The Worldliness of the *Dragon Age: Origins* Game World

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Abstract

This paper examines the game map in the Bioware computer game *Dragon Age: Origins* (Bioware, 2009) with respect to it's relation to the game world. By aesthetically critically discussing features of the game world and how they contribute to game play I want to further the discussion of the usefulness of the game world concept when studying computer games. The preposition that game play consists of three aspects of experience, game world, story and play is forwarded. One major gain with using the game world concept is that it is a handy way to talk about other content than that which is directly related to the particular story in the game at hand. Also, in games the world take on a more independent role than in literature. The game world concept should be understood as comprehensive, comprising far more than just space. Still it should not be confused with that of a real world. The game world is a scene or setting that can be used for many different stories. There is a map of the world in which *Dragon Age: Origins* takes place. It has been used both outside the game and inside it as a game map interface in a revised and cropped version. The analysis shows that this map (in either form) cannot really be regarded as a piece of the game world. It seems to work as an instrument on a conceptual level, it might have been used in game production, and definitely it works for communicating with players. Rather than a proper map map though, it is an image representing the game world on a typical level and in accordance with genre conventions. Neither can it be regarded as a part of the game world. Still, as it is used within the game, the map strengthens moods and themes within the game. The map of Thedas, and the cut out version of it used within the game, both work as images more than maps. As such they refer to the game world in a metaphorical way. Even if the map is used as an interface for navigation in the game it is really it's visual and symbolic attributes that contribute to the understanding of the game world.

The Worldliness of the *Dragon Age: Origins* Game World

This paper examines the game map in the Bioware computer game *Dragon Age: Origins* (Bioware, 2009) with respect to it's relation to the game world. By discussing features of the game world and how they contribute to game play I want to further the discussion of the usefulness of the game world concept when studying computer games. I also think I will be able to demonstrate the usefulness when analyzing game worlds, to see them as aesthetic creations rather than as worlds in a true sense. In a world it is productive to look for it's inner, hidden, consistency. A process directed at focused at describing the natural laws by which the world works. A game word on the other hand, we know to be made by humans, and that is why we rather try to understand it's expressive qualities.

My method here can be described as aesthetically critical, examining how the the map and the way it is used in the game. The observations made are then brought to make sense on a new level when discussing them in relation to how they contribute to the construction of the game world.

Dragon Age: Origins is known as a game with a high degree of story related content. It is a complex product with lots of background material, both in and outside the game itself. An admirable amount of work has been put into its artificial characters. For instance, Jørgensen (2010) has demonstrated how ingenious the character build is in the game even compared to *Mass Effect 2* by the same manufacturer. By moving some of the psychological development to AI companion characters rather than the player avatar, and putting the player character in a supportive role, the social dynamics of the game has gained significantly in interest. Similarly the game world of *Dragon Age: Origins* has a significant depth when one considers all of the

mythology and history that the makers of the game has made up for it. Even on the level of fictive languages there seems to have been a significant amount of work put into the game world, (for a thorough analysis text material and languages in the game see Gunneng, forthcoming). We know that J.R.R. Tolkien made up whole languages, maps, views and landscapes to back his stories. But for most readers this hardly entered their conscious experience of the literary work. With computer games this has changed significantly, as the average user may now experience the game world construct more or less as a part of the ordinary game experience. Therefore it has to be recognized that fictive worlds in computer games is something completely different from when the author of a text leaves odd remarks about the place where a story takes place, and that the analysis of the game world has to be made with another set of tools than those that follow narrative theory.

Often it is assumed that play and story (often referred to as "narrative") are the only important dimensions of games. For the purposes of this study I would rather like to try the notion that computer role playing games has three main in-game experiential aspects that motivate game play; game world, story and play. Each of them may be the singular dimension of a game at a given time, although most players presumably has experiences of all of them, both isolated and concurrent such, at least at some time while playing a game.

As *play* we may describe the competitive pushing of buttons, leveling and acquiring of battle skills, aspects of game play that often cater to the competitive sides of the game. There is however also a more elusive dimension to play that has a closer affinity to the games children play. To play is also to perform and pretend. Play can be meaningful, just as it can be opposed to, or challenge meaning when meaning becomes oppressive. Play can be cheerful and play can be cruel. Play can be about using ones body in ways that does not serve a serious

purpose. In playing computer games, play also has to do with thinking "what if I do that?", with testing the game and trying to understand the rules of game mechanics.

I would also like to propose that at least in the case of games like *Dragon Age: Origins* the *unfolding* of the story is a part of play, rather than of a narrative. Frequently the term *narrative* seems to have been suggested since in many games the story is actually *presented* to the player, mostly in the form of cut-scenes where the player has very few, if any, possibilities to effect the outcome (see for instance Tavinor, 2009, pp. 111; Calleja 2011 p. 94). A major reason to speak about narrative then should be the fact that the course of events in one way or another has been predetermined by the manufacturers of the game, and that the game is a sequence of fixed situations eventually leading up to the end of the game. One should observe though that even if a game is constructed in that way (and many games are) much of play is about bringing things to the point where the cut-scene kicks in. In this respect it is much simpler and effective to describe a sought after state of affairs in a game as the *objective* of the game than as the end of narrative that no one is narrating.

It is supposedly the goal of any game designer to prevent that players feel that everything has been determined in advance. The better built a game is in that way, the more the player will have to play with, as *Dragon Age: Origins* also does to a large extent. There are many different ways to end the game, and there are many ways to get there even if the same passages has to be gone through. That does not imply though, that a fixed ending of a game means that the game should be described as a narrative. If anything it is not the idea that games are ergodic and demand a significant effort (Aarseth 1997) that is a problem, but rather the notion that they must be treated as literature and that the concerned effort should be most similar to reading of all possible human activities (see also Gunneng, forthcoming, p. 4).

It can be noted that narratives normally is the closest we get to a real thing when dealing with storytelling. Story on the other hand is in most cases an abstraction, something we construct on the basis of given narrative. The narrative is narrated in words or text, and thus has a certain given material form through which it becomes possible for us to take it in. The "story" in literature is really just a way to speak about this on a more general level. In games however it appears to be the other way around. There we are often presented with something that is at least similar to a story, a kind of short hand narrative without too much form or order. It can be rudimentary as in old time arcade games, "earth is being attacked by intergalactic monsters, it is you job to shoot them to pieces"(end of story, game play begins), or it can be as a rationale for what follows and what sets up your mission in the game.

One major gain with using the game world concept is that it is a handy way to talk about the content of games – that is, other content than that which is directly related to the particular story in the game at hand – which notably is a lot of it. In literature the world is necessarily presented in narrative form, in games the world more naturally take on an independent role. In literature the world is also more up to the reader's imaginative powers, while in a game there is no way just to hint and leave the rest to the player. If there is to be a world it will still somehow have to built.

It seems as though the game world concept has been more unproblematic for those producing games than for those studying them. In the first cases however the thought of a game world is often limited to the spatial construct, basically with the same meaning as "game board" in a game like chess (Björk & Holopainen, 2004, p. 55-62; Ahearn 2001, pp. 212). What one generally has in mind when speaking of a game world is however something more comprehensive. The concept is mostly intuitively used. For instance Sicart (2009, p. 22-23) talks about how a game world may communicate the meaning of player behavior back to the

player and thus clearly sees "game world" as something more than a spatial system. Martin (2011) has discussed how the (game) world of *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* uses landscape as an expressive aspect and also how it does "work in relation to the game's story" (Martin, 2011).

As only a small amount of the content of a game is necessarily related to a particular story is seems reasonable to relegate most other parts of the content to the game world. I think that a useful criterion for what belongs to the game world could be whether an item can be used for another story as well. Characters for instance cannot really be regarded as parts of one particular story only, since they very well could appear in yet another one.

The game world should naturally not be mistaken for a real separate world. *Of course* games are played in this world, and in that sense it is correct to dispute any claim on behalf of game companies to have created real worlds. On the other hand – if one contextualizes such claims it should be quite obvious that the *meaning* of "game world" is another than "world". No purchaser of a computer game expects to be able to step into the game and never appear in the real world again. That is not to say that important communication and even actions cannot take place in electronic and virtual media. My simple point is that electronic and virtual media and everything that goes on in them are part of *this* world. In a social and cultural sense it also make *this* world significantly larger and more interesting as it offers new arenas for interaction and so easily bridges distances in space.

The Game World as Setting and as Genre

One important aspect of the game world is that it is a scene or setting so that potentially, and often in practice the same setting can be used for several different plots. In the case of *Dragon Age: Origins* there is a host of expansions to the game, some made by independent modders, that are set in the same world as the original game, but spun around different plots,

in the modding cases mostly with different characters. These uses of the game world go far beyond the adoption of a readymade stage set for new stories. New environments are made, that apply the same inner world logic, looks and general history as other branches of the game. In that way it is actually possible to play *Dragon Age: Origins* without even touching on the events in the original game.

To the game world of a game like *Dragon Age: Origins* belong not only that which can be experienced within the game itself, but also all those pieces of side information that are provided by the creators of Dragon Age through other channels than the game. For instance in the *Dragon Age Wiki* it is possible to search for information about places in the Thedas map (also provided by the Wiki) that are not mentioned in the game.

The concept of setting is often used as a synonym to genre. It is notable however that game genre divisions tend to be made along two different types of trajectories. The one dealing with setting and the other with the type of game play that the game provides. I think that rather than showing a lack of precision this seeming flaw in the theoretical framework of game genres points to how vital a component play is in the content of games. The label RPG (role-playing game) could be taken as a formal characteristic of the type of game play that a game is constructed for. However it should also be considered a vital part of the games content, as it defines the type of *play content* you will find in the game.

In computer games, as in popular fiction and film pre-defined genre labels points quite directly to what sort of a world is to be expected. A number of familiar types of settings are in place, ready to be used to communicate what games are about, as fantasy, science fiction, historic wars or western. In a fantasy game world like the one in *Dragon Age: Origins* you will for instance find humans, elves and dwarfs, i.e. the same type of characters as those found in Tolkien's stories and that has influenced the genre greatly.

There is yet one general aspect to mention. To the player expectations belong also that the world should show technical improvements and that it is even primarily through the game world that technical evolution can be showcased. Improvements in this respect often means better graphics but it also entails less hardware dependent facets like new movements or innovations in terms of avatar-world interaction. Above all, to successful game design belongs the propensity to make artistic use of technical possibilities and thus widen the over all scope of the game world. This last aspect of game worlds also clarifies how little immersion can be regarded as a necessary characteristic of a successful game world. A wonder of realism is precisely a wonder of realism, not a wonder of reality, and it is always relative to the previous success, the one that it succeeds. That one also has to keep in mind when discussing game worlds since they lack reality in precisely the same way.

The Game World in a Map?

A game map should be able to stand for a game world, but must it work as a representation of it and in that case, how? In the following the relation between the game world and the map will be problematized. Maps have a role in many games. Playing a game often means that you reveal the map at the same time as you get to know the virtual world. Lammes (2008) describes this as "touring" as opposed to "mapping" (p. 266). Frequently in games information is added to the map as the player has visited places, and new places are revealed on the map as new information is obtained in the game. In some games player activity also changes the game world so that the map has to be changed as well.

Interestingly it happens that game designers do not make a distinction between the map and the world. As an example among many, Hutchison (2009) gives a description of how to edit the "map", i.e. the 3D space, of the game *Far Cry 2*. For Hutchison there is obviously no conceptual difference between the map and the virtual 3D space where the game play occurs.

Presumably a similar understanding lies behind the strange solution of the in-game map of

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, which appears to be little less than a zoom out from the 3D space

(with clouds superimposed). This appears to be the result of a failure to recognize that a map

is a system of coded information and not just the world scaled down. Presumably that easily

happens when constructing virtual spaces, since in reality they do not represent anything.

They are the real thing and the representation all at once. So when making a virtual space for

a game one is not (at least in most cases) trying to represent a real, existing environment.

Instead the wish is to create something that looks and feels like a real environment (and not a

representation of one).This agenda may lead to a conceptual exclusion of the representative

dimension and a failure to see for instance that any form of 2D presentation of a 3D space

implies the use of a medium and that a map is not just a picture of the world but a a systematic

description of some chosen features of it.

Human geographers R. Kitchin and M. Dodge describe maps as *ontogenetic*, meaning that

maps are better understood as part of a continuous mapping process then as mere

representations of what is out there (Kitchin & Dodge 2007, p. 335, 340). While their

argument focuses on how mapping the real world will have consequences for how we see it,

and in the end for what will become real for us, it also points to how maps are a powerful tool

for our imagination. It enhances the reality of our fantasies and makes it possible to start

thinking about the spaces it reveals. Presumably the large Thedas map (Image 1.) has had

some role in the construction of the game as a design concept document. Actually it is

interesting to note how the color scheme of the map has an affinity to the color schemes found

within the game itself, so that the actual choice of colors and the visual distribution of areas

with different colors in game can be thought of as an effect of the map as a guiding document.

The map coincides with the known world within the game, i.e. the area from which all game

characters, myths and history is said to come from. A cropped version, which i will return to later, is used in the game, while this big map has been used as a backdrop to the podium when Bioware release news about the game. It is also available on the internet on the Dragon Age Wiki.

The map is an image of land and water where blue fields find their way in between larger areas of brownish, reddish and orange tones. Greener fields within the brown presumably indicate denser forests. The map's texture is varied. On the sides, outside of a scale-marker looking border, the surface is that of a water color drawing. The outermost edge looks frayed, supposedly to give the appearance of old worn maps. In some places the water color looking texture proceeds into the part of the map that is inside the scale-mark border (clearly so in the bottom left corner and a few other places), which actually accentuates the notion that the map is a sort of beginning for the game world, since it leaves the impression that the delineation of lands and water on the map has grown not from some kind of process where one measures land, but rather from a further development of the initial drawing in water color.

At least part of the surfaces on the map appear to have been further developed in a bitmap graphics program like *Photoshop* where map like textures has been superimposed on the image. The colors and textures suggest something of the natural character of different areas, if they contain high mountains or forests, rivers and lakes and so on. These signified characters also corresponds generally with the character of the different areas when the player visits them in the game. The *Brezilian Forest* for instance is a wooded place with long paths and lots of traversing streams. The *Korcari Wilds* is a marshland, as is also indicated by the web of streams and not fully marshy lakes that the map shows. The legibility of the map demonstrates how many culturally specific conventions that are being taken for granted in its conception, let alone the fact that a map like this would have been inconceivable in the middle

ages, or any time culturally similar to it, since it uses an understanding of the concept of space as measurable as whole, and as something primary to place. Both ways of understanding space that did not exist before the renaissance period.

The map contains names given in bigger letters indicating a political organization of sorts. The label "Tevinter Imperium" could be seen as the definite indicator here that names written in the same style (like Nevarra, Antiva, Ferelden etc.) should be understood as states. However, there are no markings of national (or otherwise political) borders in the map, which indicates that the depicted world does not have any clearly demarcated borders. This adds to our understanding of the game world, is indicating the geographically indeterminate nature of its geopolitical reality. More than anything else though I would consider this a genre feature. We expect fantasy stories to take place in worlds with unclear borders and vast expanses of wild and uncharted territory.

One can also notice that the scale markers along the sides of the map are not in line with each other. Neither is there a scale connected to the markers so that they can be translated into comprehensive distances. Admittedly this is less important for practical game play, as there is no actual virtual space that the Thedas map is mapping (as is the case in for instance *Oblivion* or *Skyrim)*. However it also accentuates the map's role as concept art and an item used to communicate moods and atmosphere rather than exact information.

As mentioned only a smaller portion of the big Thedas map is used in the game. It is presented as a cut out (Image 2) with it's own style of borders. The practical use of the cut out map in the game is to take the player to different locations. This is made throughclicking on symbols that overlay the map, a functional way to solve player movement. It leads to some quirks in game space though. For instance *Camp,* one of the more important places in the game has no clearly defined place in the game world. On the map it has its symbol placed in a

cut out map piece (that does not seem to fit in anywhere in the bigger map). When you go to Camp it always looks the same and whence appears to be the same place. Still, and contradictory to this, it appears to be close to whatever other places you have visited recently since the red, blood stained tracks that simulate your movement over the map always begin in the last place other than camp you visited regardless of whether you have been to camp after or not.

This points to how loose the connection is between the map and actual spaces when you consider it as a map. A drop down menu with the names of different places could have performed the same function in game play. Why is there a map at all? First of all, the occurrence of maps in fantasy games has a connection with their use in fantasy literature where, after Tolkien, maps abound (Ekman 2010). As a fantasy game *Dragon Age: Origins* clearly is related to Tolkien's stories and to the idea of constructed worlds of fantasy. In books maps work as a way to better understand fictional space and as such it is a support for the text. It is however not sufficient to say that it is a support. It is also something that tends to make the fictional world independent of the particular text and in that sense more real. Having both a map and a text means that the world is constructed in two different types of media. That strengthens the notion of the fictional world existing independently of any particular medium, since it is being pointed at by two completely different semiotic systems. So, the mere occurrence of two different objects that relate to the same imagined world is a stronger indicative of both its existence and of its character than just one. But if the two objects on top of that also uses completely different sign systems it strengthens both existence and character even further. In that way it is also very probable that the fact that computer games use variable media has a similar effect on how game worlds are perceived.

As a semiotic system of yet another order than music, speech, space, textures, images and so forth then, the map reinforces the player's readiness to imagine the game as taking place in a world of it's own. That is probably one very good reason to use a map in *Dragon Age: Origins*. Yet another reason is of course that a map is practically useful in play as it guides to the different virtual spaces. Maps in games differ in general from maps in books in this way. This also means that one can say that play is an important dimension of the map. It adds to the game's usability, and as such the map can also be seen as an *interface* to the game. As mentioned above though, this could technically have been achieved by other means, since the in game world map is not really used for giving directions.

There are however other uses that the game makes of the map that may be regarded as more important. Through a couple of devices the map is brought to add to the overall atmosphere and feeling of the game, and this must be regarded as an advantage with using it: Firstly, when the map is used for navigation in the game there are two types of animations that run on it: blood red traces that tracks movement over the map being one. The other is a shadow over the map that gradually spreads from the south (the bottom of the map). The shade indicates how far the *Blight* (the threat that the games main plot demands the player to put an end to) has advanced. Every time the player sees the map an animation lets the shade grow over it, and every time the final shaded area, after the animation has stopped, is a little bit bigger. Another word for this shading could be "taint" - which in the game world is used to describe the pollution of blood that the attacking evil brings with it and that is a central part of the original game story.

The map in *Dragon Age: Origins* thus clearly does more then just facilitates game play. It reinforces the sense of the existence of a game world as well as it strengthens moods arising from the game, all while the taint on the map keeps the central task in the game ominously

present. The latter has its definitive points since there are so many hours of side tasks to solve for the player, tasks that regularly grow into big concerns in themselves. The recurring map in this way serves as a way to reinstate the players focus on the main task and to see the bigger picture.

So the map really does contribute to the game and to game play. But next one could ask what it has to say about the game world? Both the in-game map and the larger map of Thedas quite literally have their limits as maps. Among other things clearly much must fall outside of it since we can see that the world continues outside the maps edges. We may also ask questions about the perspective from which the map is perceived and made. A map *could* be presented as a piece of the game world itself. But if we are to understand it as a part of the game's fiction we inevitably must ask for whom it would have been possible to produce such a map? The most credible answer to that question would be "nobody". It is highly unlikely that any person within Thedas would have the capacity, or for that matter, the wish, to come up with it since it presupposes an understanding of abstract space that does not fit with the portrayed world with its clear connections to medieval fantasy. That clearly speaks for an interpretation of the map as a thing entirely external to the game world.

As I have shown, the map really does not work as a mapping system either. There really is no space there to be referenced, and so the representative function is loose and metaphorical rather than indexing. Further, as a metaphor the map more stands for the *type* of fictional world, according to genre conventions, that Thedas is than it stands for Thedas itself. Therefore we are in many ways closer to the maps' type of reality when we see the big Thedas map used as a backdrop for Bioware making public appearances. In those cases it brings the game world into the present, notably not as a world but as a fiction and as a product on sale. Seen as the representation of a world the Thedas map belongs here with us in the real world as

a piece of evocative imagery, and points more to the mental images of people in this world than to foreign spaces and places.

That is why I think that rather than being a map, the *Map of Thedas* is an image, and when the map is used in the game it is really a thing that does not belong to the world it is supposed to show. In conclusion then it appears that, besides being an interface for game play, the Thedas map can be seen as a metaphor for the game world when looked upon from the outside. Simultaneously, in play it is used as a tacit indicator for the progression of the story. This in it's turn also points to how interwoven game world and play really are. Even if there are logical gaps in the presentation of the game world the player accepts and moves past them with very little grudge, partly because play can continue, very much like the way in which Jørgensen (2012) has shown that players accept interfaces much more readily than is generally understood (p. 155-56), but partly also because the over all feel and atmosphere of the game is kept within the limits expected by players.

Conclusion

The map of Thedas, and the cut out version of it used within the game, both work as images more than maps. As such they refer to the game world in a metaphorical way. Even if the map is used as an interface for navigation in the game it is really it's visual and symbolic attributes that contribute to the understanding of the game world.

It can be demonstrated that the environments of the *Dragon Age: Origins* game world are capable to stand for themselves as attractions in the game. Still, it is also clear that one should not mistake the game world for a world. For a player it is for all practical purposes quite clear that this is no ordinary place in an ordinary world. In the real world mood supporting music does not appear out of nowhere, just as there will not appear explaining text over objects

telling you what you have just done with them. When analyzing game worlds it is important

to see them as aesthetic creations and not as worlds in a true sense, and then try to see what

kind of sense they are really making. In that way a game world is not just a setting either,

since that would be to re-position it as something that is only part of a story. The game world

is something to experience *both* for itself and in relation to a story. In this way fictional

worlds in games and in literature differ a lot. In literature the fictional world is a function of

an actual text meeting it's reader. In games the game world is an object for itself that is

projected not from within a text but through shapes, forms and color.

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List of Images

Image 1. Map of Thedas, Bioware. Source:

http://images.wikia.com/dragonage/images/8/80/ThedasMap.jpg, 2012-07-15

Image 2. The *Dragon Age: Origins* in game map of Ferelden. Screen dump from game play.