viewpoint of moderation among the Templars. In “Act of Mercy,” another “Main” quest, Thrask asks Hawke to help find a group of apostates so that they may be safely returned to the Circle, rather than killed.¹³ When Hawke finds the escaped mages, he learns that their leader, Decimus, is a blood mage; Hawke kills him, and the game then asks the player to decide the fate of Decimus’s followers, now led by a mage named Grace: to help them escape either by killing Thrask or lying to him, or to turn the mages over to the Templars with the promise of mercy. Refusing to help the mages earns rivalry from Bethany, Anders, and Merrill, but friendship from Carver, Aveline, and Fenris. Choosing to convince Thrask that the mages are dead in order to help them escape earns friendship from Aveline, Varric, Anders, Isabela, and Merrill, and rivalry from Fenris. Agreeing to kill Thrask in order to help, however, earns friendship only from Anders, Merrill, and Isabela, but rivalry from Fenris, Aveline, Varric, and

13 For a playthrough of “Act of Mercy,” see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hp1uAEHBL2Q> (VideoGameSophistry 2012a). This playthrough contains a male mage Hawke accompanied by Merrill, Varric, and Anders. The player takes a pro-mage stance, convincing Thrask that the mages in the caves are all dead so that they can escape.

Carver (BioWare 2011; *Dragon Age Wiki* 2013). This would seem to suggest that the game promotes freedom for the mages, but not at the expense of others' lives, so convincing Thrask to give up his search (rather than kill him) minimizes the damage.

However, irrespective of the player's decisions in "Act of Mercy," Thrask (if alive) and Grace return as Hawke's adversaries in the act three "Main" quest "Best Served Cold."¹⁴ In this quest, Hawke learns that "someone close to" him (*Dragon Age Wiki* 2013) has been kidnapped by a faction of mages and Templars opposed to Meredith's increasingly strict control.¹⁵ Interestingly, the group appears ideologically moderate in their argument for unity between mages and Templars, but have been driven to radicalism by Meredith's oppression. If Hawke agrees with Thrask that Meredith has become too extreme, Thrask attempts to convince the others to release the victim, but Grace insists that both the victim and Hawke have to die, perhaps causing the player to regret that she was allowed to live and encouraging sympathy with the Templars. In the ensuing confrontation, Grace kills Thrask, Hawke kills Grace, and Hawke then has to rely on another mage, Alain, to resuscitate the victim using blood magic. The player then must decide what to do with Alain: killing him earns disapproval from Aveline, and telling Captain Cullen to kill all the mages earns disapproval from Varric. Defending the mages' actions earns disapproval from Fenris and Sebastian, but approval from Varric and Merrill; condemning the mages' actions earns approval from Fenris and Sebastian, but no disapproval (BioWare 2011; *Dragon Age Wiki* 2013). This combination confirms the game's stance against extremism, because although ideologically the group may have been moderate, their turn to violence delegitimizes their argument, however rational it might otherwise appear.

By this point it is obvious to the player that extremism has begun to infect not only the actions of the NPC Templars and mages, but also some of Hawke's NPCCs. Anders, in particular, is increasingly extremist in his beliefs and actions, and suggests that mages "turned to blood magic as their only option" (BioWare 2011) given Templar oppression. He asks Hawke to help him collect ingredients for a "potion" which are, in fact, the components of an explosive: "sela petrae" (saltpeter) and "Drakestone" (sulfur) which combine to form gunpowder (BioWare 2011). Hawke has the option to ask, "Was there ever even a potion?" (BioWare 2011), to which Anders admits that there was not. He then asks Hawke to distract Elthina, but will not reveal why, saying only that "It's easy to support freedom when no one has to die to achieve it" (BioWare 2011). The player may

14 For the cutscenes from "Best Served Cold," see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Icn8Np4mF6A> (astrophile1987 2011). These cutscenes feature a female mage Hawke accompanied by Varric, Anders, and Aveline, with Carver held prisoner by the rebels. The player chooses to save Alain and show the prisoners mercy.

15 If Bethany/Carver survived act one, he or she will be the victim; if Bethany/Carver died in act one and the player is pursuing a romance with one of the NPCCs, that NPCC will be the victim; if Bethany/Carver died and the player is not pursuing a romance, the NPCC with the highest friendship quotient will be the victim (*Dragon Age Wiki* 2013). The game's use of friendship to choose the victim whom Hawke must rescue emphasizes the importance of interpersonal relationships to the game's argument.

choose to help him or not, but Hawke’s decision here has no impact on the outcome of the game.¹⁶ During the ensuing conversation, Elthina remarks to Hawke, “I favor peace. Which is not the goal of either side, I’m afraid” (BioWare 2011). In an atmosphere in which extremism and oppression have become the norm, moderation and “peace” are no longer tenable options for those seeking to end the cycle.

4. “A Friend of Yours is a Friend of Mine”: Friendship, Rivalry & Humanistic Ethics

Throughout the course of *Dragon Age II*, the player has been building friendships and rivalries with the various NPCCs who comprise his party, beginning with Bethany or Carver and Aveline in the prologue and moving through all three acts of the game, recruiting and securing the loyalty of the others. At various stages, it is possible for Hawke to lose the loyalty of his companions, by surrendering Fenris to the Tevinter slavers, turning over Isabela to the Qunari, and banishing Anders from Kirkwall. If the player has been deliberate about cultivating friendship and rivalry, however, by the end of act three it is possible for Hawke to have secured the loyalty of all the NPCCs, whether through friendship, rivalry, or a mixture of both. The friendship-rivalry status of each NPCC becomes vital when Hawke must decide whether to place his allegiance with Meredith and the Templars (the Chantry) or with Orsino and the mages (the Circle).

In the game’s final “Main” quest, “The Last Straw,” Hawke is summoned to mitigate an argument Meredith’s invocation of the “Rite of Annulment” (BioWare 2011), the ritualized extermination of every mage in the Circle, enacted when a Circle has become indelibly corrupted by blood magic.¹⁷ Orsino argues that there are innocents in the Circle who do not deserve death, but Meredith states that she would rather punish the innocent than let the guilty go free, saying that “it breaks my heart to do it, but we must be vigilant” (BioWare 2011). Anders appears, proclaiming that the Circle and Chantry both have “failed us,” and “there can be no half measures” (BioWare 2011) a moment before the Chantry explodes. Anders immediately takes responsibility, and the First Enchanter asks him “Why? Why would you do such a thing?” (BioWare 2011). In committing an act of terrorism, Anders becomes what Meredith has accused mages of being, confirming the

16 Refusing to help Anders earns Hawke +30 rivalry. A typical action will earn a player between +5 and +10 friendship or rivalry; major plot-related actions typically earn +15, so the severity of Anders’s reaction is an indication to the player of the extremity to which the mage has been driven.

17 For a playthrough of the beginning of “The Last Straw,” featuring the destruction of the Chantry, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ky4N0C-Imsg> (FluffyNinjaLlama 2011). This playthrough contains a male mage Hawke who sides with the mages and has a high friendship quotient with both Aveline and Fenris.

Chantry's fear of magic and legitimizing Meredith's call for the Rite of Annulment, although Sebastian points out that there is no need to kill all the mages since the act was committed by Anders alone.

Anders asserts that "I have removed the chance for compromise, because there can be no compromise" (BioWare 2011). Anders's radical extremism appears as the consequence of decades of mistreatment by the Chantry, placing blame on institutional intolerance in addition to individual extremism. It must be said that the game in no way excuses Anders's actions – rather, the game positions acts of extremism and terrorism as a product of socio-religious conflict allowed to burgeon out of control. In Kirkwall, the voices of moderation – the Viscount and Elthina in particular – are quashed by the actions of fanatics and radicals, reason made untenable by the escalating spiral of intolerance and oppression confronting rebellion and reactionism.

In *Dragon Age II* narrative conflicts are situated in specifically religious contexts, suggesting that the game views religion as a primary shaping factor in socio-cultural as well as political ideologies. Kirkwall itself, the "City of chains" (BioWare 2011) Varric explains at the game's beginning, encapsulates the image of people bound by their religious beliefs into perpetual strife and ideological servitude. As Hawke, however, the player is an outsider, and is therefore able to overcome the ideological oppression that seems to constrain those who live within its walls. Yet despite the relative freedom of choice the player has throughout the game in terms of ideology – Hawke can be pro-Chantry, pro-mage, pro-Qunari, or relatively unbiased at nearly every opportunity – the game refuses to allow the player to remain neutral at its conclusion. Even if Hawke says "I don't want to get involved in this" after Anders destroys the Chantry, he is told that "You are already" (BioWare 2011).

At this point the player must decide whether to support Meredith, the Templars, and the Chantry, or Orsino and the mages, and must also decide whether to punish Anders, to free him, or to require him to "atone" (BioWare 2011) for his actions.¹⁸ As all the available NPCCs are 'present' for these events, Hawke is able to ask for the opinions of each. Here, it is evident that the relationships between Hawke and the NPCCs take primacy over the opinions of Orsino and Meredith. If asked, Isabela remarks "Bold plan. At least I thought so" (BioWare 2011), the only NPCC who does not condemn Anders's actions. Fenris argues that "He wants to die. Kill him and be done with it"; Aveline says that "Belief is no excuse"; Merrill argues that "He should come with us. Do what he can to put things right"; and Varric remarks that "I think I'm sick of mages and Templars" (BioWare

18 For a playthrough of this sequence from "The Last Straw," see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhLbbaFKuA> (WebFoo 2011b). This playthrough contains a female warrior Hawke who sides with the Templars and executes Anders. For a playthrough of this sequence containing Anders's survival, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ydk_W0RiZbg (SeaMarchedFlame 2011). This sequence contains a female mage Hawke who sides with the mages and forces Anders to atone for his actions.

2011). If Hawke chooses to kill Anders, the player (obviously) loses Anders from the party. If Hawke frees Anders or chooses to bring Anders in the party, Sebastian will leave in disgust. Either way, the player must decide which of the two NPCCs to prioritize – and determine whether (and how much) ideology factors into that decision.

The player must also choose between the Chantry and the Circle, a decision which can also impact and be impacted by Hawke's friendship-rivalry status with each NPCC. High enough friendship status with the ideologically aligned NPCCs – Anders, Merrill, Fenris, Sebastian, Bethany, Carver, and Aveline – allows Hawke to persuade them to stay in the party despite their disagreement with the player's decision. If the player has taken the time and made the effort to cultivate friendship with all of the NPCCs, it is possible for Hawke to keep all but one (either Sebastian or Anders) through the final battle, using their abilities even when they are not members of the active party (those not actively chosen become non-controllable NPCs). If the player has not cultivated friendship with an NPCC with whom Hawke disagrees, then that NPCC becomes an enemy rather than an ally, and must be overcome, increasing the difficulty of the quest's combat sequences. Thus ignoring or minimizing ideology in favor of friendship is the better overall game strategy, one which encourages the player to choose a humanistic rather than religious ethos as he or she plays through the game.

If, at this juncture, the player chooses to side with the Templars and the Chantry, the friendship-rivalry status of most of the NPCCs becomes largely irrelevant. Bethany remains with the Circle until Hawke's party encounters Orsino in combat, when she assists the party as an NPC. At the conclusion of the combat, the player can allow her to rejoin the party or permit Meredith to execute her. Merrill sides with Hawke irrespective of her friendship-rivalry status, unless Hawke has full rivalry with Anders and the player has not completed Merrill's act three "Companion" quest, "Merrill, Friend or Foe?" (*Dragon Age Wiki* 2013). If Anders is spared on the condition that he "atone" for what he has done but Hawke sides with the Templars, only a complete rivalry track allows Hawke to force him to comply, otherwise the player must choose between freeing him and killing him (*Dragon Age Wiki* 2013). The fact that only rivalry allows Hawke to force Anders to go against his avowed ideology helps to confirm the game's condemnation of the mage's actions.

If, however, the player chooses to side with the Circle mages – whether approving of blood magic or simply disapproving of Templar oppression – friendship and rivalry become much more significant. If the player has maximized either friendship or rivalry with Fenris and has completed the act three "Companion" quest "Fenris: Questioning Beliefs," Hawke can convince him to remain in the party (*Dragon Age Wiki* 2013). If the quest remains incomplete, a friendly Hawke has the ability to convince him to rejoin the party, but a rival Fenris becomes an enemy. Aveline can be convinced to go against the Templars in most situations, unless her act three "Companion" quest, "Aveline: Questioning Beliefs," is incomplete and she is a rival, in which case she, too, becomes an

enemy who must be defeated (*Dragon Age Wiki* 2013). Carver will initially resist, irrespective of friendship or rivalry, but will rejoin the party as an NPC for the final battle in the Gallows Courtyard.

From this comparison, it might appear that the game encourages the player to side with the Templars, as that decision is the least likely to produce enmity from Hawke's companions. However, the game has repeatedly emphasized Meredith's extremism, the oppression of the Templars, and the injustice of the persecution of mages, narratively contrasting this mechanical advantage. Additionally, because friendly companions will side with Hawke irrespective of the player's actual decision, maximizing friendship with all NPCCs negates any mechanical difference in choosing the Templars over the mages, rendering ideology irrelevant in comparison with human relationships. It is important to note that the events and narrative of the game are functionally identical from the moment of Hawke's choice forward, with only slight differences.¹⁹ This ludonarrative ultimately reveals the game's view that the beliefs of both the Circle and the Chantry are deeply problematic, produce intolerance, and foster violence and extremism.

Once the player makes the decision to side with one faction over the other, Hawke follows whichever side the player has chosen: to the Gallows if allying with the Templars, to the Circle if allying with the mages. If Hawke and his party are at the Gallows, Meredith persists in oppressive discourse, saying that "The Circle will know fear" (BioWare 2011), while at the Circle Orsino expresses despair, saying "Even if we win, what then?" (BioWare 2011). By siding with the Chantry, Hawke chooses the more powerful ally, while siding with the Circle represents a stand for the marginalized and persecuted driven to the end of their proverbial rope.

Hawke's address to each side expresses regret – yet another indication that the game ultimately argues for moderation and compromise over extremism – but each is differentiated in terms of tone. A Templar-allied Hawke speaks from a position of privilege and paternalism, arguing that

We didn't want this. The mages, they're our brothers and sisters. It's sad, but still necessary. Kirkwall needs us to set this right. We need order, or we lose ourselves. It's the only choice we have. (BioWare 2011)

Hawke here echoes Meredith's language, but his statements are patently contradictory to the game's mechanics: this wasn't the "only choice" the player had, although it may have been the choice the player made. Furthermore, the assertion that the Templars are obligated to destroy the Circle in the name of Chantry law presumes their superiority based entirely on ideological claims.

¹⁹ A mage-allied Hawke begins at the Circle and fights his way through the Gallows to the courtyard where the party encounters Meredith. A Templar-allied Hawke begins in the Gallows and fights through to the Circle before returning to the courtyard for a confrontation with Meredith. Either way, Hawke's party will have to fight Templars, mages, Orsino, and Meredith.

On the other side, however, a mage-allied Hawke speaks with the voice of the oppressed, saying,

We're cornered, and the Templars know it. But this is bigger than their hate, their fear. They've come to take your lives, and we're saying no. We didn't want this, but sometimes you just have to stand. (BioWare 2011)

This speech draws upon a tradition of social, cultural, and religious protest against oppression in which the persecuted eventually take “a stand” against those who would silence them. In cultural terms, a mage-allied Hawke's speech resonates more with a Western audience familiar with the rhetoric of freedom from oppression, appealing to the player's sympathy and sense of justice.

On both sides, however, the leaders of each respective faction have succumbed to the pressure created by the other to resort to extremism: Meredith to keep absolute control over the mages out of fear, and Orsino out of desperation to retain some level of autonomy under Chantry oppression. Neither is worthy of Hawke's support, as whichever side the player chooses betrays Hawke and his party. In both scenarios, Orsino turns to blood magic because he claims to have no other choice.²⁰ In the Circle, he says to a mage-allied Hawke, “I see now that there is no other way. Meredith expects blood magic, then I will give it to her” (BioWare 2011). To a Templar-allied Hawke, he says, “The irony of it is that until this moment, I have never used blood magic” (BioWare 2011). In both instances, Orsino is driven to blood magic by Meredith's persecution, adopting the persona she has assigned to him out of fear and hatred. Here, as in other encounters with blood mages throughout *Dragon Age II*, the player is presented with an image of extremism created by oppression; without Meredith's “squeezing” (as Varric describes it), the game suggests, the mages would not have felt obligated to turn to forbidden practices.

Once Orsino is dead, Hawke and his party return to the Gallows courtyard, where Meredith is waiting.²¹ For a mage-allied Hawke, her hostility is obvious, and she says “You'll pay for what you've done here” (BioWare 2011). She also says,

I'll be rewarded for what I've done, in this world and the next. I have done nothing but perform my duty. What happens to you now is your own doing. (BioWare 2011)

This pronouncement specifically aligns her radicalism with religious fervency. If, however, Hawke supported her, Meredith appears even more nefarious, saying, “I'm beginning to wonder how large

20 For a playthrough of Orsino's betrayal in “The Last Straw,” see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6dyWft8R6SA> (WebFoo 2011a). This playthrough contains a female mage Hawke who has sided with the mages and is accompanied by Anders, Fenris, and Isabela.

21 For a playthrough of Meredith's betrayal in “The Last Straw,” see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_cUjGZpXKf4 (Carlos Torres 2011). This playthrough features a male mage Hawke who has sided with the Templars and is accompanied by Fenris, Isabela, and Sebastian. It plays through the final cutscenes to the end of the game.

your part in this really was,” proclaiming he is a “worse threat to this city than the Circle” (BioWare 2011). She then outlines a plan for explaining to the city that “you died battling the mages. A righteous cause” (BioWare 2011), intending to kill Hawke (and his companions) in the name of the Chantry.

After Hawke and his party defeat Meredith, the player views one of two possible ending cut-scenes. A mage-allied Hawke is allowed to leave the city unmolested, while a Templar-allied Hawke receives the loyalty of the Templars and is named the new Viscount of Kirkwall. But even a Hawke who became Viscount leaves Kirkwall soon after. When the Chantry Seeker, speaking to Varric in the frame-narrative, places the blame on Meredith, Varric counters, saying “Or that damned idol. Or Anders. Take your pick” (BioWare 2011).²² He then observes that

You’ve already lost all the Circles. In fact, haven’t the Templars rebelled as well? I thought you decided to abandon the Chantry to hunt the mages. (BioWare 2011)

The implication here is that the religious structures underpinning the Chantry and the Circles are deteriorating into chaos and factionalism. Certainly, this narrative sets up *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) as *Dragon Age II*’s sequel (Darrah 2013; “Game Overview” 2013), but it also suggests that religious ideology and infrastructure ultimately fail to guarantee stability and order.

The fact that the game’s conclusion remains fundamentally the same irrespective of Hawke’s decision has garnered some criticism, the argument being that the player’s ideological, narrative, and ludic choices should have a more significant impact on the final outcome of the game. Daniels (2011), for instance, argues that *Dragon Age II*

teased you. They’ve created an elaborate and stunning religion that you could have embraced but then it yanks that choice away. It teased you with the ability to choose to be a genocidal maniac, but it forced you not to be. (para. 15)

Daniels’s frustration with *Dragon Age II*, however, precisely embodies the rationale for curtailing the game’s concluding possibilities. In the end, Hawke, like most people in the ‘real’ world, is powerless to affect significant change in the world around him. The sense that players have of the game robbing them of their agency is deliberate; they are helpless in the face of the massive scale of institutionalized oppression, particularly when that institution is both religious and protected by cultural investment in its success, as the people of Kirkwall are invested in the Chantry.

22 The idol was discovered by Hawke’s party in the Deep Roads during the final “Main” quest of act one, and was stolen by Varric’s brother Bartrand, who subsequently went mad. Bartrand sold the idol to Meredith, who had it forged into her sword. During the final combat, she uses the weapon almost as a magical implement, and her eyes glow red (the same color as the artifact), seeming to suggest that a good deal of her fanaticism was exacerbated by the idol’s influence. However, Meredith was responsible for oppressing the mages in the Circle throughout all of act one, before the idol was discovered, so while it may have influenced her, it did not control her absolutely.

Mechanically, the game's focus on evaluating the player's decisions via the friendship-rivalry continua suggests an overall ethos that is unconcerned with the specific beliefs and practices of any of these factions. The point of the mechanic is for the player to negotiate with the beliefs of NPCCs in order to secure their friendship or rivalry, or to make the decision to play ideologically and allow NPCCs to be alienated by those choices. While the game itself does not present a clear answer in terms of a 'correct' belief (either for the player external to the game or for Hawke internal to it), it does ask the player to choose between taking a religious stance (with the Chantry or Circle) and losing companions, or taking a humanistic one and maintaining the majority of those relationships. The game presents a mechanical system that encourages the player to maximize their personal benefits by maximizing their willingness to compromise, cooperate, and tolerate the belief systems of others. The optimal ludic outcome for the player is one in which he or she has the most choices of active NPCCs, and the one in which the most NPCCs remain loyal to Hawke for the final confrontations with Orsino and Meredith. *Dragon Age II's* focus on cultivating positive relationships prioritizes human interaction and empathy over institutional religion.

So as we move outside the content of the game and reflect on the purpose of *Dragon Age II* to the twenty-first century in the 'real' world, we find that the game is attempting to use the context of religious extremism and oppression to encourage reflection on the part of the player about the conflict between personal relationships and the intolerance fostered by adherence to institutionalized ideologies, whether religious, cultural, social, or political. As Salo (2011b) suggests, *Dragon Age II*

shows the dangers of ideology, and what happens when one group oppresses another. It doesn't matter if the reason for the oppression is worthwhile or not; oppression often leads to violence, and that is something we should always be mindful of. (para. 9)

With much of the world suffering from genocide, ethnic cleansing, religious extremists perpetrating acts of 'holy martyrdom,' Islamic terrorism, Christian fundamentalist intolerance of homosexuality, and open warfare in parts of Africa and the Middle East, *Dragon Age II* focuses on the danger of even good intentions when those intentions become perverted by fanaticism, as under Meredith, or warped by oppression, as with Orsino.

Instead, the game asks its players to consider their friends and acquaintances – like Hawke's NPCCs – who most likely hail from a variety of ethnic, social, economic, and religious backgrounds. And in considering individuals rather than movements, the player is asked to reflect on whether those people (and their beliefs) are more or less important than their own religious, cultural, and political ideals. Within the world of *Dragon Age II*, the game argues that friendship should take supremacy by rewarding the player with a mechanical advantage for doing so, but – importantly – does not foreclose the possibility of playing the game with a religious or cultural bias:

some players may well choose to experience *Dragon Age II* as a devotee of the Chantry or a blood mage, and the game frames those decisions as within the player's 'right.'

In essence, without explicitly telling the player what to believe, *Dragon Age II* presents an argument that friendship and human relationships provide individuals with the greatest variety of experience and the broadest network of support without condemning those who choose to privilege ideology over companionship. The multiplicity of possibilities within *Dragon Age II* is in fact the greatest evidence that the game presents a "godless" (or at least an agnostic) world; because there is no universal judgment, no condemnation or even praise for any particular system of choices, because the player is able to play ideologically or strategically, selfishly or selflessly, the game suggests that the world is ultimately only what we make of it, and that the game means what we choose to have it mean. Such absolute freedom of choice comes with consequences – perhaps it alienates friends or family, perhaps it earns persecution or oppression – but by refraining from presenting a universal continuum of judgment, the game suggests that such choices are both made and evaluated by the individual – the player, not the Maker.

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