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Novigrad in the evening sun. *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (CD Project Red 2015)

Special Issue

**Gamevironments of the Past.**

by

Derek Fewster and Ylva Grufstedt





# Interview with Mike Laidlaw and David Gaider at BioWare

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## Abstract

Interview with the Lead Designer Mike Laidlaw and Lead Writer David Gaider (and Lucas Christiansen) at BioWare about the *Dragon Age* games.

**Keywords:** *Dragon Age* series, BioWare, role-playing game, fantasy, history, medievalism, authenticity, Mike Laidlaw, David Gaider

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## The Creation of a Medieval Past in a Fictitious World

The *Dragon Age* franchise (2009-2014) is a single-player third-person role-playing video game series within a medieval fantasy world with a fictitious past. The gameplay allows a wide range of multiple choices of action and opportunities to affect the dystopian narrative, sprung from a dark past, to a possible hopeful future.<sup>i</sup>

In October 2012, the project *Medeltidens form- och tankevärld i Dragon Age: Origins (Medievalism in Dragon Age: Origins)* at the University of Gotland visited BioWare in Edmonton, Canada. We met Lead Designer Mike Laidlaw and Lead Writer David Gaider of the *Dragon Age* series. The meeting lasted for six hours and included discussions of fiction, fantasy and history, gameplay and demonstrations of concept arts. In the following text parts of the interview are transcribed in order to present how Laidlaw and Gaider reflect upon the experiences of creating a universe. The interview was conducted at the head office of BioWare in Edmonton on 22 October 2012. The citations are not presented in chronological order, but are thematically

arranged according to highlighted topics in the area of a hyper-medieval and fictitious past that our questions focused on.<sup>ii</sup>

## The Idea...

### It all started...

Mike Laidlaw (ML): We had made *Baldur's gate*,<sup>iii</sup> which was very successful and pretty well loved, and we had just finished *Star Republic*,<sup>iv</sup> and we very consciously decided "we think we could build a fantasy world" and that's where *Dragon Age* began, and we wanted to turn some of the tropes of the fantasy world on our side. Familiar enough there are elves... The purpose was to create a fantasy brand that we owned and that could trigger the same thing as *The Lord of the Rings* but without having to pay for. When doing *Star Republic*, they had to ask "can we do this with a Jedi?" Origin was a very long project, 5–6 years with a small team."

### History takes place... maps

ML: The map is quite central. "Some parts of the map were frankly, actually just like "let's put a dot here and give it a name and we'll figure out what to do with it later. Because you kind of make up the geography but that evolves over time. [...] In the second game, we were looking at the map and saying, well, where are we going to set it? We need a major city... how about Kirkwall for number two? It's close enough for Ferelden, and it makes logical sense to stop an army and like crossing the river [...] so that makes sense for refugees to flee here, it is their first stop. Okay, let's give this city a backstory. And then we were starting to think of the history we built up, like the Tevinter Imperium like the Roman Imperium working their way up north, right? What would they have done with a city like this? They would have brought people up here, trained their slaves [...] even if it isn't realistic history, let's take some component parts and deepen it like on demand.

Our Lead Artist is a big history buff. He has always been a, let's say, big fan of geography that frames history [...] he sees the battle that we tend to remember [...] as due to a quirk of the weather or quirk of the terrain really other than a line of dudes head a line and [smashing hands] real hard. So there is a big part in that it in saying "Realistically, what would it mean that there is the Frostback Mountain between Ferelden and Orlais? Well, it does actually make sense that Orlais can't easily invade Ferelden, even though they probably want to, because they have three passes they can go through and that's a pretty easy place to hold." They did succeed once... the map came before we made the actual game. They didn't write the stories first. We built the world and then we began to tell stories and we knew fundamentally that we were not building a trilogy, we weren't carrying the same character forward, our goal was to create a world so interesting enough so that you could go over here and say "What is happening here now?" And that has really driven us though the sequel. We really have been saying "We really want to tell the story of a hundred-year period, not the story of this guy or this place." That has been an interesting challenge.

David Gaider (DG): The map was a very interesting process. When I first started to create the world, I was sort of given directions from the Lead Designer who said "come up with something that appears as some sort of medieval history. And he gave me a medieval history book which I mostly ignored [laughter] but in terms of basic historical events... Such as the gold invasion. We have the schism between the Catholics and the Orthodox church you know, the Orlesian chantry and the imperial, events like that without being too concerned about having them exactly being carried out. And I found really quickly that until I had a map, it wasn't a real place, I couldn't picture how the places were related to each other, the various nations. So we were starting "doodling" it...

MK: We drew the maps on notebook paper that we scanned into the wiki...

DG: I didn't meant them for that... those maps were for my own process, and then I think it was James or someone who saw the doodles thought "Wow, those look great!" And I said "No, they look terrible!" But well, there was the map, and I starting putting things on it, like here is Orlais and pointing out different events. By that time, it was just a view. We didn't know where the first game was going to take place. We were making the world before we made the first story. We have a timeline...These maps are early maps that I did before it all was painted up... I sort of tried to picture how history came to be, a series of maps that sort of played out how the various nations developed [...] and the timeline growth as we start adding information to the game. If we mentioned a date or an event that had happened, which didn't exist in the wiki, we added it, and so it has been growing as we have been doing games. [showing some maps] Well, this is old history... and then we are going all the way to our current time, the Dragon Age.

The war between the Quanarians and the Tevinter Empire was sort of inspired by the Byzantine Empire and the ancient Romans, and Antiva, which was run by the Crow, was our version of Venice and the merchant guilds. And Ferelden had the Blight which was supposed to happen, and Orlais had the civil war which was going to break out there, so we could actually put the first game in any one of these places. And then we eventually picked Ferelden as our place, which I think was a good idea. It was our stand-in for England, which I think for many people is the most recognizable, the most comfortable, part of medieval fantasy... a sort of quasi-England [...] and in the third game we get into France basically, Orlais, where things actually start because France in this area was kind of a cultural center, right? Well, I guess that is arguable [...] eventually all the nobility in other countries, they all tried to copy French culture, right?



things like that... And will we ever tell the actual truth to the players... We don't know what's true of course... But whether we do or not, we have to know... Otherwise we spend our money on water. If you don't know what the truth is, it gets really awkward. It's funny, because we didn't know that we had to do that until we started DA II. We started to get some new writers who didn't know what the truth was...I got like, "well we better start writing it down" [laughter] or from ten years from now, I will have no idea of what we are doing!

**Did you write the codex as one consistent document?**

ML: No, the way we approach it is that we will do some letters as needed. We want to provide context for this adventure going on. "I am here in the Dalish camp and I am going to go into the forest where there are werewolves. Well then we need codices to get some more details. And usually it is the writer who is doing the plot, is the one who work that out. But we read it all and look for consistencies. We throw out things and we use our codices, the written texts, to bring those out... One more thing: we are very conscious that those are often... no, they are always, from a point of view. From the notes of law, which we are conscious of, because that means that history can be mutable because it is from someone's perspective, instead of having an omniscient narrator.

**Is DA a Medieval World?**

ML: Sort of hyper-medieval. It is very much feudal time. It is a time when they firmly believe that they are very cultured but they have lost a ton. I believe, and this is not a discussion I have had with the writers, but to my mind; I bet if you lived in the dark ages, you didn't think of them as the dark ages. You wouldn't know what you were missing. And there is a lot of stuff in the *Dragon Age* universe, like what ever happened to the elves of Arlathan? I don't care!" because the elves they know are second-class citizens and that doesn't matter. [...] The culture is reminding us of

history. You can see the different layers. It's on the bones of Tevinter, and Tevinter itself is on the bones of older stuff. You know that is all empire going down. And that's a big part of it.

**You are thinking of the high middle ages?**

DG: Well, we don't follow that very carefully... when we are looking at the art style, there are some points to where we go right to the Renaissance. [...] If we were actually authentically medieval, lot of people would look at it and say... this is not true [laughter].

**It is more like you use the history to have something to develop?**

DG: Yes... Jamie's<sup>v</sup> idea, when he gave me that direction, was using history as shorthand. We wanted to make a make-believe world in a context that was sort of relative in reality... So we had this discussion... we have mages... real people that could read minds and summon demons... and know there were medieval witches and such stuff, but these were real...what would people do about that? We were talking about it and said that people would think that they were really dangerous. ... 'cause I mean, when we are talking of *Dungeons & Dragons* – that's where BioWare kind of started – things of that world that really annoyed, and one of them was this kind of disregard what common people would think of this really dangerous monster and magic and what frightened people would be for anyone who had those abilities, right. What would happen... something like the church... and how it would develop in relation to that? And that's where the idea of the chantry, that sort of stand-ins for the Catholic Church. One of the questions we got to ask was about the Jesus character, but it was Joan of Arc that was our founding figure, how would the fact that this was a woman change what religion meant to people, right... how would that change what religion is to people? I mean... things have to be masculine or feminine [...] historically that was exclusive for men... and how magic might be built up in

relation to... like if this was the chantry. "Magic exists but it exists to serve man, not rule over him." That the Roman Empire sort of rules by the mages and that this was a sort of reaction to that... sort of think of the reaction in a realistic world... what would happen... Like elves, are elves... here is this smaller group and the human come in and exist next to them, and the elven reaction was sort of "Wow" [...] Orlais we sort of depicted as being...is that even Renaissance? It's maybe the late Renaissance... We have always thought that Ferelden is much earlier, more primitive... That is sort of the idea of Britain was somehow behind continental Europe, technologically, and Orlais is a little bit further ahead... and I think that the Tevinter Empire is even further ahead.



Figure 1. David Gaider, during the interviews, October 2012. Photo by Ulf Palmenfelt.

## **On the Question on Authenticity: Realism and References**

### **On realism and fantasy**

ML: The world to some degree was crafted like it was created with a purpose and a





And all of a sudden they lost the whole era of history, saw no point in keeping it. Well, that is what is happening. Look at all those things, the relics from antiquity. There were no values when these things were old until all of a sudden, much later when archeology became a thing. Until that time these things were just, to the people who lived in this area, those things were just stone-arts, old and without any value. Different people tried to bring Rome about again after the dark ages. Though there are some differences in the context of Theda, because the Tevinter Imperium wasn't thought of as being a great thing to achieve, right, it sorts of fell away, and the rest of Theda looked upon them as an evil thing, it was never sort of a romantic ideal that should be reborn. It's a slightly different context.

With the elves too... there were a few different cultures we were sort of have been reminiscent of, the Dalish in a way... you can sort of point to the Jewish people or even Native American in terms of how they lost their homeland and try to wander the world until they can make claim on their homelands... sort of the Zionists, I guess. [...] I don't know if I wanted to copy them, but it is what I was talking about before, having those elements of history that we can use as touchstones and inspiration. I know there might be some people who would say that it is better to create an entirely new history, but I don't think that our history, that most people know it well enough to... how do I say that... I don't think it so well known that using it as a lodging point is a bad thing... it is kind of sad that a lot of people don't know that they have a relation to our own history (1.10.45) you know, the best people say "oh, it's a cultural immersion, like the crusade" and we go like yes, it is more than that. Well usually someone picks up on that, and we have a fan that goes into detail and looking for things that correlate to our own history. It's quite neat that someone does that...

**Are anachronisms a problem?**

ML: A little bit... We try to keep that low when possible. Some sneak by. And some are at the edge of anachronistic. We always try to maintain a modern voice, except Morrigan alright, she speaks weird because she has grown up outside society. We always approach it from the sense that some of the voices will always be anachronistic [...] there is an event in *Dragon Age III* when they are attending a great ball in Orlais, and our art director said, "You know, they didn't waltz in medieval times," and I said, "Well, I am well aware. But they also didn't have blood mages and dragons, so we can probably bend to a waltz if we really want to do..." The joking version of it is "How did that happen?" "A wizard did it... with magic!" That is sloppy, it's sloppy storytelling, we know it is. But at the same time, to some degree it's a created world and to create that space!

**Are there any hardcore authenticity issues?**

DG: Names are the hardest things to agree on. I don't know why... well actually I do know why. They have no bar to judge except from the aesthetics. Because it is only aesthetics, everyone has a very personal connotation they bring to names. I might think that some name sounds great; someone might say, "Ah, that reminds me of this. Why can't we take account of that?" And we argue over it... I remember Antiva. Ancient Antiva used to be called Calabria. Just by accident it is actually a region in Italy. And we said "Well, it seems weird that we should name a place after a place in the real world." But some people have already got used to Calabria... When something has had a name for a while, it starts to be that name, and changes become really hard.

The Qunari... When I first named the Qunari, there was a group that said, "That sounds like canary." And there was that weird conversation, because to them it

sounded like a canary, a bird, a stupid name... but it had been Qunari for so long, so what else were we going to call them, what else could they possibly be? It's weird... I call it the rule of naming for fantasy; once something has had a name, a pretend name, for a long time, it can't be changed anymore. But it is always a weird argument... everyone attaches values to names... it is an identity thing, I guess. Same thing with character, naming characters is difficult!

**Anders<sup>vi</sup> is a very typical Swedish name...**

For anyone in the Scandinavian countries, it is like naming someone Bob [laughter], a very common name, but it isn't for us. There is a point when all our names and texts go out to our foreign offices, and they start reporting based on what context this might have for another culture, things that don't have context for us [...] and well, he had been Anders for so long, and they said that this is going to sound strange to people in Scandinavia, because it seems like a very non-fantasy name. You know, there was a big argument, the terrorist thing... it was intentional, because of 9/11, there was the question of whether or not some people might think that it was poor taste... And then it was that guy<sup>vii</sup> who committed some sort of terrorist attack... and it was this weird... did we cause that? When you start close up to real world issues, what you are saying... not meaning it (you just want to write a story) ... but you can't help but make a commentary. We run into that question when... sexuality... as soon as we broach the topic of romance, we were making a comments on what that includes, what was okay, what was normal. That was a weird space to be in, because you don't want to... You try to tell yourself that a game is not a social commentary, that they are not there to talk about social issues... We don't want to think of the examples we set aside... It is not different than in movies or TV.

There is a lot of social responsibility that you have to assume. If we want to be treated like a mature art form, we have to think about what we are saying about

people even if we don't intend to. We have to stop and consider what sort of effect it has. The terrorist thing... eventually we decided... that was intentional. One of the themes in *Dragon Age II* was the conflict between the need for security and the desire for freedom, the mages versus the Templars. Some people might find it shocking, or bad taste, but that was something that we just wanted to include... and in the end we had to judge whether it was worth making... and we said, well, yeah, it is.

**Is the name Morrigan inspired by the goddess Morrigan?**

DG: "No, no... The Irish goddess? It's funny how names will come about. Because sometimes we name characters and somebody afterwards points and says, "Hey, that name has a meaning, which is really appropriate... At the time we were talking about the dark ritual in the end of *Dragpn Age: Origins*... She didn't have that name at that point, but I thought it was a little of Morgan le Fey. I didn't want to name her Morgan because it was too under nose, so I was going through versions of the name, and I liked the way Morgan sounded, so I wanted something similar. I came across Morrigan as an Irish name which fit into Ferelden which has such Irish and old English names. Somebody later has pointed out, "you know that name is from this Irish goddess of death." It was completely unintentional, and they went, "I don't believe you! You must have intended that!" ... Okay... [laughter]. Sometimes it's intentional but not very often... Alistair was named after a character that I played in *Dungeons & Dragons* back when I was 16 years old... There was a couple of characters that we searched for names... sometimes they were based on a meaning. There is a nice website called "Behind the name" that you can do searches on meaning on the names... I think Win's name was based on them... Alistair got his name late. I think his first name was Victor... I have been watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*... and there is a character called Xander and I thought that maybe it would be interesting to write someone like that, so I rewrote Victor so he sounded kind of

different... He was really endearing and much more likeable. And all of a sudden everyone associated Victor with the character he used to be, and we thought he doesn't fit that name anymore. Well, why can't we have a nice likable Victor? Because mentally Victor was this veteran guy not this a little bit of a goof that Alistair ended up being. So I say, "Okay, I'll rename him," and we went through the process, trying to pick name... and it's always painful... And then I saw this actor one afternoon when I was watching the television... on some kind of talk show... Well, I get the names in the weirdest ways... Alistair Appleton, that's right! [...] The names... I get irritated... we always fight over them [laughter]. We act like children, you know, we sit in a room and scream at each other... We end up like, "No, we want the story to be like this!" and the artists go like, "No, we want a giant castle!" "That doesn't fit the plot!" and somebody has to mediate... but weirdly enough it is the names we get most emotional about... I don't know why...

### The Player and the World...

#### **Felix Culpa and morality—about the multiple choices the player can make in DA**

ML: Whenever they [the players] have an option they like, you know, "do I punch the guy or talk him down?", they would talk him down. Always. And that's an interesting discussion; is it even worth having the bad, the mean or the punchy or whatever? And what we found is that it really seems worth it because having them there creates this "ah, I didn't choose it!" Almost the fortunate fall-theory (I have only studied it in the context of Milton)<sup>viii</sup> but the sense that by being put into a world where tough situations and sin are possible, by choosing *not* to sin, your actually being a better person than if sin wasn't even something you could do. By having bad, the good is valued [...] It does let someone within a fantasy context experienced with what would it feel like to punch that reporter who is asking the tough questions. [Laughter]. What would that be like, and the game, let play it out and see... and you kind of get that

guilty thrill. We always try not to encourage to do it [the bad choice] but if it gives you some catharsis, it is okay.

GD: Once you get the player to the point when they feel the world is real and feel immersed, it is a matter of making them feel that they can really have an effect on the future world... and in *Dragon Age* specifically... who would be the king or the queen of Ferelden? You make some decisions that sort of altered the course of history. That is probably a part of why people, you know, get so emotionally invested in it. We can see a lot of that... people who seem to have more emotional investment than in the real world, in our world, the real one [laughter]. That's alright, it's a compliment really!

Lucas Christensen (LC): We invest a lot in the character to make them as real people, so that the choice does actually matter.

DG: That is one thing we have to do... it is hard for people to wrap their head around... So we have those characters come with you... and mixtures sort of represent the complexity of the world... and the conflicts...because it is easy to relate to a person rather than to, you know, a whole culture... so it is a way to teach them the world. So if they care about that person, they care about what they care about. It is a good shortcut to what the world represents. [...] We think of these decisions as... it kind of brings up something inside yourself... it examines how you respond to those questions. [...] Some players, they see themselves as playing someone else and they kind of try to figure out what kind of person that is... There is a lot of people who put themselves in the game, right. There a lot of fantasy worlds that are built on dichotomies, right... like Star Wars... the light side and the dark side--very clear--and a lot of people find that very comforting... that you don't have to think of what's right or what's wrong... the evil is dark [...] I have never found it interesting myself.



We have to find some middle ground. We talk about a lot of negotiation, because they don't want to feel like we are just giving them a list of things – "please deliver!" and that they don't have any input. But it can be tough. One thing that didn't work so well in *Dragon Age: Origins* was Loghain. He was an interesting character, but I remember when they finally made the model, his villainy was expressed too visually. You can look at him and say "He is the bad guy!" And they felt like if they didn't do that, he looked boring... It's a negotiation and as writers, we don't want to go too far and say "no, no, no it has all been told through a narrative."

It is a process of trying to explore. We eventually come to a point when we have some kind of pipeline, like a way of doing it, how often we meet. We have gates, we call them, before we can proceed. [For example] before we can make a character model, who require to sign of like, "yes I agree on this particular vision," who has a stake in the outcome, to get those people into a room, and they agree to that gate so that they don't go any further than to that point. We have to do the same thing as writers. When we are writing the story, it is a gate prior to us. Breaking it down and doing it step-by-step process [with] the cinematic people, the lead designer, the artists, get them into a room and explain to them, "this is what we are intending to do." And once everyone in that room says "Well, that sounds great!" ... for a while. [Level designers] say "I don't see any room for us to make an interesting level in that story. Visually it seems to be very boring." "Well ok, what do you think we can do?" and maybe they offer some suggestions. And maybe that turns into something like "Well, that sounds great," or at that meaning we may conclude that we can't come to an agreement, and we have to do some more brainstorming, come back again, have another meeting...

As much as we try define exactly what that process should be, there'll always some situation that pops up which makes it quite irrelevant and you have to feel your way through it. There was a part recently where we have gone through every stage of the gate, and then late in the process someone who wasn't a part of the original gates had an issue that they were not a part of the process, they were not consulted... like "What is going on!" And we're like, "Well, everybody else has signed up" so what do you do, right? Do you say to that person "Well sorry, you are out of luck!" or do we start the process over, "What do you need to feel that you have a stake in what is going on?" or bring up "Here is a logical issue in the story" ... Suddenly for different reasons, it doesn't make sense. And it did make sense when we first wrote it. Then we have to justify the gameplay...level-design decided that they wanted a puzzle.... and to make the puzzle make sense we had to change some things in the story so that it flowed better... and suddenly the character-art decided that they wanted to use a certain type of monster at that level, that we hadn't accounted for in the story... so okay, there are dragons... interesting... [Laughter]. And suddenly the big picture doesn't make sense, and the test-player says, "I don't understand what's going on here!" ... There is a point when the game gets so big that it's hard for one person to keep the big picture coherent. One has to rely on everyone doing his job. The testers constantly taking a look at it, telling us whether we maintain coherence. It is as hard as with maintaining the lore; once it's so much lore in the world... We have our own Wikipedia... but even then, we constantly make mistakes. I created the initial stuff but I can't remember... I remember all the things before they got changed so I sometimes forget what things have been changed and what haven't... I have done that in public to... such as names...

**On Leliana's legends**

DG: Because Leliana's character was a storyteller, we decided at some point that it would be nice if you asked her to tell her some stories... on the wiki there are some

legends...and they all seemed very long, so she [the writer] sat down to write them. She wrote some legends on her own and told through Leliana. And when I saw them I said, "Where did you get those legends?" and she said, "I just made them up." And I read what she had written, and said "Wow, those are cool!" and now they are a part of the world...

Our relationship with the player... there are probably a few players who are looking for the worse scenario... that's weird... most people... the relation between us and the player is proper... They want to be told a story, and they want to be a part of that story, and they are willing to a degree to allow us to be the person who is in charge of the telling, but they want to be like telling the story with us. They want be able to say, "You tell the important part of the story and when it comes to me I want to be able to decide what I do." Well, that is actually the way it works [...] We didn't want, like a lot of fantasy, or some of them, are very optimistic--good things happen to good people, always, and bad things happen to bad people, always. We wanted a world where... we became cynical... we didn't want to represent a world where good things happen to good people... but we didn't want to make a dark world where you know bad things happen to everybody.

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<sup>i</sup> The article is a continuation of the contribution *Gameplay and historical consciousness in Dragon Age: Origins and Dragon Age II (BioWare)* (Meaningful Play 2012 at State University of East Lansing <http://meaningfulplay.msu.edu/proceedings2012/>).

<sup>ii</sup> The interview was semi-structured and therefore presented without our specific questions. The project was represented by Ulf Palmenfelt, Lars Wängdahl and Cecilia Trenter. BioWare was represented by Mike Laidlaw, David Gaider, Mary Kirby, Lucas Christensen and Ian Mitchell.

<sup>iii</sup> *Baldur's gate series* 1998–2004.

<sup>iv</sup> *Star Wars: The Old Republic series* 2003-2014.

<sup>v</sup> James Ohlen is the original Lead Designer for Origins.

<sup>vi</sup> Anders is a NPC in *Dragon Age II* who can turn out to be a terrorist.

<sup>vii</sup> Referring to the terrorist Anders Breivik.

<sup>viii</sup> *Felix culpa* means that some greater good can come out of a series of unfortunate circumstances.